

Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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**North Norfolk break
18 – 21 May 2021**

Participants

Mel and Ann Leggett
Malcolm and Jane Key
Simon Jones

Leader: Rob Lucking

The group stayed at Titchwell Manor www.titchwellmanor.com
Report and lists by Rob Lucking.

Cover photos, all by Mel Leggett. Top: Weybourne from Kelling Heath. Bottom: thrift and green hairstreak.
Other photo credits as noted in the report.



Above: group photo by Ann Leggett. Below: North Norfolk railway, Kelling Heath by Mel Leggett.



Honeyguide Wildlife Holidays always tries to put something into nature conservation where we visit, and a donation of £40 per person to the RSPB was our way of contributing this time.

DAILY DIARY

Tuesday 18 May – Holkham

The group met at Lady Anne's Drive on the Holkham NNR at 9.30 under glorious blue skies and sun. As we gathered in the car park, a mistle thrush fed on the grazing marsh and a spoonbill flew over our heads.

We walked out onto Holkham's famous beach, described by Jane as one of the Seven Wonders of the World, and across the pioneer saltmarsh down to the beach. Patches of pink thrift were flowering and Rob pointed out some of the saltmarsh plants that weren't yet in flower. Walking along the base of dunes being careful to stay out of the cordons erected by the Holkham wardening team to protect beach-nesting birds such as ringed plover and little tern, we watched a pair of ringed plovers in a creek and three oystercatchers having a territorial dispute.

We also found a slipper limpet on the tideline – a non-native American species thought to have been introduced on ballast from ships and now firmly established in The Wash. Slipper limpets live in stacks of around a dozen individuals and are 'sequential hermaphrodites' – the largest animal at the bottom of the stack is a female and the smaller ones are males. When the female in the stack dies, the male animal that is attached to her changes sex and becomes female!

We then cut through the dunes to the Washington hide, overlooking the freshwater marshes. Views from the hide were impaired a little by elm saplings but we were able to watch marsh harriers quartering over the marshes, little egrets and a multitude of breeding lapwing and waterfowl. From the scrub in front of us, blackcaps and chiffchaff sang.

Walking past Meals House, we ducked into the old cart barn where there were around 30 ant lion pits visible in the sandy floor. Adult ant lions look a bit like damselflies, but the larva is basically a swollen body with a massive pair of jaws. The larva lies buried at the bottom of the pit where it waits for a small insect, such as an ant, to venture over the edge of the pit whereby it loses its footing and slips to the bottom of the pit where it is captured. Ant lion larvae are so efficient at digesting their prey that they don't have an anus!



Ant lion pits (Mel Leggett)

Our lunchtime stop was in the dunes just beyond the western end of the pines where an elevated position gave us a great view over the grazing marsh. We saw our first great white egret feeding in a pool which promptly vanished to be replaced by a spoonbill! As we watched, we saw more great white egrets flying back and forth to and from the nesting colony. Our first red kite flew past, and we watched buzzards flying in the thermals over the woodlands of Holkham Park.

After a leisurely lunch break, we meandered back along the path towards the cars and stopped in the elevated Joe Jordan hide. We watched spoonbills, little egrets, cormorants and great white egrets flying to and from the colony. Last year four pairs of cattle egrets nested but the birds left Norfolk during the cold weather this February. An unexpected common crane fed in the grazing marsh, disturbed when one of the NNR wardens arrived to change the battery on an electric fence.

After a relaxing hour in the hide, we wandered back towards the car park past Salts Hole, a saltwater pond that is thought to be a relict feature from before the Holkham grazing marshes were claimed from the sea 250 years ago. Usually a good site for little grebes, Salts Hole today held just a pair of tufted ducks and a moorhen! We made it back to the café in time for a hot drink and to do the bird log for the day. As we walked back to the cars, we spotted a pair of grey partridges and a drake wigeon on the grassland adjacent to the car park.

Wednesday 19 May – Kelling Heath and Cley Marshes

Another sunny day and the group convened in the NWT Cley Marshes car park and then drove in convoy to Kelling Heath, one of the largest remaining extents of lowland heathland on the North Norfolk Coast.

