

Norfolk November 2011

After our disappointing and non-eventful trip to Norfolk at the beginning of September, when we'd gone too early and only managed to scrape a Citrine Wagtail at the last minute, we were left feeling somewhat defeated. We still had 2 weeks holiday to take from work and so as not to be beaten we quickly decided that round 2 was definitely in order to lift our spirits before winter set in. Soon there would be thousands of wintering geese and ducks, with the possibility of something interesting in with them, not to mention Snow Bunting, Shore Lark, Hawfinch, etc, etc. For the first time ever we would be able to try Lynford Aboretum for Hawfinch, which is a bird we were both dying to see and right at the top of our hit list. As the daylight hours would be shorter we would have to cram a lot in to a day but thankfully there would be no getting up at stupid o'clock as it would still be dark. We decided to try November, the latest we've ever been to Norfolk and the only thing we could guarantee was that it would be absolutely freeeeeeeezing.....the fools we are! :P. To help us this time I decided to try the newly released Rare Bird Alerts iphone app. This differed from the BirdGuides app, which didn't work that well in September, in that it sent notifications, which would pop up on the screen when a bird was reported. It would be just like getting a text and also there was the option to pay for 7 days subscription, which is exactly what you want when nipping away for just a week.

Friday 4th November

The run up to our trip was, as usual, fraught with anxiety. There'd been a bout of D&V, gale force winds and a car service resulting in me having to get new tyres fitted (that morning) before we were left. Worst of all though was seeing the reports of decent birds arriving in and then departing from Norfolk....Aarrghhhh! Regardless of these issues we were pretty excited and after a long day at work we arrived at the Sea Terminal at 6.53pm. Fortunately the strong winds had died right down for our sailing and it wasn't long before we were setting off at 7.45pm. We'd been positioned right underneath the funnel on the car deck and last time we were put out there we returned to find the car windscreen smeared in a weird, black, oil, which made it nearly impossible to see out of. If that happened again it would be a setback before we had even started. With that in the back of our minds we tried our usual tactic of getting some sleep before the long drive to Norfolk and after watching some TV we nodded off at around 9pm. The next thing we knew about was at 10pm when a member of staff unlocked our cabin door, walked in and sounding surprised said, "Oh sorry, wrong cabin!" We did manage to go back to sleep until 11pm when my alarm went off.....Phew! At the car I expected the worst but was amazed to find not even one speck of oil on it. How lucky was that.....but it didn't last long as we got stuck on the boat and were the last car to come off....Grrrrr. With no schedule to keep to it wasn't a major deal and we even flaunted time by Wendy nipping into the terminal Café for a coffee. We finally headed off at 12.03am.

Saturday 5th November

This time I was totally prepared for the satnav to throw another wobbler but luckily enough it sent us in the right direction and onto the M62.....Phew! At 1.20am we saw our first bird of the trip when a suicidal **Blackbird** flew low over the motorway somewhere near Bradford. We hit a diversion on the A1M through Doncaster, which brought back some bad memories from our last trip when we'd dipped on Wryneck there.....Grrrrrrr! Yet again the panic and stress of driving in an English city kept me wide awake so it was probably a good thing! A few hours into the journey we stopped

at Blyth Services for a break and to stretch our legs (or should that be coffee fix?) and continued at 2.32am. I can't complain though as I did get a jam doughnut out of it...om nom nom :). We'd reached Lincolnshire by 3.03am and saw our first mammal of the trip, a **Fox**, which ran across the road ahead. All of a sudden we hit thick fog, as if it wasn't hard going enough, and visibility became horrendous. The roads around there are narrow and winding and we saw a good few **Long-tails** scurrying about. We just about saw a second Fox running across the road near Swineshead Bridge which was pretty cool as it would probably be the only chance we'd get to see them as we don't usually see Foxes at all. By 4am I was pretty tired from having to concentrate so hard with the zero visibility so took the chance to stop at a 24hr petrol station to top up. Talking to the attendant I felt as close to a zombie as I want to get but we'd finally broken the back of the journey and we entered Norfolk at 4.08am.....Woo Hoo :).

As it was still pitch black outside we planned to get some more sleep until sunrise. We pulled up at our first planned stop, Lynford Arboretum at 4.52am, settled into our sleeping bags and quickly dozed off. We were woken at 5.10am by something which more than slightly resembled a scene from the film 'An American Werewolf in London'. There we were lying in a car surrounded by thick swirling fog in what looked like the middle of nowhere, listening to the muffled sound of a howling pack of dogs....or something! It was quite an eerie feeling, given our surroundings and state, but eventually we dismissed it as a boarding kennel nearby (we hoped!) and went back to sleep.

We were woken up again at 7am by a car, which parked up next to us and a birder stepped out and made his way slowly down the path. At last we could see where we were, it didn't look quite so scary in daylight, so we took this as our cue to get going. Amazingly we didn't feel particularly tired so we packed up our sleeping bags, got ourselves together and headed off, in the rain, to find our first target bird of the trip.....feeling very pessimistic :/.



If we were successful in seeing this bird it would be a bit special. It was something that Wendy had always wanted to see and that I'd already failed with 3 times before so it would be a lifer for us both. High up in the trees we could see the usual 10

million **Woodpigeons**, a **Carrion Crow**, **Rook** and **Jackdaw**. We heard **Redwing**, **Crossbill** and **Siskin** flying over, a **Grey Squirrel** scurried about nearby and a **Sparrowhawk** zoomed over our heads. There were **Chaffinch**, **Blue Tit**, **Great Tit**, **Long-tailed Tit** and **Goldcrest** in the lower branches and a **Pheasant** scratching round on the ground. We scanned the trees and walked along the footpath that circled the area they were usually seen in. Yet again the brilliant Neil Glenn Norfolk book was our bible and it said that our target bird prefers the Hornbeams, so we stopped to check them out. We could hear **Nuthatch**, **Green Woodpecker** and saw a **Greater-Spotted Woodpecker** and a **Jay**. We spotted a **Kestrel** hunting over the fields but there was no sign of what we were looking for and we'd walked nearly all the way round and were now heading back towards the car. As we rounded the corner we could hear several Goldcrests calling so we stopped to check them out. Although Lynford is nowhere near the coast you just never know what you might find when you are in Norfolk. The first bird I looked at in the bush was a **Firecrest!**.....absolutely brilliant. Apart from when we were in Cornwall we'd only ever found 1 of these, over the course of 5 trips to Norfolk, so this was an unbelievable start to our trip. This was closely followed by **Marsh Tit**, a bird we always love seeing as we have none in the Isle of Man. Brimming with excitement we skipped off to find the right path to get back to the car seeing **Coot** and **Moorhen** on the way.

We then stumbled across Lynford Hall, a big house set in the grounds over a lake. I say lake but there was very little water left, like we found at Flitcham Abbey Farm last time we were there, as Norfolk has suffered recently from lack of rain.



This discovery made us wonder whether the dogs we'd heard earlier where in fact hunting dogs belonging to the owners. Further down the path Wendy spotted something coming up the track to our right. It was another Fox but this one was happily trotting straight towards us.....cool. We stayed still and watched it getting closer and closer until it stopped, dead (about 30 meters away), turned to face the bushes, then pounced into them and out of sight. That was without a doubt our best ever fox moment to date :).

On the last stretch of footpath to the car we stopped again to give the trees a last look. We noticed that it had stopped raining too, which was good but still no sign of anything resembling our target bird. We'd just about exhausted this site but then I heard a familiar sound from Wendy. "Eee Arr what's this?" With unbelievable eagle eyes she'd spotted 2 birds miles off and high up in the tall trees and they looked pretty good. Their size and build were right but they were distant. The more we looked though the more certain we became.....**Hawfinch!** We were totally chuffed and even Wendy had to admit that it deserved a high 5 hahahaha :).



This became a bit of joke, when we realized that not only had we just got up and we hadn't even reached our HQ yet but we'd now equaled our lifer total from our last trip! This was either a good sign or a bad one.....could it get any better than this? We contemplated turning round and heading straight back to Heysham but thought we may as well try our luck for the rest of the week and carry on to our next planned stop, which meant going back on ourselves, but would hopefully be worth it :P.

Heading out of Lynford at 9am we saw **Black-headed Gulls** on a playing field, a bird we'd normally have picked up at the Sea Terminal but this time it had been dark. Big flocks of **Starlings** were now flying over and the odd **Collared Dove** and **Magpie** were up and about. We passed a flooded field next to the 'British Sugar' factory, which was caked in **Lapwing** and we picked up **Pied Wagtail**, a **Cormorant** flew over and in another field were some **Whooper Swans**.

We arrived at WWT Welney at 9.45am and saw some **House Sparrows** on the track leading to the entrance. The Visitor Centre doesn't open until 10am so we had to wait (more like jiggle) about for a W.C and coffee break. While we waited we had a quick scan of the car park area and it was absolutely freeezing. We'd seen Corn Bunting and Tree Sparrow there in summer so it's always worth a look. Not this time though, as all we could find were **Dunnock**, **Goldfinch** and **Greenfinch** in the bushes and 2 x **Little Egret** flew over. We'd also seen Yellow Wagtail from the café window and nesting Little Ringed Plover from the main hide last time so we were uncertain as to how productive the whole reserve would be in winter. The most obvious sounds we

could hear were that of the many **Skylarks** and a flock of noisy **Fieldfare** going over. Finally the Visitor Centre opened so, after buying our tickets, we shot off to the desperately needed toilets and café.....Phew! From the window we could see a **Meadow Pipit** but nothing else of interest. After a very quick break we went straight out to the main hide to see if we could find our next target bird, even though the bloke at reception had told us they'd all left for Slimbridge the day before.....Urrghhh.



