



Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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North Norfolk break
21 – 25 February 2022

Participants

John & Jan Croft
Anne McGregor
Dawn Stevens

plus

Malcolm & Helen Crowder (23 February)
Julia Maynard (24 & 25 February)
Helen Young (25 February)

Leaders

Rob Lucking
Chris Durdin (23 & 25 February)

Report and lists by Rob Lucking.



Group members at Kelling Heath; from Morston Quay (DS).

The group stayed at Titchwell Manor www.titchwellmanor.com

Cover photos: top, red-breasted goose at Cley by John Croft.

Cover, below: gorse in flower, Kelling Heath (CD) and Blakeney Harbour from Stiffkey (RL).

Other photos by Rob Lucking and Chris Durdin, or as noted in the report.

Honeyguide Wildlife Holidays always tries to put something into nature conservation where we visit, on this occasion a donation of £40 per person to Norfolk Wildlife Trust, earmarked for NWT's appeal to purchase Sweet Briar Marshes in Norwich. With the addition of Gift Aid through the Honeyguide Charitable Trust, we were able to give £190 to NWT.

Daily diary

Monday 21 February – arrival

The group all gathered safely at Titchwell Manor, Anne coming via Norwich then a lift with Chris and Julie Durdin. It was soon time to enjoy a meal together and plan the next few days.

Tuesday 22 February – Holkham

We met at Lady Anne's Drive on the Holkham Estate on a sunny but breezy morning, the last vestiges of Storm Franklin. There was good variety of bird life feeding on the marshes next to the car park with wigeons and teals being the most numerous. A great white egret fed in one of the many ditches criss-crossing the marsh and distant red kites and marsh harriers created disturbances among the wildfowl.

We made our way along the boardwalk through the dunes seeing a few small birds – coal, blue and great tits mainly – and onto the beach where we watched a small group of meadow pipits. A plaintive burst of song behind us turned out to be a woodlark – a good record for Holkham as we later found out from Paul Eele, one of the wardens.

Out on the saltmarsh we watched small groups of shelducks, brent geese and a flock of around 30 sanderlings but unfortunately the recently reported snow buntings and shorelarks were nowhere to be seen.

On the strand line we found slipper limpets, a North American species that has been introduced to our waters in ships' ballast water. It now forms dense colonies on mussel beds on The Wash and is a 'sequential hermaphrodite'. Slipper limpets form stacks of up to twelve animals with the largest at the bottom being female and all those on top males. When the female dies, the next largest male changes sex and becomes female.

By this time the wind had picked up and a squally shower passed through making for a very unpleasant walking experience! Discretion being the better part of valour, we decided to take an early(ish) lunch at the Lookout Café where we added barnacle goose and tufted duck to the bird list.

By the time we finished lunch the weather was decidedly better, and we walked west along the back of the pines. In sunny sheltered spots we found seven-spot ladybirds, a couple of early-flying bumblebees (not sure which species) and an early hoverfly which didn't stay still long enough for an attempt at an identification.

Salts Hole held two little grebes, two coots and a moorhen and the smell of hydrogen sulphide gas (rotten eggs) acted as reminder that the pond is actually a remnant feature from Holkham's intertidal past. The pond remains saline despite being isolated from the sea for over 250 years and supports several species of marine crustaceans.

We also came across a stand of winged (or cork-winged) elm, a North American species which has been planted for some, probably forgotten, reason at Holkham. The corky ridges along the stems – the wings – were very distinctive.



Winged elm or wahoo *Ulmus alata*; stinking hellebore at Holkham.

From the first hide we looked out over the grazing marsh, the elevated position giving us a much better view. Lapwings were displaying and we saw several marsh harriers quartering the marshes. Two mistle thrushes were seen distantly along with brown hare and Reeve's muntjac deer. Just as we were getting ready to leave, we heard the distinctive 'cronk cronk' of a raven and upon exiting the hide were fortunate to see it flying low over our heads. Ravens have only recently recolonised Norfolk since becoming extinct in 1859 after years of persecution from gamekeepers; there is now a handful of pairs breeding in the county, including one pair that has been nest-building in Holkham Park.

We checked an old shelter for signs of antlions but last year's larval pits were long gone and it was too early in the year for the new ones to be formed. Two large clumps of stinking hellebore were by the track, presumably naturalised garden escapes.

From the second hide a flock of around 75 'Russian' white-fronted geese fed in the shelter of the remains of the old Iron Age hill fort and two great white egrets – an increasingly common sight at Holkham – flew towards us and dropped into a reed-fringed ditch. A distant barn owl foraged over the grassland, and we saw several more brown hares out on the marsh.