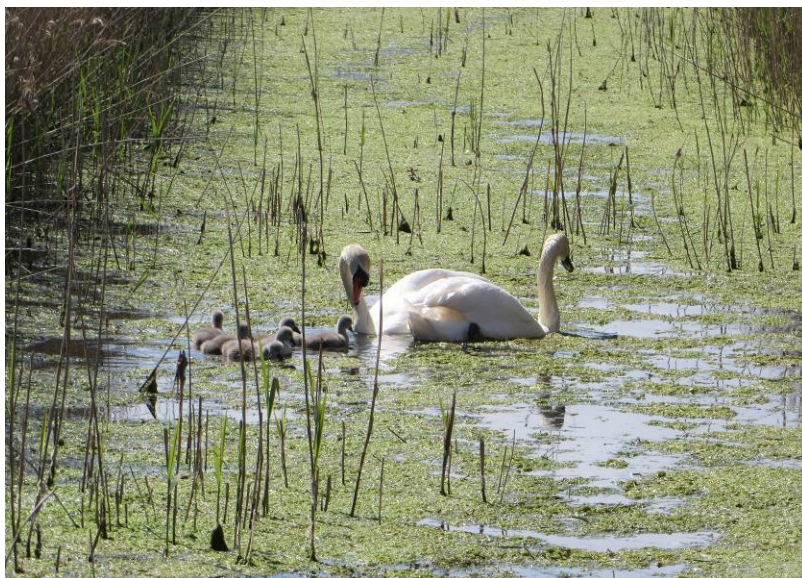
As we crossed the road between heathland blocks, we found two green hairstreak butterflies active in a sheltered sunny spot. Crossing the heath towards the level crossing, we timed our arrival at the crossing perfectly to watch a passing steam train from the North Norfolk Railway which runs from Sheringham to Holt.

One of our targets here was Dartford warbler, Kelling Heath being the only nesting site in Norfolk for the species. We walked slowly around the block of heath to the area where Rob had seen them a couple of weeks previously with another Honeyguide group. Unfortunately, they weren't showing so instead we enjoyed good views of linnets and of a particularly confiding jay that foraged completely unconcerned in front of us, going to prove that a good view of a common bird is far better than a poor view of a rarity!

Continuing around the heath, a few of the group were surprised when a nightjar gave two brief bursts of song in broad daylight! As we wandered slowly back towards the level crossing, Rob heard a brief snatch of Dartford warbler song and eventually we watched one well, at a safe distance, in the top of the gorse. As we made our way back to the car park, we enjoyed good views of a whitethroat and heard a distant cuckoo. A garden warbler was heard singing from some dense scrub next to the road but showed only briefly.

Once back at the car park, we retraced our steps back to Norfolk Wildlife Trust's Cley Marshes reserve and enjoyed lunch sitting outside the visitor centre terrace, overlooking the reserve.

With the central three hides closed due to a marsh harrier nesting close to the boardwalk, only Bishop Hide and Babcock Hide were open. Bishop Hide overlooks Pat's Pool which held little bar a few avocets and redshank. We did however enjoy good views of a pair of mute swans with seven cygnets.



Mute swans, Cley (Mel Leggett).

We then walked to the Babcock Hide where we enjoyed good views of a reed warbler singing in the reed-fringed ditches. We also found a 'tent' of brown-tailed moth on a sea buckthorn bush.

Babcock Hide overlooks Watling Water where we watched two common sandpipers and a spoonbill feeding. An arrival of hirundines – mostly sand martins and a few swallows – attracted the attentions of a superb hobby that gave us great views chasing the hirundines briefly before powering away from us.

We retraced our steps and walked up the East Bank to the shingle beach. A small flock of dunlins and ringed plover were feeding on Arnold's Marsh and Sandwich terns flew west past us towards the breeding colony at Blakeney Point.

Thursday 20 May – Wells and Stiffkey Fen

Thursday saw the start of period of unsettled weather, and it was noticeably more blustery as we met in the coastal town of Wells-next-the-Sea and walked the short distance along the sea wall to North Point Pools.

There were a few lingering brent geese on the salt marsh along with breeding herring and lesser black-backed gulls. A common tern plunge-dived in front of us. We saw our first collared dove – feeding on the mudflats – and house sparrows feeding in the alexanders on the sea bank. Good views were had of a spoonbill and a little egret feeding in the tidal channel.

North Point Pools were created around five years ago by a local farmer, assisted by Natural England, on an area of arable farmland that was difficult to farm due to flooding. With a bit of land-forming and some water control structures it has developed into a superb wetland. On the first pool, viewed from the sea bank, there was a drake pintail along with lots of nesting avocets and lapwings.

We then dropped down off the sea bank into some coastal scrub with singing reed and sedge warblers and reed bunting. The main pools held two little ringed plovers, numerous avocets, redshanks and lapwing and we enjoyed good views of lapwing chicks – a sign of good breeding success. A sedge warbler showed well in a path side bush.

We returned to Wells for lunch in The Maltings when it started raining. We decided to go to Holkham Park where the trees would give us some shelter from the rain, but it brightened up not long after arriving. Nevertheless, Holkham Park gave us some new species for the week: barnacle geese and great crested grebe on the lake, long-tailed tit and nuthatch in the woodland.