Looking out over the pool we found **Shoveler, Pintail, Mallard, Pochard, Wigeon, Teal, Greylag** and **Canada Geese** but worryingly there were very few Swans about. I had expected many more to be there at this time of year but in amongst the Whooper and **Mute Swans** we finally found our target bird, a single **Bewick Swan**, lifer number 2 for Wendy :).



With no time to waste we left for the next hide and on our way up the path we accidentally flushed a **Peregrine** with its breakfast from the hedge. A flock of **Golden Plover**, some **Bar-tailed Godwits** and a **Snipe** flew over probably flushed by a **Marsh Harrier** floating past. At the Lyle hide the only thing we could add was a **Grey Heron** and from both the Allport and Friends Hides we could find nothing new. By now it was getting near to lunchtime and we were hungry, having had nothing but a cereal bar since getting up at Lynford, so we thought we'd head back to the café. On the way we saw something on the path that we hadn't expected to see at all on this trip, a **Common Darter Dragonfly**! What on earth was a dragonfly doing still alive in November? Crazy! Back at the café at 11.50am we had lunch and we were back at the car to get going for our next destination (heading back in the right direction) by 12.30pm where there were still no Corn Buntings but we saw our first **Mistle Thrush** of the trip.

We pulled up in the car park at Royden Common at 1.17pm and looked out over the misty, dark scene.



Luckily, before we went away, I'd asked for some help about this bird and been put in touch with a local birder called Sue Bryan. She was very helpful and had given me very precise directions to a spot where she thought we'd be most likely to see it. We headed off down the muddy/sandy track following her instructions, hearing a **Tawny Owl** from deep in the trees, and through the heather until.....the track stopped! We were now standing knee deep in a heathery bog with nowhere to go flushing loads of **Red-legged Partridge** as we went...Uh Oh! Not wanting to get into a bigger mess than we were already in we retraced our steps back the way we came. We'd checked everywhere for the bird too but there was nothing. We started to feel very guilty as we suddenly realized we weren't on the main path and to top it off there were now 2 other birders standing looking at us. I started getting agitated and loudly exclaimed, "This is what we get for following directions from a woman!" As we got near to the main path I hoped to just breeze past the others quietly with our heads down but Wendy went for the head on approach and said, "Urrghhh just been sent on a wild goose chase here, we were told to.....blah blah blah." They looked at us smiling and we were horrified when the woman said, "Are you Pete? Hi, I'm Sue."OMG how embarrassing! We wanted the ground to open up but she remained friendly and went

through the directions again with us. It turned out that we hadn't gone far enough up the track before turning onto the heath and when she pointed about 50 yards up I could see the giant public footpath sign.....Arrghhhh, massive facepalm! We chatted with them both for a while and they told us that the bird hadn't been seen that day.....typical our luck!

After all that effort, which resulted in nothing but our first dip of the trip, we were now feeling very tired, extremely embarrassed and now it was getting dark. We left at 3.20pm and still had to go shopping at Morrison's and find our HQ.

After wandering around Morrison's in a daze picking up random things that looked vaguely edible we left at 4pm to find our accommodation for the week. We eventually pulled up in the driveway at 4.30pm and had our first look at our HQ, Bixes Barn in Cley. To say we were impressed would be an understatement, it was exactly how it looked on the website....modern, clean and well kitted out. Wendy even discovered that, she shouldn't have packed her milk frother as they'd even provided one of them in the kitchen! There was another barn directly opposite ours and we'd been worried that we may have neighbours but it appeared to be empty. Happy days :). After settling in and having tea etc, we finally sat down at 7.45pm to vegetate after a very long couple of days. We were a bit annoyed though when we found out that the previous occupants hadn't left any dishwasher tablets or washing up liquid to do our dishes with. We were in no fit state to go out again so we'd have to go shopping again tomorrow....Urrghhhh.



Wendy went outside later on and heard Tawny Owls calling, a sound that we really miss back at home, and as it was Bonfire Night there were fireworks going off nearby. Totally knackered we gave in and fell into bed at 10.30pm and went out like lights.

Sunday 6th October

We'd made the very wise decision to chill out for a change this morning so we didn't set any alarms and woke up at 8.30am. It was overcast again and by the time we'd got ourselves sorted it was 10.14am when we left HQ. First stop was the nearest place for a coffee fix, which happened to be Cley Visitor Centre. From the car park we could see the ever, present Marsh Harriers as well as some **Shelduck, Egyptian Geese,**

Dark-bellied Brent Geese, Greater Black-backed Gull and a massive Golden Plover flock. Cley wasn't on our to do list just yet though as there had been a Jack Snipe reported at Kelling Quags (now known as Kelling Water Meadows) so we headed off and arrived at 10.35am.

We'd never had much luck at Kelling in the past, although there have been some good reports, but it was worth a shot for another lifer for Wendy. On the water was a single **Kittiwake** and on the island and surrounding field were several **Common Snipe**, some of which we had had to wait for to wake up before ruling out. There was no sign of a Jack Snipe so we wandered off. Further down the path were quite a few DB Brents and they seemed un-phased by us so I tried to get a photo but the wind was too strong to get anything decent :(.



After that we continued on to the shingle ridge to have a look out to sea. Looking out over the North Sea it looked as dead as the Irish Sea back at home but as always with Sea-watching anything can happen at any second!



The wind was belting in so we huddled behind the half buried pillbox so we could get a bit of shelter. We weren't alone either as there was another birder sitting to the right of it who looked slightly disappointed to now have company. He looked round at us so we smiled and said, "Hi" but the gesture wasn't reciprocated.....charming! Eventually we found a **Lesser Black-backed Gull, Gannet, Eider, Common Gull** and then streams of Ducks and Geese arriving for the winter. Wendy then spotted a flock of finches flying up the beach which, as they grew closer, finally gave us a flash of white on their wings.....13 x **Snow Buntings!** Brilliant! :). They landed on the shingle ridge behind us for a couple of minutes then were gone.

With nothing else about we called it a day and headed back to the car. The birder from the pillbox was ahead of us up the path and was struggling to get a signal on his mobile phone. Wendy laughed and said, "Ah so it's not just us then?" and to our surprise the guy started chatting to us and turned out to be really friendly after all. He told us he'd just seen a Water Pipit at the water meadow so we thanked him and headed straight back. Although there was no doubt in our minds that there had been one, unfortunately when we looked, we could only see the Meadow Pipits from earlier.

At 12.26pm we were back at the car setting off for the coffee van at Salthouse Beach car park. We parked up at 12.35pm and Wendy got her fix which she brought back to the car along with a cup of tea for me, which I stupidly forgot to stir and consequently thought was horrible.....Doh. So, "Sorry coffee man, it was my fault after all" :/. Wendy all of a sudden shrieked, "Eee Arr, what's this?" We leapt out of the car and watched a **Leach's Storm Petrel**, being mobbed by gulls & crows, fly straight over our heads, around the car park and over the fields....what the...?! Absolutely amazing though and a great bird for Norfolk, we certainly weren't expecting that! Unfortunately in the heat of the moment I completely forgot to change my camera settings so all my shots were well blurred.....Doh! You can still see it's a Leach's tho! :).



Excitement aside we had a quick look around to see if we could find any Snow Buntings or Shorelarks but all we came across was a flock of ridiculously tame **Turnstone**.



and a **Redshank** but after our drinks earlier nature was calling so we left at 1.15pm to use the W.C's at Cley.

Earlier in the morning the RBA app had been going nuts about something decent at Cley West Bank so we thought we'd stop off for a look. We arrived at 1.30pm and it

wasn't long before I spotted what we were after sitting low down in the marsh....a **Pomarine Skua** which, eventually, was kind enough to fly towards us before settling back down in the grass. Lifer number 3 for Wendy :). We tried to get some shots of it but with the very strong wind and position of the bird a record shot was just about all we could manage.



While we were watching it the poshest bloke I've ever met came over wearing what looked like a Cambridge rowing sweater and said, "What ho chap, could you inform me and the guys what the bird that everyone is looking at happens to be?" so I told him. He seemed a bit confused but said, "Thank you my good man, toodle pip." and off they went. A bit surreal but he seemed nice like everyone we had met so far.

I also spotted a **Short-eared Owl** flying high over the trees at Cley. Nice :) Then I heard the piercing shriek of a Black-headed Gull so turned around. I then saw why the BHG wasn't happy when a Skua appeared right behind it but before I could confirm the ID it disappeared over the ridge. After that bit of excitement we decided to try the North Hide. This is another place, which always gets amazing things, but I don't really like the view from the hide. The birds are always a billion miles away and if the sun is out all you can see are silhouettes, whatever time of day it is. From there though we heard a **Dunlin** and on the water outside the hide we saw **Gadwall**, **Oystercatcher**, **Avocet**, **Grey Plover** and another Short-eared Owl. The week before we'd arrived there'd been reports of 30+ SEO's coming in off the sea which would've been amazing to see but it looked as though we were too late to witness the influx. The clock was ticking and we still wanted to check out the other hides so we headed off at 2.30pm by which point it was already starting to get dark.