While we were in the hide, another birdwatcher told us that the snow buntings had returned so we thought we'd have another crack at them and retraced our steps back to the beach. Unfortunately, the snow buntings had been flushed and had moved further down the beach and as we were starting to lose the light, we headed back to the cars.

Wednesday 23 February – Blakeney and Cley

We met at Morston Quay in readiness for our boat trip out into Blakeney Harbour. Thankfully the wind had dropped considerably, and the trip was on. While waiting to board, we took a short walk along the sea bank towards Blakeney, seeing redshanks on the saltmarsh and a distant little egret. Inland, a male kestrel flew in front of us and landed in a tree with a female nearby.

We boarded the boat and sailed out into Blakeney Harbour passing several small mixed groups of roosting waders including redshank, dunlin, turnstone and grey plover. A close great northern diver popped up next to the boat giving good but brief views to those lucky enough to get onto it.

The boat took us right to the end of Blakeney Point where we soon found our target species – grey seal. Around 25 bulls were hauled up on the sand, looking at us lazily. The boat skipper told us that grey seals were a relatively recent colonist in Norfolk with the first breeding record 30 years ago and now Blakeney Point supports the largest colony in England with more than 3,000 pups being born annually.



The boat from Temples Seal Trips; some of the grey seals on Blakeney Point (JC).

We turned round and headed back to Morston, this time with the wind behind us. While the great northern diver didn't put in a repeat performance, we did see four red-breasted mergansers and the boat skipper's assistant picked up two distant spoonbills in flight without the assistance of any optical aids whatsoever!

After Blakeney we headed along the coast towards Cley for lunch and rendezvous with fellow Honeyguiders, Malcolm and Helen Crowder. However, we had news that the red-breasted goose that had been in the area for the past month was showing rather well with a flock of brent geese and decided to try and see that first as it was a new bird for many of the group. After a detour due to roadworks in Cley village we easily located the brent goose flock feeding alongside Beach Road and in with the brents was the red-breasted goose!

This diminutive goose breeds in arctic Siberia and usually winters around the Black, Caspian & Aral Seas. A real rarity in the UK, this winter three red-breasted geese have been recorded on the east coast with birds in Lincolnshire and Essex, as well as Norfolk. This one gave great views in the afternoon sun, and we could even hear it calling.



Brent geese with a red-breasted goose, Cley.

After lunch we headed to the central group of hides in Norfolk Wildlife Trust's flagship reserve. From the boardwalk we found a very early flowering alexanders with examples of the alexanders rust gall *Puccinia smyrnii* on some of the leaves and several cigar galls in reeds. Cigar galls are caused by the frit fly *Liparia luscens* which lays its eggs in common reed stems. The larvae eat the growing tip of the reed causing the gall to form which looks a bit like a cigar. After the larvae has pupated and emerges as an adult fly, the empty galls are sometimes used as nest sites by the reed yellow-faced bee.



Alexanders rust gall *Puccinia smyrnii* on alexanders; cigar gall.

From the hides we saw our first large flock of avocets with around 40 birds present, along with a small number of black-tailed godwits and dunlins. There was a good range of wildfowl with gadwall, pintail, wigeon and teal.

We retraced our steps and walked along the edge of the reedbed to the East Bank. The grazing marshes were full of wigeons and teals. A small flock of golden plovers flew overhead and a grey heron dropped into the heronry on the other side of the road. A single male ruff dropped in, a distinctively pale bird.

The shingle beach was very windy, and we couldn't see a huge amount on the choppy sea so we dropped back into the lee of the shingle bank. We walked a short distance seeing some specialist plants of the shingle including sea beet, yellow-horned poppy and buck's horn plantain. Before long we found our target – a small

group of nine snow buntings – feeding out of the wind on the shingle bank. Following our failed efforts the day before, it was a relief to finally see these arctic visitors!



From the shingle beach at Cley (DS).

Thursday 24 February – Titchwell and Thornham

We had planned to spend the morning at Thornham and the afternoon at Titchwell but due to the weather forecast, we decided to swap the day around and visit Titchwell first where at least there would be some shelter from the rain which had been forecast. As it turned out, there was no more rain in the morning!

The nice thing about Titchwell is that the birdwatching starts as soon as you get out of the car! On the path from the car park to the visitor centre we enjoyed close views of a goldcrest and two song thrushes fed on ivy berries. Next to the path were vivid red blobs of the scarlet elf cup fungus.