Wells Harbour (Malcolm Key).

A herd of fallow deer browsed in the woodland and Malcolm and Jane, who have planted and now manage their own woodland in Suffolk, commented on the lack of regeneration and the similar age of all the trees. Holkham Park was originally planted in the late 1700s hence the oldest oak trees are a relatively youthful 250 years old! The park also contains many Holm oaks, typically a Mediterranean species. The story goes that when the first Earl of Leicester brought back treasures from his Grand Tour of Europe in 1770s, they were packed in crates full of holm oak acorns. Rather than wasting them, the Earl planted them out in his newly created estate grounds!

With time to spare we moved on to the intended afternoon location of Stiffkey Fen. We parked by the road where Rob explained

the history of the site from its purchase by Lord Aubrey Buxton (one of the founders of WWF) in the 1970s and its subsequent conversion to a nature reserve. A red kite gave good views by the parking area as we set off down to the fen.

Our first view of the fen revealed a great white egret and Malcolm's sharp eyes picked out something in the water. His initial identification as the Loch Ness Monster quickly turned into three otters! A great end to the day!

Friday 21 May – Titchwell Marsh

With a pretty dismal weather forecast of wind and rain, we knew that our final day would be a challenge but, as they say, 'you have to be in it to win it!' We met at the visitor centre at RSPB Titchwell Marsh and were greeted by Hayley and Lizzy, two of the reserve's wardens. They explained that there had been some predation problems and together with the cold spring, there were very few birds on the reserve. Ah well!

We started off down the East Bank path towards the first hide and had great views of a female pochard feeding in one of the reedbed pools. In one of the larger water bodies were two little grebes, tufted duck and coot. A pair of greylag geese and six goslings were on the path and not wanting to frighten them too much, we hung back until the goslings followed their parents from the path and through the grassy bank to the safety of the water. A smart male wheatear perched obligingly on a fence post in the saltmarsh.

We escaped from the wind and rain in Island Hide looking over the freshwater lagoon. Some common terns were hunkered down on one of the islands along with a single little tern. A single Mediterranean gull was with the black-headed gulls on the fenced island at the far end of the lagoon but was very mobile and didn't give very good views.

We braved the wind and rain again and dashed down to the Parrinder Hide where we watched two ringed plovers on the exposed mud in front of the hide and eventually got better views of the Mediterranean gull as it perched on the posts in the lagoon and flew around giving good views of its pure white wing tips. A mixed group of immature common, herring and great black-backed gulls allowed us to compare the sizes.

Moving up to the beach, our second hobby of the tour flashed by, and we had better views of a little tern feeding in the saline lagoon just behind the beach. On the beach itself was a small flock of summer

plumaged sanderling but by this time the wind and rain had strengthened, and visibility had deteriorated. The walk back to the visitor centre facing into the wind and stinging rain wasn't pleasant and we were all pretty cold and wet when we arrived back at the café for lunch.

Malcolm and Jane called it a day after lunch and headed back home whilst the rest of the group explored the reedbed boardwalk and pools. We failed to add anything new to the list and the consensus of the group was to call it a day and finish early.

Bird list

Little grebe: one at Cley on 19/05; 2 Titchwell 21/05

Cormorant: many nesting at Holkham 18/05; also seen at Cley and Wells.

Little egret: many nesting at Holkham 18/05; also seen at Cley and foraging in the salt marsh creeks at Wells

Great white egret: several at Cley on 18/05 where they nest; one at Stiffkey Fen on 20/05

Grey heron: small number at Holkham 18/05 and at Cley 19/05 & Wells 20/05.

Spoonbill: several at Holkham 18/05; singles at Cley 19/05 and Wells 20/05.

Mute swan: pair with 7 cygnets at Cley 19/05; also at North Point Pools 20/05 & Holkham 18/05

Greylag goose: seen at all wetland sites.

Canada goose: seen at Holkham 18/05; Cley 19/05 & North Point Pools 20/05

Brent goose: a few lingering birds on the salt marsh at Wells and Stiffkey Fen on 20/05

Barnacle goose: feral flock on the lake at Holkham on 20/05

Egyptian goose: common on the grazing marsh at Holkham on 18/05. Several at Cley on 19/05 and at North Point Pools on 20/05

Shelduck: seen at all wetland sites. Pair with small chicks at North Point Pools on 20/05.

Wigeon: drakes at Holkham 18/05 and Cley 19/05

Gadwall: seen at all wetland sites.

Mallard: seen at all wetland sites.

Pintail: drake at North Point Pools 20/05

Shoveler: seen at all wetland sites.