Back in the main part of the reserve we sat down in Daukes Hide at 3pm and looked out over the rapidly darkening scene. The only new birds we could find were **Ruff** and 2 x **Pink-footed Geese** which sparked the question, "That's a point, where are all the Pink Feet?" We'd only seen Greylag and Brents so far....weird. It was really cold and we were flagging by now as the past couple of days had started to take their toll so we decided to pack it in and go and warm up with a hot drink from Cley Deli.

Wendy went in but ended up queuing for 20 minutes while a posh young couple discussed the origins of and then bought loads of poncey, overpriced food and drink. As they left they said, "Oh, thank you sooooo much, it all looks sooooo delicious." Hopefully it tasted as good as it cost, which Wendy was sure it was, as she'd just learned it's all home made by locals. I reckon she'd would've gladly bought half the shop if she could've hahaha :P. There was a long staying Cattle Egret in one of the fields next to Friary Hills in Blakeney so, as it was nearby, we took a quick spin out there to see if it was still about. We had a feeling it was too late in the day and there was indeed absolutely no sign of it so it had obviously already gone to roost for the night. It was our only dip of the day though so things were looking good. We then paid Blakeney Spa a visit, so we could finally do the dishes and remembering our uninspiring food cupboard we nipped down the road to The Kings Arms Pub for tea.....Sorted :).

We arrived back at HQ at 5.40pm and we realized that if we were going to make the most of our time then we would have to get up and out earlier in the mornings. Compared to all our previous trips to Norfolk the daylight hours were a lot shorter and there really wasn't enough hours in the day. After our baths we could finally wash the accumulated stack of dirty dishes and eventually sat down to relax. We still had no neighbours so it was looking as though we may have the area to ourselves....Phew!

Monday 7th November

Wendy was up at 7am only to be greeted by a massive house spider in the bathroom. A glass and an info leaflet later and it was wandering around in next doors garden.....the best bit was that I knew nothing about it hahaha. On this trip we had no set plans so we were just going to follow our noses while trying to find stuff ourselves. We would also be picking up anything of interest locally from the RBA app alerts and the BirdGuides website. It was dark and overcast again but at least the cloud cover was keeping the temperature bearable so we thought we'd go for another pop at Roydon Common and left HQ at 8.35am. Even though it was nearly an hour away it would be totally worth it if we could find the bird that was there. On the way Wendy pointed out that we'd seen no Buzzards yet and that we'd seen loads on our other trips. About 1 minute later she spotted one hunched in a tree so we could now add **Common Buzzard** to our list.

We arrived at the car park at 9.30am and negotiating the massive muddy puddles I found a space. We weren't optimistic about this and to add to the worry we spotted a guy with a shotgun and some dogs ambling his way down the track we were heading for...Great! I've already had one incident involving being shot at and didn't fancy a repeat performance. We were just getting our stuff together when a very nice guy, who was returning to his car after walking his dog, spoke to us. He warned us that the guy with the gun was in fact some kind of psycho ex gamekeeper from the Estate. Apparently, when the Estate was sold to someone else they'd made him redundant and in retaliation he'd vowed to keep his role anyway regardless of the locals concerns. The nice guy said that he'd had several run ins with him over shooting near public footpaths but was met with aggression every time and had got nowhere (brave man!!). We thanked him for the info and waited until the gunman had disappeared over the hill and the sound of his shots had become more distant before trying for round 2 on a bird we'd already dipped on and nobody had seen the day before. We crossed our fingers that the gunshots hadn't scared our bird away or worst still that the idiot hadn't shot it!

This time though we followed Sue Bryan's directions properly and found the correct path.



Walking along the soggy, squelching path Wendy threw another Karl Pilkington style strop. She was moaning that it was a complete waste of time and that there was NO way we would see this bird. I knew where she was coming from but wasn't going to be deterred and we carried on regardless, unpleasant as it was. We reached the end of the line for the directions Sue Bryan and Birdforum had given us and stopped for another look. After a couple of minutes I heard, "Eee Arr, on top of the dead tree stump, looks like a bit of the tree but I think it's it." I couldn't see what she was looking at to start with but eventually I saw that sitting, perfectly camouflaged, on the silvery grey tree stump, was the bird.....a **Great Grey Shrike!** YESSS!! Finally! Lifer number 4 for Wendy :). It flew from its perch over the heather and hovered for a while, something that neither of knew they did, and back again. After a few minutes it started working its way left along a row of spindly saplings. It then vanished! We couldn't find it anywhere so decided to split up, I went right and Wendy went left. A few minutes later and Wendy was walking up the path towards me waving her arms and pointing to the bank behind her. She'd managed to relocate it in on top of another tree. We edged our way closer and got good views of it sitting there. Luckily though there was what looked like some big ancient sand dunes, which were now covered by heather, making it possible for me to approach the bird without being seen. Walking on the path, skirting my way around, I was perfectly out of sight until I popped my head up and saw the bird about 50 meters away. I was still a bit far off but I took a few shots anyway and waited. Next second it dropped off the tree and out of sight! Perfect. I got up and legged it to get to the next ridge. Unfortunately the Shrike reappeared instantly and I'd only managed to cover about 3 meters and to make matters even worse, I was standing completely in the open....Arrghhh! I froze and to my complete surprise the bird stayed put. In the end I was able to sit down and take a few shots of it without it being bothered. Smart. After about 10 minutes it lifted off and disappeared miles away.....what a brilliant bird though!



Happy with what we'd seen I made my way back down the bank but not watching where I was going I stepped on a hole in the ground sending a painful jolt straight up my back...Uh Oh. If I'd done myself some damage it would mean the end of our holiday. Eeeek! Luckily though the pain quickly subsided and I was ok to carry on walking.....Phew. Heading back to the car we heard a sound that we hadn't expected and in the bushes by the footpath were 3 x **Yellowhammer**! It was now 10.50am and since we'd shortly be driving through Flitcham we thought we'd have a quick look for the Little Owl.

We arrived at Flitcham Abbey Farm at 10.59am and went straight to the hide, which was full! Yet again the people in there were friendly but they hadn't seen the Owl. There was still very little water there, which we'd first noticed back in September. We tried to blow the people away with some great Manx birding skills but there was no sign of what we were after and the only new bird we could find was a **Stock Dove** in amongst the Wood Pigeons. We left at 11.19am and headed to Choseley passing a couple of **Curlew** feeding in a field. We became slightly confused by a white van man flashing us and giving us the thumbs down as he passed us....Eh? I slowed right down as I thought this could be a sign of a crash round the corner or something. A bit further on it all became clear when we came across a Policeman with a speed trap so, "Thank you very much Mr van driver." :). Ten minutes later we were at Choseley Drying Barns hoping that the Corn Buntings were still hanging around. We looked and listened intently for them but they weren't there and we only saw **Linnet** and a **Song Thrush** in amongst about 100 Blackbirds in the hawthorn hedge. We left at 11.46am and set off for our next stop.

We pulled up at Titchwell at 12pm and had our lunch in the car where I spotted a lovely male **Bullfinch** in the bushes no more than 5ft away. There'd been a Yellow-browed Warbler reported on the footpath every day for the past month or so and we were hoping it was still about. It was apparently very vocal so, if this was the case, we stood a very good chance of at least hearing it. Standing at the exact spot where it had

been 'calling all day' yesterday, we heard nothing but more Goldcrests.....typical! We did hear a half, hearted blast of song from a **Cetti's Warbler** though, which again was a bit unexpected. Out on the reserve, at the first pool were **Little Grebe** and **Spotted Redshank**. We had a quick look from my favourite hide at Titchwell, the Island Hide, but it seemed that it isn't the place to be in winter as the lovely mud just in front of the hide is completely covered in water. A bit disappointed we moved on to the concrete monstrosity Parrinder Hide where Wendy found a pair of very distant **Great-Crested Grebes** displaying to each other. Yet again the newly formed 'brackish marsh' was completely dead.



There was little else of interest so we headed out to the beach to see if we could find something out at sea. On the beach were **Bar-Tailed Godwit**, **Sanderling** and **Knot** but the sea itself was desolate and also a gazillion miles out! We had a quick walk up the beach to see if there was any Shorelark about (dream on) but what we did see was an amazing sight. There were thousands, maybe millions, of Razorfish and Mussel shells washed up on the beach as far as the eye could see. This would explain why this area has huge wintering seaduck flocks later in the year. There must be an enormous amount of food for them going by the amount of shells.



As there wasn't much to see, bird wise, coupled with the fact that it was freezing cold we decided to leave Titchwell and try our luck elsewhere. We expected to be paying it another visit on the way out on Friday so we hoped we could get the YBW then. We were back at the car by 2.20pm and already the light was fading.