We spent a bit of time watching the feeders outside the visitor centre as a brambling had been reported but we only saw chaffinches so we headed up towards the beach. In a ditch next to the path, we had point blank views of a water rail busily feeding and we watched as it extracted worms from the leaf litter and carefully washed them in the water before eating them.

In the sunny weather, marsh harriers were displaying with two males ‘sky-dancing’ over the reedbed. Rob explained the recent management works carried out on the reedbed that would allow better water level control to help reedbed species such as bittern and bearded tit while also, it’s hoped, attracting spoonbills to colonise. In the reedbed pools we saw several tufted ducks and some very smart male pochards.

From the Island Hide we saw around 50 avocets and on a bank of cut reed on the edge of the lagoon there were at least six snipe hiding themselves well among the cut reed stems.

Continuing towards the beach we saw several curlews out on the salt marsh and a pair of red-breasted mergansers on the sea pool – a naturally created pool formed fairly recently when a tidal creek naturally became blocked up with sand.

On the beach we found a relatively sheltered spot amongst the dunes and scanned the sea. Despite the choppy waves we located a smart male goldeneye, and on the beach saw ringed plover, grey plover and sanderling.

Titchwell’s beach is one of the best for beach combing and we found chunks of peat broken off from the intertidal peat beds that are the remains of an ancient forest that stretched across to Germany before the British Isles were formed. The peat had holes in it formed by the piddock, a type of bivalve that is able to bore holes into soft rocks and clays, as well as ancient peat beds.

We wandered back to the visitor centre for lunch, and while sitting at our tables located the brambling perched up in a tree. We then walked around the boardwalk trail seeing a large frog but, best of all, the over-wintering Siberian chiffchaff. Currently this is considered a subspecies of chiffchaff, though some authorities believe Siberian chiffchaff should be considered a species in its own right. Regardless, we got great views!



Scarlet elf cup; Siberian chiffchaff (Steve Cale), same bird as the group saw, on a different day.

There was nothing much from Fen Hide so we returned to the car and drove the short distance to Thornham Harbour.

It was very windy, bordering on the unpleasant, up on the sea bank but we saw a large flock of golden plovers on the grazing marsh. An overwintering dotterel had been reported in the flock in previous days but the flock was too distant and the wind too windy to view it well! A flock of several thousand pink-footed geese flew in – the first big flock we'd seen.

We reached the beach and a bit of shelter and scanned along. There were several bar-tailed godwits along with sanderling and ringed plover.

The walk back was much more pleasant with the wind behind us, and we were soon back at the harbour. Several linnets fed in the mud, and we saw another barn owl hunting over the rough grassland towards Thornham village.

Friday 25 February – Kelling Heath and Stiffkey Fen

A fine, sunny day without too much wind at last! The group met at Kelling Heath and, while we were assembling, enjoyed a singing woodlark and a pair of bullfinches neatly nipping buds off the blackthorn bushes next to the car park.

We crossed the North Norfolk Railway onto the section of heath where Rob had seen Dartford warblers a couple of weeks earlier. Dartford warblers often closely associate with stonechats and before long we located a pair of stonechats along with their attendant Dartford warblers. Both species gave excellent views as they flew between gorse bushes and small saplings.

Common buzzards were active in the sun; we saw at least five along with kestrel and a distant red kite. A green woodpecker flew over the heath with its distinctive undulating flight.

As we continued around the heath, we came across a second pair of stonechats, again with a pair of Dartford warblers in tow and we enjoyed more excellent views, including seeing the Dartford warblers on the fence and a fence post.

We crossed back over the railway line and walked along the edge of a firebreak maintained to prevent the embers from passing steam trains setting fire to the heath. This section of heath can be good for adders basking in the morning sun but there may have been too much disturbance from dog walkers already and we drew a blank. We did hear another woodlark singing though.

Reaching the car park, we bade farewell to Julia and Helen and went for lunch at the Kelling Reading Room café.

There was a very active rookery over the road and a noisy group of house sparrows in the hedge. A hedgerow shrub in flower was a cherry plum, often confused with blackthorn. The rule of thumb is that if it is in flower during February, it is cherry plum, in late March or April it is blackthorn. To be sure, a quick look at the base of the flower will reveal recurved sepals if it is cherry plum.



Turkeytail fungus and cherry plum blossom, both at Kelling.