As we were driving through Brancaster we thought we'd take a detour and have a nosey around, as we'd never explored the area before, and took a spin down to the beach. It was a strange place with a Golf course shop and a ginormous car park that was completely empty. We noticed that there were also beach huts and stuff so it must be a popular spot in summer rather than winter. We quickly turned around and headed out and as we did we got a report from the RBA app of 2 x Waxwings in the Church grounds at Burnham Deepdale! This was literally 5 minutes away so off we shot, finding the church and the exact tree but it's branches were bare....Poo! Whilst we were there we got another report of Waxwing, this time at Titchwell Church! Are Waxwings religious or something? We turned around and backtracked to Titchwell for the second time in the day. We parked up at the Church at 2.48pm, scanned everywhere but again found nothing...Urrghhhh! I then got another notification saying that the Rough-legged Buzzard had just been seen and a Black Brant was with the Brents at Burnham Overy Staithe. The wintering Rough-leg was the bird I most wanted to see on this trip so we jumped back in the car.....we were sure there'd be more Waxwings turning up somewhere else at some point :/.

We passed the well known, Barn Owl fields in Burnham Overy and we usually see at least 2 out hunting but not this time though, which was disappointing and slightly worrying. We got to the roadside car park at 3.13pm and wandered down the footpath. I decided not to use the main village car park as high tide was due and I didn't fancy finding that my car had been washed away while we were gone. The path from the layby was a new area for us even after 5 holidays in Norfolk! A bird suddenly flew up in front of us and frantically flapped off like a rocket...a **Woodcock!** There was no sign of any Buzzards at all never mind the Rough-leg but further down the track, nearer the seawall (marsh wall more like), the fields were full of Geese. We'd scanned through them all, and there were quite a few, until we reached the last field. If it wasn't in with this lot we'd just have to give it up as a bad job and leave with another dip, this time a double dip, to end the day. Finally I managed to find it

amongst the others.....a **Black Brant** (with its white flash shining like a beacon) and lifer number 5 for Wendy :). Unfortunately it wasn't really close enough and way too dark so I didn't even attempt to get any pics of it....Doh!



Happy with this we were now extremely cold and it was getting windy and too dark to see much so we walked back up the path to the car.

We arrived at HQ at 4.31pm and had our well, deserved tea. After that Wendy went to the utility room to get our limited supply of muddy clothes washed, only to find that the previous occupants had also left us no washing powder either! Flipping heck! So I had to make another trip out to Blakeney Spa.....Grrrrr! Chores done and thinking there couldn't possibly be anything else missing after getting washing powder we finally sat down to relax :).



I fired up the Macbook only to find that we had no Wifi!!!!!!! Since we'd arrived the connection had been flakey to say the least but this was different, totally dead. Normally I'd have just rebooted the router but it was in the barn opposite.....Arrghhh! I needed to contact the owner but obviously couldn't send him an email like I'd done before. After a few minutes of shuffling through various laminated A4 info sheets I eventually found his phone number.....I'd have to ring him asap....Arrghhh! A couple of minutes later it was resolved, well kind of. He was going to get someone to go into the empty barn opposite us to reboot the router.....tomorrow! This meant that we wouldn't be able to keep up to date with BirdGuides that evening so if anything exciting had appeared, we had no way of knowing (we also had no mobile signal either never mind a 3g signal). All we could do was keep our fingers crossed that, wherever we were tomorrow, we would have a mobile reception and rely on the RBA app. If there was ever a time when we wished we had neighbours it was then. Ah well :/.

The Tawny Owls were calling outside in the nearby trees and we had everything we needed.....except the internet. We'd managed 5 dips in one day – Little Owl, Corn Bunting, Yellow-browed Warbler, Waxwing (twice) and Rough-legged Buzzard but at the last minute we'd scraped another lifer for Wendy.

Tuesday 8th November

Although we were disheartened by yesterday Wendy was still up at 6am and yet again it was overcast but not windy or raining...Phew! She went outside to listen to and hopefully see the Tawny Owls but instead was rewarded with a Woodcock flying over the house and a Barn Owl hunting in the field behind. She called me out to see the Owl but it had vanished by the time I got there.....I hadn't seen one yet either! As we stood waiting I heard what was possibly a Firecrest but we couldn't even see any of the Goldcrests in the trees let alone a Firecrest...Grrrr!



I then dosed myself up with painkillers as my back had started to give me grief after my little accident at Royden Common :/.

We left at 8am via the rubbish/recycling bins in the outside shed. Both bins were overflowing so we had nowhere to put our own rubbish! We knew that someone was going to be going into next door, so we left a note to inform them. Ten minutes later we were heading out for our first plan of the day. Before we'd gone away Wendy had specifically wanted to see Hawfinch and Shorelark and she'd managed the first one just after getting up on our first day. Now it was time to try for the second. There hadn't been any reports of Shorelarks yet but the book said that Holkham is the best place for them so we thought we would give it a whirl.

We arrived at Holkham Pines car park at 8.38am and walked on the sandy path through the trees and out onto Holkham Gap.



This is a large area of saltings (a blanket of strange brown grass about 6 inches high which grows on a beach), which eventually joins up with the dunes at the top of the beach. Apparently the birds had been seen on the saltings, but where exactly was anyone's guess as the place is massive! We decided to try the right hand side so walked along the edge but after nearly a mile and near the end of the saltings we cut across the clear channel, which lead to the dunes. We climbed up them and walked along the ridge to give us a clear view over both the saltings and beach side of the dunes. A nice flock of 7x Snow Bunting flitted past us and Meadow Pipits were in abundance. We could hear larks everywhere but after checking them all we could only find Skylarks. I decided to take a short cut over one of the channels but being smaller and having less waterproof boots than me Wendy couldn't jump it. She walked further on hoping the water would narrow off somewhere but it only seemed to get wider! Eventually I had to wade through and give her a piggy-back over :P. After walking for about 3 miles we were back where we'd started, knackered, and heading back to the car. We found a female **Blackcap** in a bush on the path in the pines, which was our first of the trip. Rather than leave Holkham we thought we'd take a wander over to the west end of the pines and past Meols House, which is one of the best places to see Pallas' Warbler in Norfolk (so the book says). On the way we heard another blast from a Cetti's Warbler, which eventually flew across the path in front of us and found a **Chiffchaff** in the trees. There must have been at least 3 x Cetti's in this area alone. We arrived at the house, which on first glances looks derelict but is very much still occupied, and Wendy called over to me, "Eee Arr.....on

the roof!" I looked up to see a brilliant male **Black Redstart** perched on the ridge tiles at the back of the building.....smart!



This was a pretty good find for the area but the bird didn't stick around and within a couple of minutes was gone. We carried on to find the Joe Jordan Hide, which overlooks the fields where the Rough-leg had been reported. Looking out from it I spotted a shape hunched up on a bush so I checked it out.....a Peregrine. We also saw a Kestrel and in the distance we could see a Buzzard on the ground eating something. It was just a Common Buzzard though and not what we'd hoped for so with very little else happening we left at 10.51am finding 2 more Firecrests in the bushes on the path back. We were back at the car by 11.43am and we really wanted to find that Rough-legged Buzzard so decided to give Burnham Overy Staithe another shot. After repeating our walk from the day before, annoyingly, we failed to find it again....Grrrr! Depressed, we left at 12.41am and headed to Wells Woods where there'd been a report of a Yellow-browed Warbler in the 'dreaded' Dell.

We arrived at Wells at 12.52pm and after lunch in the car we wandered off into the trees. Apart from loads of Goldcrests and a few noisy Jays it was very quiet and we still came away totally confused as to where the famous 'Dell' was. Is this it?



We thought we'd finally found it in September but this time we weren't convinced. When we left at 2.52pm, we must've hit a phone signal as I got a flurry of notifications reporting Waxwing, Red-necked Phalarope and Cattle Egret at Cley. This was shortly followed by another, which really got to us, Shorelark x 5 at Holkham east end of saltings.....Nooooooooo! If only the mobile reception was better! There was nothing else for it we would have to go back to Holkham for another look, as it seemed we hadn't walked far enough, east before crossing the saltings.

We pulled up for the second time that day at 3.02pm and paid another £3.50 for up to 3 hours parking. It was now getting pretty late in the day, the light was fading and we had an even longer walk than we did that morning ahead of us. I decided to leave my camera in the car as my back was in need of a well, earned rest. On the way out I spotted something on the ground about 15 feet in front of us and on closer inspection it turned out to be a nice female **Brambling**. It wasn't in the least bit worried by us and continued feeding while we walked past. I reckon it must've just come in off the North Sea exhausted and starving hungry to be behaving like that in such an unlikely place. I really could've done with my camera but that's just sods law. A bit further on and we flushed some otherwise invisible **Grey Partridge** from nearby. As soon as they landed they were gone and we couldn't find them again. This was slightly worrying as if the saltings grass could hide a bird as big as a Partridge how on earth were we going to spot any Shorelarks feeding in there? :\. After walking right to the east end of the saltings there was still absolutely no sign of any Shorelarks so we made our way back to the car. Both of our backs were now killing us, we were totally knackered and it was dark so the only thing we could do was go back to HQ.

We arrived back at 5pm and were very pleased to find that we now had Wifi again....Yey! We had tea and a soak in a hot bath before checking what we'd missed on BirdGuides. There was nothing tragic but there was an interesting and peculiar report of a Melodious Warbler at Happisburgh so that was our plan for the morning sorted :P.

Wednesday 9th November

Knowing that we had a lot to fit in today Wendy had set her alarm for 6am so we could be ready to go as early as possible. I finally surfaced at the altogether more sociable hour of 7am. Again it was overcast but we had to count ourselves lucky that it still wasn't raining. We left HQ at 7.40am and as we'd had to detour to the deli for coffee we also tried Blakeney Fresh Marsh at Friary hills to chance the Egret, hoping it would be light enough this time for it to be out and about.

We pulled up at the entrance to Friary Hills and instantly spotted a white blob in the cattle field.....Yes! There it was, the **Cattle Egret** doing its stuff with the cows, following them about and literally getting under their feet.



I tried to get some shots but it was too far away to get anything amazing and Wendy was itching to have a go, even though she can only just about lift the camera!



We probably stayed with it for longer than we'd planned and didn't leave until 8.15am. We also wanted to fit in a bit of Sea-watching while it was still early as some of the reports had been good in the past week. We decided to go to the very popular hut at Cley west bank and hopefully not tread on any of the locals toes.

It was only 8.25am, so still pretty early but it was windy which made it feel very cold. Standing at the hut we realized we couldn't see right up to the shoreline, which made us wonder why it's so popular. We moved up the beach, onto the shingle ridge and sat down to shelter behind a small boat. After a few minutes I noticed a group of gulls flying past. They were quite far out but it soon became very obvious that they were in fact 40+ **Little Gulls**. We also found a **Red-throated Diver**, some **Goldeneye** and a **Slavonian Grebe** flew past. A large Harrier caught our eye flying in off the sea and when it came closer we saw that it was ringtail **Hen Harrier**.....cool. After 20 minutes we were absolutely freezing and needed to get going so we left at 8.45am for our next possible target.....Red-necked Phalarope at Cley reserve.

It only took us 5 minutes to get to the Cley layby but we still had to trudge our way 'round the houses' again to get the hide. We sat down in the Avocet hide and scanned over the pool. If it was there it would be obvious but after a few minutes it sunk in that it clearly wasn't.....Urrghhhh! Clutching at straws we moved to Bishop's Hide to get another angle over the pool but there was still nothing vaguely resembling an RNP. I did manage to find a lovely **Water Pipit** though which went down well after we'd failed to find the one at Kelling Water Meadows.



The sun was now trying desperately to break through the clouds so I got some pics and video of it and Wendy had a pop at a Coot and some Wigeon.



It's such a brilliant place for anyone who's learning bird photography, as the birds are right under your nose, you could easily spend all day there. Having wasted enough time already and a coffee fix being overdue we headed back to the car and to Cley Visitor Centre to refuel. Wendy skipped off to the café and came back with a cappuccino and a bar of something, which she assured me, was going to be lovely. She opened it and broke off a bit for me to tryBleurrghhh! If I'd known it was

some weird raw fruit and ground up nut concoction I'd have stayed well clear! I quickly spat it out (nearly puked it out more like) and we left with a bad taste in our mouths (literally – for me hahahah) after our first dip of the day. It was now 10.35am so we thought it best to head out to the east side of North Norfolk to our main site of the day as we'd finally had a notification through with the report we'd been waiting for all morning.

As we entered Happisburgh at 11.35am we crossed our fingers that it would live up to its name and that we'd be coming away happy. We weren't convinced. The 'twitch' was obvious and the biggest we've ever been to in Norfolk. There were loads of birders standing in a row at the side of a narrow road behind a Church, facing the hedge of someone's garden! :O.



Most of them were chatting, so it didn't look promising, but there were a few looking into the bushes as well as some more, further up the road. We were already seeing a few familiar faces and unfriendly guy (who turned out to be friendly) from Kelling was there as was Sue Bryan's friend from Royden Common, who recognized us and stopped for a chat. We positioned ourselves over the other side of the road, away from the hoards, and started to look. How likely was it that we were going to see an LBJ in all that cover? I guessed which bush to look at, as I'm sure I recognized the leaves from the photo on the BirdGuides app, so we started staring into it. We'd only been there for 10 minutes when a couple of blokes became agitated. Someone called it and people started running from their 'spot' with their bins and cameras poised. Sure enough the movement came from the bush we were looking at and we couldn't believe our eyes. We had about a 20 second view of this plain looking warbler hopping about like it was a Goldcrest but it was definitely a **Melodious Warbler!** Lifer number 6 for Wendy and 2 for me.....Woo Hoo! It moved through the bushes like lightening and there was no way I was even going to attempt a shot so I was content to simply observe the bird before it disappeared again and the excitement died down...like a lead balloon. Everyone remained alert but it didn't show again. A bird did fly across the road and into the trees behind but it was debatable as whether it was the Melodious. After giving it 10 minutes and with nobody being able to relocate it we were happy enough with what we'd seen and decided to call time.

We went back to the car via the Churchyard where a pair of Black Redstarts had been reported, hanging around on the gravestones, earlier. Wendy eventually found the male on the roof of the church which then chose to fly right to the top of the tallest steeple we've ever seen and also became unphotographable.....Grrrrr!



We were back at the car by 12.30pm and were indeed happy with our trip to Happisburgh :P. What a crazy bird to see in November. We found out later that it's only the 2nd Melodious Warbler in Norfolk in 50 years!!

I then had another notification about Waxwings at Waxham. After a quick check of the OS map on my phone I found out that Waxham wasn't far away at all. Going by our days luck with place names linking in with the bird in question we headed off at 12.45pm. Our luck had unfortunately run out and we left empty handed after having lunch in the car at 1.05pm and detouring through Sea Palling as it was the closest place for W.C's. The first thing we noticed as we approached Sea Palling was that we could smell our target area before we'd even seen it. After taking advantage (whilst holding our breath) of the local amenities we left but couldn't seem to leave the smell behind until we were well on our way out of there :/. We then drove through Roughton at 2.10pm and this place really did live up to its name. The first thing we came across during our brief encounter was 2 (definitely rough) blokes in their 30's, wearing scruffy grey trackies, hanging out in a bus shelter and slurping on cans of cheap lager. We could only hope that no rarity turned up there in the next couple of days. Quickly leaving Roughton well and truly behind us we then passed something that instantly struck us as odd. There were a couple of retired walkers stepping it out along the roadside and although there was a total absence of bins they were both kitted out in head to toe camo. Nothing entirely strange about that in this part of the world but.....it was the high viz waistcoats they were sporting that confused us! Why would anybody go to all the trouble to camouflage them selves so well only to top it off with the most conspicuous outer layer humanly possible? :D.

I then had another notification, which was of a Ring Ouzel at Kelling so as we were heading back west we made a quick diversion straight for it. I'd lost the signal on my phone again so we had no other details and absolutely no idea of where about in Kelling it was. We had to presume that it was around the Water Meadow area

(although it could have been the heath for all we knew). We arrived at 2.30pm and headed off down the track again but it seemed our run of good luck had finally run out. We covered the whole area and met a few other birders, none of which had seen the bird yet. We had another look for that elusive little Jack Snipe but neither of them where anywhere to be seen.....Urrghhhhh! It was now starting to get dark and with not much time left to do anything else we squeezed in a quick visit to Cley East Bank.

It was 3.55pm when we parked up at Cley and the visibility was poor but we weren't ready to give up yet....you never know what might pop up or when.



On the way down the bank we stopped to admire the beautiful red sunset behind Cley Village. Further on and we were rewarded by the squealing sound of a **Water Rail** and we finally heard our first **Bearded Tits** of the week. These birds had only been on our 'maybe..... if we're lucky list' so this spontaneous detour had turned out to have been a good move after all. Back at the car at 4.37pm we were now tired and hungry so knowing that there was a nice friendly pub just down the road in Salthouse we set off for tea.

We arrived at the Dun Cow pub at 4.39pm and after a yummy tea we were back to HQ by 5.50pm glad that we didn't need to cook again. On the way back I got a notification reporting a Hume's Leaf Warbler at Trimmington! Blimey.....what a bird that would be and something I'd never have predicted at all. It would have come all the way from eastern Siberia I think, making it something very special! We couldn't help but notice that the sky was very clear which made us slightly worried that any decent birds that were hanging around would use this to their advantage and move off. I had a look at BirdGuides and found that we'd hit the right spot for the Ring Ouzel even though we'd failed to find it and noticed that we'd also not received a report about Waxwings in Holt or Pallas' Warbler at Trimmington where we were going to be tomorrow.....Grrrr! The shorter days were becoming frustrating now as we were finding ourselves having to sacrifice one thing to go to another. Usually we could fit most things in and even go out after tea so prioritizing wasn't easy.

The weather for the next day was the best we'd seen all week with 5 hours of sun forecast. We knew we had to get out early if we wanted to see the Hume's and we

also wanted to give the Shrike and Shorelarks another shot. Hopefully the extra sunlight would lengthen the day slightly and we could cram it all in. I had a quick research of the Trimmington area in preparation, as we'd never been there before. With a combination of Google maps, Birdforum and BirdGuides it looked pretty straightforward and I worked out exactly where we needed to walk to the next day.