Chris left the group at this point, and we headed off to Stiffkey Fen as our first afternoon stop. Marsh harriers were displaying here and we heard the female calling to the nearby male. We climbed the steps onto the sea bank and in one of the salt marsh creeks found a greenshank - a scarce wintering species. Out on the fen was a small group of avocets and lapwings. A grey heron fed on the far side, but the water levels were rather high and we turned our attentions to Blakeney Harbour.

A large aggregation of gulls contained a variety of species – mostly black-headed and herring gulls but with a smattering of great and lesser black-backed and common gulls. The prize, however, was a single adult Mediterranean gull which flew up out of a creek and obligingly lands with a group of black-headed gulls allowing close comparison. It wasn't in full summer plumage yet and didn't have a full black hood, though the pure white flight feathers were clearly visible as were the bright red legs and bill.

There was a range of wildfowl out in the harbour, mostly brent geese and wigeon with a smattering of pintails and shelducks. There were also at least ten red-breasted mergansers out in the deeper water of the Blakeney Channel and a barn owl foraged over the salt marsh and rough grassland next to us.

While we still had some light, we drove the short distance to the other side of Stiffkey village to the small National Trust car park overlooking the saltmarsh where a small number of hen harriers regularly come into roost at dusk. We had great views of another barn owl and two sparrowhawks flew low over the saltmarsh, but sadly no hen harriers this evening. There have only been 2-3 birds roosting this winter, perhaps an indication of persecution in the breeding grounds as Norfolk's wintering birds are primarily from the UK uplands.

Highlights

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| Anne | close views of barn owl hunting at Stiffkey; hearing the Dartford warbler singing; red-breasted goose and Siberian chiffchaff, two 'lifers'. |
| Dawn | finding the snow buntings, loved the barn owls and hares and of course the beautiful red breasted goose |
| Jan | Dartford warblers and Siberian chiffchaff. |
| John | has to be the great views of two 'lifers'; the red-breasted goose and the Siberian chiffchaff. |
| Chris | red-breasted goose and Dartford warblers. |
| Rob | Dartford warblers at Kelling. |

Bird list

Great northern diver	1 Blakeney Harbour,
Little grebe	2 on Salts Hole, Holkham on 22/02; 1 Cley 23/02
Cormorant	Seen in small numbers at virtually all coastal sites visited. Largest count was around 70 on Blakeney Point on 23/02
Little egret	Seen at most, if not all, wetland sites visited.
Great white egret	Several at Holkham on 22/02.
Grey heron	Singles at Cley on 23/03 and Stiffkey Fen on 25/02
Spoonbill	Two in flight from the boat in Blakeney Harbour, one seen later in flight at Cley on 23/02
Mute swan	Small numbers at all wetland sites visited
White-fronted goose	c.75 Holkham, 22/02
Pink-footed goose	Small numbers at Holkham on 22/02 and Cley on 23/02. A large flock of several thousand at Thornham on 24/02/
Greylag goose	Seen at all wetland sites.
Canada goose	Several among greylags at Holkham on 22/02 and Titchwell on 24/02.
Barnacle goose	Five at Holkham on 22/02.
Brent goose	Seen at all sites visited.
Red-breasted goose	One at Cley on 23/02
Shelduck	Seen daily at all wetland sites visited.
Egyptian goose	Several at Holkham on 22/02.
Mallard	Seen at all wetland sites.
Gadwall	Several at Cley 23/02.
Pintail	Small numbers at all wetland sites visited.
Shoveler	Small numbers seen at all wetland sites.
Wigeon	Seen daily at all wetland sites visited
Teal	Seen daily at all wetland sites visited
Pochard	6 at Titchwell 24/02
Tufted duck	1 Holkham 22/02, several Titchwell 24/02
Goldeneye	Drake on the sea at Titchwell 24/02
Red-breasted merganser	Four in Blakeney Harbour 23/02; 2 Titchwell 24/02; 10 Blakeney Harbour 25/02
Red kite	Singles at Holkham 22/02 and Kelling Heath 25/02
Marsh harrier	Seen at all wetland sites visited. Displaying at Titchwell and Stiffkey.
Buzzard	Small numbers seen throughout.
Sparrowhawk	Two at Stiffkey, 25/02
Kestrel	Two at Morston 23/02, one at Kelling Heath 25/02.
Pheasant	Several seen on farmland as we travelled between sites.
Water rail	One at Titchwell 24/02
Moorhen	Two at Holkham 22/02; several at Stiffkey Fen 25/02
Coot	Seen at Holkham 22/02, Cley 23/02 & Titchwell 24/02
Oystercatcher	Seen daily
Avocet	c.40 at Cley 23/02; 50 at Titchwell 24/02; c.20 Stiffkey Fen 25/02
Ringed plover	Small numbers at Blakeney & Cley 23/02; Titchwell 24/02 and Stiffkey 25/02
Golden plover	Small numbers at Cley on 23/02 & large flock at Thornham on 24/02
Grey plover	Small numbers at Blakeney & Cley on 23/02; Titchwell & Thornham 24/02 & Stiffkey 25/02
Lapwing	Displaying over Holkham Fresh Marsh on 22/02. Also seen at Blakeney & Cley on 23/02, Titchwell & Thornham on 24/02 and Stiffkey Fen 25/02.
Sanderling	Seen in all intertidal habitats visited.
Turnstone	Several in Blakeney Harbour 23/02 & on Titchwell beach & Thornham Harbour 24/02 and Stiffkey 25/02.
Dunlin	Seen at Cley on 23/02; Titchwell 24/02 & Stiffkey 25/02.
Redshank	Seen at all wetland sites visited
Greenshank	1 Stiffkey 25/02
Black-tailed godwit	Several at Cley on 23/02 & at Titchwell 24/02
Bar-tailed godwit	Several Thornham Harbour 24/02
Curlew	Seen at all wetland sites visited
Snipe	c.6 Titchwell 24/02
Ruff	1 at Holkham 22/02, 1 at Cley 23/02, 1 at Stiffkey 25/02
Black-headed gull	Seen at all wetland sites visited.