Thursday 10th November

Wendy woke up and leapt of bed in a blind panic at 6.30am. Her alarm hadn't gone off as her mobile had run out of charge during the night.....Oooops! I was up 15 minutes later and the aim was to be leaving at 7.30am. Wendy saw one of the Tawny Owls flying over the barn to its roost and also the Barn Owl floated in from nowhere and straight into one of the Owl Boxes....cool :). I went out for a look and found another box which was number 1,760 and had been donated by the Barn Owl Trust. Why can't the I.O.M pull their finger out and get something similar going for our Barn Owls? With so much going on right on our doorstep and also having to get ourselves ready it was 8am when we left which was later than we'd hoped. By this point the clear blue sky had been replaced by clouds and it looked like it was going to rain.....so much for 5 hours of sunshine! Trimmington was out on the east side of North Norfolk again so we were looking at a 45minute journey according to the Satnav.

We arrived at the layby in Trimmington at 8.33am (without breaking any speed limits!) and started our trek through a field, some woods and along a coastal footpath to the area where the Hume's and Pallas' had been the day before. This stretch of coastline is eroding fast and the evidence was there for all to see.



We enjoyed our walk to our destination, as it was a new and interesting area. It looked as though it could have loads of potential but we found very little on the way. When we arrived we thought we were alone and behaved accordingly. Wendy set about to find a spot to relieve her bladder when out of the dense undergrowth appeared another birder followed by a couple more from round the corner.....hahahaha that could've been embarrassing :D. Deciding that she would have to wait we carried on scanning the bushes intensively as nobody had seen anything yet that morning. We caught a glimpse of a small Warbler in a tree and

waited for it to reappear.....a Chiffchaff! By now a few of the familiar faces had turned up as well until there ended up being quite a few of us dotted around.



The next birds to catch our eye were yet another Chiffchaff and a **Sparrowhawk** but at 10am I saw something else. My instant reaction was Yellow-browed but after getting it in my bins and getting Wendy onto it we quickly realised that this bird was a bit different and the bird we'd set out to see.....**Hume's Leaf Warbler!** Excellent! This was lifer number 7 for Wendy and 3 for me :). I quickly ran off to alert the other birders in the area and soon there were about 10 of us watching the bird. I even managed to predict its movements through the hedgerow and found it again a few minutes later. Talk about trying to find a needle in a haystack!



This time it was really close and I really should have got a photo but I was too busy just watching it. It then disappeared out of sight so I'd missed my chance. There was

also a Blackcap and loads of Goldcrests around too, so while we were waiting for the Hume's to reappear, we started going through them all. Recognizing the nearly identical call we were chuffed to have found another lovely Firecrest. We were doing well for these birds on this trip and Wendy found yet another a few minutes later while I was trying to get a pic of the first. This bird was coming really close to us and sitting out in the open, although typically brief, so I thought I stood a good chance of my best ever Firecrest shot. It was so close in fact that while I was talking to a woman, who'd also noticed the lack of Barn Owls, it landed on the ground just in front of her feet! She was totally oblivious and would've stood on it if she'd taken a step forward but before I could say anything it had shot back up into the trees. Totally crazy! Nobody had seen the Pallas' that morning so we presumed that it had moved off and by 11.10am Wendy's back was giving her so much jip that she decided to pack it in and go back to the car for some painkillers and coffee. I wasn't going to let the Firecrest beat me but hadn't yet taken a shot that I was 100% happy with so I stayed put. The bird was lightning quick, so it was pretty depressing seeing it land about 20 feet away but being unable to get a shot. The fact that it was so dark under the trees didn't help either and no combination of auto focus and manual focus could get me the shot I wanted. Eventually I got one sharp shot which was ok but I should have got one a lot better.



Just as I was thinking about leaving a call came out, "HUME'S" so everyone legged it past me and blocked the path! I wasn't complaining though as I got another view of this great bird but this time I had the camera ready to try for a record shot but the bird totally disappeared.....Grrrrrr! Eventually I had to admit defeat with both birds and made my way back to the car by 11.40am. We drove away with sore backs but were extremely happy to have been the first to find the Hume's that day :). Whilst talking to the nice couple at the Hume's twitch Wendy found out that it was them who'd found and reported the Shorelarks at Holkham earlier in the week. They said the birds were right out at the most easterly part of the saltings so at 11.50am we headed back west to try Holkham Pines for our 3rd and last possible attempt.

On the way there I suddenly thought, “Oh flip what about Dartford Warblers?” We didn’t have much else left on the agenda today apart from Holkham so I suggested we took a detour to Kelling Heath. It was a unanimous decision so I put it in the Satnav as an interim destination. By extreme luck the Satnav told me to turn right in 100 yards which put us right on the Kelling Heath road! Wahey :). We were curious as to whether they would still be in the same area we’d seen them during the summer of the previous year. We arrived in the car park at 12.22pm and had lunch. I was a bit reluctant to leave the car there as parked a few spaces up was a car crammed full of teenagers. Ah well, I’d have to chance it.



It was, as forecast, sunny and really warm when we set out but we were dressed for winter! We reached the area we wanted to be in but it looked dead until we finally found a pair of Stonechats. Remembering the top tip given to us by the nice birder we’d met there last year we watched them like Hawks. He’d told us that if we found the Stonechats the Dartfords wouldn’t be far behind. We followed them about for ages but there was no sign and the glare of the sun was creating a mist effect in our bins, which wasn’t helping. Wendy then saw a bird fly briefly over, then into the heather...it had to be one. A couple of minutes later I saw something similar and thought I could see a long tail. Shortly after that Wendy shrieked, “**Dartford Warbler!**” Sure enough, there it was, perched in the lower branches of a young birch tree.....Nice. We were also very pleased to see how the area that had been burnt due to a heath fire last year had started to regenerate itself. In such a short space of time new ground coverage was definitely taking hold again. Job done we had to make a move and walked back to the car seeing another Sparrowhawk and Wendy (very excitedly) found her first Fly Agaric mushrooms of the trip. It’s to be hoped that whatever had a nibble on the edge of it was immune to the it’s side effects :P.



We were back at the car and leaving for Holkham by 1.21pm. At 1.52pm I received another notification about the Rough-leg, but that would have to wait, as we weren't going to give up the Shorelarks without giving it our best shot. So far these birds hadn't been reported again since the one report earlier in the week so we weren't feeling optimistic but at 2.07pm we set off for round 3! It seemed like a no brainer and a total waste of our ever, decreasing energy as we walked out towards the saltings. Wendy was beginning to sound like Karl Pilkington again but this was our last chance before heading out of Norfolk in the morning. I, "Ummed" and, "Arred" about bringing my camera and decided that I better had this time, just in case, but my back was protesting big time.

After what seemed like hours we reached the end of the line where we'd be turning back on ourselves and all we'd seen were Skylarks at this point.



Wendy then noticed a group of 5 birds fly up from about 100 yards in front of us. They then doubled back over us and around the saltings area but they didn't look as though they were going to settle. The number of birds was right, they were lark sized and weren't acting like Skylarks at all. They also looked really dark in flight and not at all like Skylarks. They flew around, high up, for ages and at one point went behind the dunes.....Arrghhh! We just needed them to land so we could check them out. Suddenly they reappeared, turned and started heading straight for us :O. You would think that a brown bird with a bright yellow and black face would be obvious but you'd be soooooo wrong. It wasn't until the last minute when they dropped against a darker background, just before landing, that it became clear. I couldn't believe it as I said, "**Shorelark!**" It didn't seem real but on our final day and 3rd attempt we'd actually found them.....lifer number 8 for Wendy and definitely her bird of the trip :). We watched them feeding for ages and Wendy was grinning like the Cheshire Cat...talk about last minute, nail biting stuff! We'd put the most work into seeing these birds and it was one of the 2 that she'd been wanting to see for years.....Phew!

I really wanted to try and approach them to get a decent shot but we could see another birder wandering around with a scope about 100 yards away so I decided to tell him about the birds first. We tried making gestures over to him as he obviously hadn't seen the birds flying in and we'd had felt terrible if we let him walk away empty handed. Eventually he saw us and cottoned on to their presence. After a while I realized that I'd better stop looking and get some pics while I had the chance. This soon became hard work, we were totally knackered, and I didn't have my tripod with me so Wendy offered herself up as a substitute. She actually worked a treat on all fours (ooer) and made the perfect tripod :P. She soon got bored of me getting pics and wanted to get some of her own so I ended up having to return the favour.....god knows what people were thinking! The birder with the scope and another guy with a camera had made their way over to watch them by now as well, so we all got our fill of these great birds. We'd been so lucky to have seen them and had managed to fire off hundreds of shots so, happily, we packed up and headed back to the car. In the fading light I knew our chances of decent pics were very slim but Wendy got the best one of the bunch, obviously due to the fact the tripod she was using was super sturdy ;).



On the way back one of the others couldn't help but comment and said to me, "Interesting tripod you have there." Hahah. We reckon we should go on Dragon's Den with our invention of the 'Humanpod' - no bulky extra weight to carry, just needs a bottle of water and it's ready to go :P. Back in the trees we also found another Firecrest and a Woodcock zoomed past us. I then got a notification about a Desert Wheatear at Thornham Harbour. OMG! Desert Wheatear is a bird I've been desperate to see, since missing out on 1 in the Isle of Man in 2002, and to top it off this was a male. It was nearly dark by now but if the bird was anywhere near the car park we would have a chance. We hurried back to the car by 3.53pm and although the sun was setting, for the first time in the week it looked as though it would still be light enough to bird by the time we got there.....if I put my skates on!

We passed the Barn Owl field and the crowd that gathers there each evening. We expected to see nothing once again but this time Wendy spotted a lovely Barn Owl sitting in a tree. This was my first of the trip and normally I'd have pulled over to watch and try for some pics but not this time.....we were on a mission to see a Desert Wheatear. I put my foot down as the light was fading fast but was soon stuck behind a 'Coasthopper' bus and I noticed that my Satnav was now only on 1 bar.....Aarrghhhhhh! At 4.15pm we arrived at a very dark and cold Thornham Harbour.



We'd never been to this area before so we started to aimlessly walk out towards where the other birders were coming back from. Our gut feelings weren't good and it was about a mile long walk to get to the dunes where the bird had been reported. We'd bitten off more than we could chew this time and realized that it would be way too dark to see anything by the time we got out onto the beach. There were a few birders coming back but nobody heading out there so, deflated, tired and cold, we resigned ourselves that this bird would have to wait till tomorrow. I was totally gutted and didn't hold out much hope that it would still be there in the morning. At 4.25pm we were back at the car but at least it was handy to have seen the area and worked out where we needed to go.

We arrived back at HQ at 5.20pm starving so we had tea and started packing our stuff up before leaving in the morning. We'd been watching the weather forecast all week and had hoped it would change. It was saying gale force winds for Friday night, which is when we'd be on the boat! Unfortunately this hadn't changed and all we could do was keep our fingers crossed that it wouldn't be too bad and the boat would still sail.

All in all it had been a good last day having only dipped on Pallas' Warbler and being too late for the Desert Wheatear. We knew where we'd be going first thing in the morning.....Thornham and as early as possible so we decided we'd leave our stuff at HQ and go back for it later to give us the best chance. An early night was definitely in order, as we had a very long day ahead of us, but with so much to do it didn't happen!

Friday 11th November

Wendy was up and about at 5.53am frantically trying to get as much done as possible before we went out, as well as taking her last chance to listen to the Tawny Owls. I was up at 6.45am and with most of the packing already done we could see no benefits in having to come back for our stuff later so decided to load up the car and just leave there and then. It was yet again overcast and as forecast the wind had picked up.....Urrghhhh! We locked up, waved Bye Bye to the smartest holiday cottage we've ever had (and probably WILL ever have unless we win the lottery) and drove away for the last time at 8.35am.....:({.

We had no idea if the Desert Wheatear would still be there so we thought we'd wait for a notification to come in before driving that far west so early in the day. We went straight to the beach at Cley west bank again for a last look and when we arrived at 8.42am it was the coldest it had been all week and absolutely freeeezing!



We were pinning all our hopes on the Wheatear so had forgotten just how good Cley beach actually was. In half an hour we'd managed to see **Common Scoter** x5 (close in), Red-throated Diver x 5, **Black-throated Diver**, **Guillemot** x 3 and another flock of 40+ Snow Bunting but at 9.15am we got what we were waiting for. A report of the Desert Wheatear so it was all systems go! We had to make a quick visit to Salhouse with our remaining bread to feed to the ducks and the Black-headed Gulls, who snaffle it mid air or (if you don't let go) will snatch it straight from your fingers :P.

We arrived at Thornham Harbour at 10.25am, luckily knowing exactly where to go. We followed the path and saw some more Grey Partridge, which flew over from the marsh over the track and vanished into the stubbly field next to us. We climbed up and over the dunes where we found a large group of birders, including the 'usuals' on the beach.



We could tell from a distance the approximate vicinity of the bird by their body language and found it straight off.....**Desert Wheatear!** Lifer number 9 for Wendy and 4 for me :). The bird was quite happy with our presence and wasn't fazed in the slightest allowing everyone to get brilliant views.....unbelievable! It wasn't all plain sailing though as just when we thought it was settled it would fly off down the beach or behind the sandy ridge out of view. One guy barged his way through the crowd and straight towards the bird, which we thought was a bit rude and stupid...until we overheard somebody say, "Watch Dave, he'll walk straight up to it and it'll sit on his head." The guy did just that, it didn't sit on his head but he certainly didn't flush it. We know some jammy birders but he beat them hands down. I, on the other hand, had decided to sit, very still, on the sand and wait for it to come closer to me... needless to say it didn't. Doh. Every time the bird cleared off down the beach the crowd followed it so we joined in taking every opportunity to get a distant record shot while we had the chance. There were too many people around to feasibly use the portable Wendypod though, which was a shame when I wanted to get some video :P. Me, and a video cameraman then decided to try a pincer move on the bird so we went onto the path in the dunes to get ahead of the bird. Wendy was now hopping around and regretting her last coffee so wandered off into the dunes to find a quiet spot. It was then that everyone started to follow me and the cameraman and loads of other people started to appear.....typical! She would have to hang on for a while until the traffic had died down. Eventually we got ahead of the bird and I sat in a spot I thought would be totally perfect. I just needed the bird to fly up and perch for me.....it never did. A few minutes later a bloke appeared with a digiscoping outfit, walked straight up to the bird (to within about 20 feet) and started firing off the shots....I couldn't believe it. If I'd tried that the bird would flush and I'd probably have got my head kicked in! Soon though a crowd of about 20 people had managed to get really close to it so we thought, "Fine, we'll go for it too." We didn't get to 20 feet but still closer than we had all morning and managed to get some ok shots in the poor light.



By now it was so cold that our hands were numb, our noses were running and the bird was becoming less accessible so we decided to call it a day.

As we headed towards the exit through the dunes I spotted the Dessie flying past us and back up the beach ahead of us. We then saw an elderly couple, coming towards us with bins round their necks. I put my 'Good Samaritan' hat on and stopped them to ask if they were looking for the Desert Wheatear. They said, "Yes" so I told them that it had just flown up the beach behind them. Luckily enough there it was just 50 yards behind them hopping around. :) They were extremely happy. Probably because we had just saved them a mile walk on a freezing cold beach! A bit further up there was a guy standing motionless with his legs crossed and head down. He didn't move a muscle and didn't half look a plonker, a bit like one of those street entertainers who pose as a statue. He's obviously an old school birder who has excellent fieldskills and sure enough the bird flew near to him to check him out! Nice. The flow of people had now eased off so when we got into the dunes Wendy seized the moment while I kept watch. It was all going well until 4 blokes appeared over the top of the dunes.....hahahah. All I could do was laugh and warned Wendy, "Just don't stand up!" I think those blokes had two good views that morning though ;).

Heading back along the path towards the car we passed loads of birders on their way out to see the bird and back at the harbour I spotted a **Red-breasted Merganser** in one of the channels. We were back at the car by 12.27pm and Wendy had spotted a Deli on our way so it was time for another well, earned coffee fix and to look at some expensive, weird stuff they pass off as food. We realized then that we only needed to find 2 more birds before reaching 130 for the trip and although that may sound easy we knew it wasn't going to be. Normally we'd be aiming for Leighton Moss by about 7pm and picking up a few new species but that's only possible in summer when it's light. Before coming away I thought a target of 100 would've been good for November. By mid week I thought 120 would've been brilliant but now we were looking at a stunning 130!

We arrived at Titchwell at 12.45 and had our lunch wondering hopefully if the Spoonbill we'd missed by a day had reappeared or if we might find something new out at sea. As we stepped out of the car the temperature had dropped noticeably so we considered our selves very lucky to have had such good weather up till our last day. We were adamant that we were going to find the Yellow-browed Warbler on the Meadow Trail, it had been calling constantly all week.....apparently! When we passed the café near the entrance who should be working behind the counter but Sue Bryan! She recognized us again and shouted over a, "Hello" so we returned the gesture. Dragging our feet and feeling knackered already we were yet again faced with loads of Goldcrests calling but in the dense coverage we couldn't even see 1 of them. Then we heard a very loud, constant and familiar call.....**Yellow-browed Warbler!** We followed it for ages but never clapped eyes on it once :(This was such a downer as I really wanted a decent view of a YBW but we only needed 1 more bird to hit 130 so the hunt was still on.....Urrghhhh. While the Yellow-brow was giving us the run around we heard another Cetti's and noticed some people looking into the ditch at the side of the path. It was a Water Rail showing unusually well.....until we got there. We saw it but it was now skulking behind the undergrowth so it wasn't possible to get a shot, I'd missed my opportunity of a 'best ever' Water Rail pic...Grrrr! An elderly woman, who was pushing what appeared to be her husband (with bins) in a wheelchair couldn't find it so we helped to show them where the bird was before we carried on. We should join the Samaritans we're so nice! :P. We walked out to the 2 hides and the beach but saw nothing new so we decided to nip to the café to warm up with some coffee, tea and toast. Sue Bryan brought the toast over to our table and stopped for a chat, asking us what we'd seen while we'd been in Norfolk, which was very nice of her. We were still cringing and hoping that she didn't think we were being serious at Royden Common as she'd been nothing but very helpful and friendly to us :/.

Refuelled and ready for the off we were back at the car at 3.07pm by which time it was getting dark.....Aarrghhhh! If we were going to hit 130 we'd need a miracle and quick. I then got a notification reporting some White-fronted Geese at Chosely....that would do it! Where about in Chosely was the big question, there were no other details, so we headed straight for the Drying Barns hoping to finally pick up a Corn Bunting too. Unfortunately Choseley turned out to be a 'wild goose chase' and although we'd driven round the whole area there was no sign of a single Goose in any of the fields and still no Corn Buntings either so we left at 3.19pm.