Common gull	Several in gull flock at Stiffkey 25/02
Mediterranean gull	1 adult Stiffkey 25/02
Lesser black-backed gull	Several in gull flock at Stiffkey 25/02
Herring gull	Common - seen at the majority of coastal sites
Great black-backed gull	Seen in small numbers at all coastal sites visited
Woodpigeon	Common throughout.
Barn owl	Singles at Holkham 22/02 & Thornham 24/02 and 2 at Stiffkey 25/02
Green woodpecker	1 Kelling Heath 25/02
Skylark	Seen/heard throughout
Woodlark	1 singing at Holkham 22/02, at least 3 singing at Kelling Heath 25/02
Meadow pipit	Several in the saltmarsh at Holkham 22/02, heard flying over at Cley 23/02 & Stiffkey 25/02.
Rock pipit	Several on saltmarsh at Holkham 22/02
Pied wagtail	Small numbers seen throughout.
Wren	Seen/heard in most wooded habitats visited
Duncock	Seen/heard in most wooded habitats visited
Robin	Seen/heard in most wooded habitats visited
Stonechat	1 at Cley 23/02, at least 5 Kelling Heath 25/02
Blackbird	Seen/heard in most wooded habitats visited
Song thrush	2 at Titchwell 24/02
Mistle thrush	2 at Holkham 22/02
Dartford warbler	2 pairs Kelling Heath 25/02
Cetti's warbler	Heard at Cley 23/02, one Stiffkey 25/02
Goldcrest	Heard at Holkham 22/02, seen at Titchwell 24/02
Siberian chiffchaff	One at Titchwell 24/02
Long-tailed tit	Several at Holkham 22/02
Coal tit	Several at Holkham 22/02
Blue tit	Seen/heard in most woodland habitats
Great tit	Seen/heard in most woodland habitats
Treecreeper	1 Holkham 22/02
Magpie	Seen in small numbers most days
Jackdaw	Seen in small numbers throughout.
Rook	Several flying over Kelling Heath & rookery at Kelling village 25/02
Carrion crow	Several at Holkham 22/02
Raven	1 Holkham 22/02
Starling	Seen throughout
House sparrow	Several in Kelling village 25/02
Chaffinch	Several at Holkham 22/02 & Titchwell 24/02
Brambling	1 at Titchwell 24/02
Linnet	Seen in small numbers most days.
Goldfinch	Seen or heard most days in suitable habitat
Bullfinch	Pair at Kelling Heath 25/02
Reed bunting	Male at Stiffkey Fen 25/02
Snow bunting	9, Cley 23/02

Mammals

Grey seal	around 30 on the tip of Blakeney Point
Reeve's muntjac	several on grazing marsh at Holkham on 22/02, Titchwell 24/02 & Stiffkey 25/02
Chinese water deer	one on saltmarsh at Stiffkey, 25/02
Roe deer	two, Stiffkey, 25/02
Brown hare	