The 130 bug had now taken over and determined, in the near dark we headed back to Flitcham Abbey Farm. We passed a small fishing lake so I slammed on the brakes and pulled in hoping to maybe find a Tufted Duck. We cracked up laughing at how desperate we now were to get to 130 but there was nothing there at all. We arrived at Flitcham at 3.57pm and it was so dark we doubted we'd be able to see anything from the hide, never mind what we were hoping for, but it was worth a go.



Looking out over the field was difficult to say the least and scanning the dead tree, the fence posts and everywhere else we knew our target bird hung out seemed pointless. Wendy then piped up, "Eee Arr, that's either it or part of the fencepost, err no hang on, it's definitely it cos it just moved!" At first I couldn't see what she was on about but then I saw it, a small grey blob that in the poor light merged perfectly into the wooden post at the back of the field. **Little Owl!** We could also hear another calling from somewhere and caught a flash of it flying past the first one but it landed behind what we thought was a ditch. Whenever we'd seen the Owls before they'd always been at the far end of the field on these posts and we'd always thought that that there was bank before the trees behind. As it was dark this time I was totally shocked to see car headlights going past the fence. This could only mean one thing, that there was a road between the fence and the trees! We'd be better off viewing the posts from the road as we'd be standing right next to them....Urrghhhh. We'll remember that for next time but we'd just learnt something new and very helpful. We'd also now hit the practically impossible total of 130 species in the very, very, last minutes of birdable light. WAHEY! Wendy yet again had to give in to a high 5 for that :). We were back at the car at 4.20pm and we could still hear the Owls calling to each other and also a Tawny nearby. Wendy took a wander up the track towards the road, seeing not only the Tawny Owl flying away but when she looked over the wall she came within 3ft and face to face with another Little Owl! When she saw it, it clocked her, they looked at each other for a while and the Owl flew off.....jammy or what? With our mission accomplished it was now 4.33pm so we were finally happy to leave Norfolk and set off for the drive to Heysham.....if the boat was still sailing!

It turned misty and drizzly for the journey but by 6.45pm we'd reached our stop off point, Blyth Services. We parked up to get some horrifically unhealthy food from a certain burger chain and a coffee fix from Costa. I'd planned to go to the petrol station while we were there so I drove over to the pumps. We noticed a scruffy looking guy with a rucksack on his on back bending over, talking through the window, to the driver of the car next to us. He stood up, turned around and started to walk over to me! It turned out he was a trampy hitchhiker who asked me if I was going north or south. I told him I was going north, which luckily must've been the wrong answer. Rather than say anything polite he implied that I was bending the truth and asked if I

was SURE I was going north! He quickly moved off to his next victim of the night. We were flagging by now but we've felt worse on past trips so after I'd filled my petrol tank we carried on and left at 7.50pm.

Everything was going fine until we got on the M62 and the heavens opened. This made the rain on the drive back from Scotland look like a light shower! To say the driving conditions were hard was an understatement as every passing car was throwing up a massive wall of spray so big you couldn't see a thing. Driving anywhere near a lorry was like driving under Niagara Falls or something! The conditions didn't improve until we were near Lancaster and we couldn't wait to get to the pub. Unfortunately Arnside is one of those places that although you think you're nearly there there's still another 3 miles of unlit, single track, winding road to negotiate. We usually see loads of Deer on these roads at night but saw nothing other than a very grumpy looking wet Barn Owl sitting in a roadside tree sheltering from the rain.

Eventually we arrived at our local 'The Albion' at 9.40pm and breathed a sigh of relief that we could now just chill out with a drink and comfy seat for a couple of hours. Last time we were there in September we'd been greeted by the usual Landlord, a man who looked as though he might like a tippie or two. He was fun to watch though, when he opened the till the drawer it would fire out into him, nearly sending him flying and the way he staggered about collecting glasses! This time, however, the quiffed, poncey looking 'bar fly' guy in the suit who looked as though he was boring the pants off the landlord last time was behind the bar. Looks as though he's taken over the place.....there'll be a 'Beers of the World and Cocktails' menu on every table next time we find ourselves there I'm sure. Normally by the time we're sitting in The Albion we can hardly string a sentence together or keep our eyes open but we were feeling surprisingly spritely. We certainly looked on better form than the poor girl sitting with the droning and incredibly boring Mr Know it All on the table next to us. She spent the evening listening to his disagreeable conversation, playing with her hair and tapping her foot frantically with irritation. Either he is the only single 30year old bloke left in Arnside or he is minted! We'd love to have been a fly on the wall when her friends asked, "Sooooo, how'd the date go?" :P. We'd had enough by 11.25pm and left for Heysham.

By 12.05pm it was nearly over and once again we were sitting waiting for our cue to board the boat.....with the wind howling in the background. Fortunately due to tidal conditions our departure was scheduled for 30 minutes earlier so we were boarding at 1.10am. Wendy went straight to sleep which was lucky as it wasn't the smoothest of crossings....but not the roughest either! Yet again I struggled to sleep and only managed to get about 30 minutes in all so when we arrived in Douglas at 5.15am I was just about able to get to the car deck. We disembarked at 5.30am and headed for home thinking that maybe this time, just for a change, we'd go back to bed.

Breathing a sigh of relief we walked into our freezing cold kitchen at 5.40am. Wendy clicked the heating on straight away but nothing happened.....it was dead! Not only did we have no heat but we also had no hot water either. I spent the next 2 hours learning how to be a gas boiler engineer and eventually fixed the problem while Wendy unpacked, so our plan of catching up with some sleep was quickly forgotten. After we'd sorted everything out we decided to go out.....birding. Nutters!!

All in all, the trip had been a complete success, we'd seen most of the things we'd gone away hoping for and even had a few surprise extras thrown in. We'd managed to exceed our estimated total of 100 and managed a fantastic 130, although when we got home and checked we'd actually got to 133! Wendy had come away with 9 lifers and I

got 4 so compared to 1 each in September we can't sniff at that :). Although the majority would qualify for freak of the week the only 'tick' missing was finding a fit birder. As it was so cold we just couldn't tell through all their layers of clothing and massive hats so we'll have to save that particular sport for the warmer months.....hahahaha. Normally, as soon as we get home Norfolk goes mental with rarities, which leaves us feeling ripped, gripped and whatever other kind of 'off' you care to imagine! This time however, for the first time, we felt quite smug as the reports from Norfolk died down and nothing new appeared on BirdGuides. Maybe that's because we'd left so nobody else was finding anything decent....Bah ha ha ha ha ha ;).

We don't know when we'll be going back to Norfolk again but one thing's for sure, that this trip will be a tough one to beat.

Red-throated Diver	Hen Harrier	Herring Gull	Dartford Warbler
Black-throated Diver	Sparrowhawk	Great Black-backed Gull	Blackcap
Little Grebe	Common Buzzard	Kittiwake	Yellow-browed Warbler
Great Crested Grebe	Common Kestrel	Guillemot	Hume's Leaf Warbler
Slavonian Grebe	Peregrine	Razorbill	Chiffchaff
Leach's Storm-Petrel	Red-legged Partridge	Feral Pigeon	Goldcrest
Northern Gannet	Grey Partridge	Stock Dove	Firecrest
Cormorant	Common Pheasant	Woodpigeon	Bearded Tit
Cattle Egret	Water Rail	Collared Dove	Long-tailed Tit
Little Egret	Moorhen	Barn Owl	Marsh Tit
Grey Heron	Coot	Little Owl	Coal Tit
Mute Swan	Oystercatcher	Tawny Owl	Blue Tit
Bewick's Swan	Avocet	Short-eared Owl	Great Tit
Whooper Swan	European Golden Plover	Green Woodpecker	Nuthatch
Pink-footed Goose	Grey Plover	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Great Grey Shrike
Greylag Goose	Northern Lapwing	Skylark	Jay
Canada Goose	Knot	Shore Lark	Magpie
Dark-bellied Brent Goose	Sanderling	Meadow Pipit	Jackdaw
Black Brant	Dunlin	Water Pipit	Rook
Egyptian Goose	Ruff	Pied Wagtail	Carrion Crow
Common Shelduck	Common Snipe	Wren	Starling
Eurasian Wigeon	Eurasian Woodcock	Duncock	House Sparrow
Gadwall	Black-tailed Godwit	Robin	Chaffinch
Common Teal	Bar-tailed Godwit	Black Redstart	Brambling
Mallard	Curlew	Stonechat	Greenfinch
Pintail	Spotted Redshank	Desert Wheatear	Goldfinch
Shoveler	Common Redshank	Blackbird	Eurasian Siskin
Common Pochard	Turnstone	Fieldfare	Linnet
Common Eider	Pomarine Skua	Song Thrush	Common Crossbill
Common Scoter	Little Gull	Redwing	Bullfinch
Common Goldeneye	Black-headed Gull	Mistle Thrush	Hawfinch
Red-breasted Merganser	Common Gull	Cetti's Warbler	Snow Bunting
Marsh Harrier	Lesser Black-backed Gull	Melodious Warbler	Yellowhammer
			Reed Bunting