Pochard: drake at Cley on 19/05; several in reedbed pools at Titchwell on 21/05

Tufted duck: seen at Holkham in Salts Hole on 18/05, Cley on 19/05, Holkham Park on 20/05 and Titchwell on 21/05

Red kite: singles at Holkham on 18/05, North Point Pools and Stiffkey Fen on 20/05.

Marsh harrier: seen at all wetland sites visited.

Buzzard: watched distantly at Holkham on 18/05 with much better views at Kelling Heath on 19/05.

Kestrel: two at Kelling Heath on 19/05

Hobby: one at Cley on 19/05; one at Titchwell 21/05

Grey partridge: two on the grazing marsh at Holkham on 18/05.

Pheasant: seen daily at virtually all sites visited. Also plentiful on farmland between sites.

Moorhen: one on Salts Hole, Holkham on 18/05, also at Cley 19/05, North Point Pools 20/05 and Titchwell 21/05.

Coot: one on a nest at Cley on 19/05; also at Holkham Park 20/05 and Titchwell 21/05

Crane: 1 at Holkham 18/05

Oystercatcher: 3 Holkham Beach 18/05, also seen at Cley on 19/05, Wells Harbour on 19/05 and Titchwell on 21/05.

Avocet: seen at all wetland sites visited. Many nesting at North Point Pools on 20/05

Ringed plover: 2 on Holkham Beach 18/05, several on Arnold's Marsh, Cley on 19/05 and 2 Titchwell 21/05

Little ringed plover: 2 at North Point Pools 19/05

Lapwing: many nesting at Holkham on 18/05 and at North Point Pools on 20/05. Many large chicks seen at North Point.

Sanderling: small flock on the beach at Titchwell on 21/05

Dunlin: small flock on Arnold's Marsh, Cley on 19/05

Black-tailed godwit: small flock seen in flight distantly at Holkham on 18/05

Curlew: singles at Cley on 19/05 and Wells Harbour 20/05

Redshank: seen and heard at Holkham on 18/05, Cley on 19/05, Wells Harbour, North Point Pools & Stiffkey Fen on 20/05

Common sandpiper: 2 at Cley on 19/05

Mediterranean gull: one at Titchwell 21/05

Black-headed gull: seen at all wetland sites visited.

Common gull: several at Titchwell on 21/05

Lesser black-backed gull: several pairs in Wells Harbour gull colony on 20/05.

Herring gull: seen at all wetland sites visited. Large colony nesting on salt marsh in Wells Harbour on 20/05

Great black-backed gull: one at Titchwell on 21/01

Sandwich tern: several watched flying west towards Blakeney Point from Cley Beach on 19/05

Common tern: one feeding in Wells Harbour on 20/05, several at Titchwell on 21/05

Little tern: Titchwell 21/05

Woodpigeon: common throughout.

Collared dove: a couple at Wells on 20/05

Cuckoo: heard at Kelling Heath on 19/05

Nightjar: one heard churring briefly on Kelling Heath on 19/05

Swift: seen daily

Skylark: heard singing at Holkham on 18/05 and several seen

Sand martin: large flock at Cley on 19/05 over Watling Water attracted the attention of a hobby!

Swallow: small numbers seen throughout. Pair nesting in cart barn at Holkham.

House martin: small numbers seen throughout.

Meadow pipit: several at Cley on 19/05

Pied wagtail: small numbers seen throughout.

Wren: heard singing at Holkham on 18/05 and on Kelling Heath 19/05

Dunnock: one at Titchwell on 21/05

Robin: seen and heard on Kelling Heath on 19/05

Wheatear: a male at Titchwell on 21/05

Blackbird: seen or heard most days in suitable habitat

Song thrush: heard singing at Holkham on 18/05

Mistle thrush: one on the grazing marsh at Holkham on 18/05

Cetti's warbler: heard singing in most wetland habitats

Sedge warbler: heard singing in all wetland habitats. One showed very well at North Point Pools on 20/05.

Reed warbler: heard singing in all reedbed habitats. Several showed very well at Cley on 19/05.

Garden warbler: one singing on Kelling Heath on 19/05

Blackcap: singing at Holkham on 18/05. Kelling Heath on 19/05 and in the coastal scrub at North Point Pools on 20/05.

Dartford warbler: one on Kelling Heath on 19/05

Whitethroat: heard and seen well at Kelling Heath on 19/05

Chiffchaff: heard in suitable habitat throughout.

Willow warbler: singing at Holkham on 18/05 and on Kelling Heath on 19/05

Goldcrest: one at Holkham on 18/05

Long-tailed tit: small group in Holkham Park on 20/05

Blue tit: seen/heard in most woodland habitats.

Great tit: seen/heard in most woodland habitats

Nuthatch: one Holkham Park on 20/05

Jay: one seen very well at Kelling Heath on 19/05

Magpie: seen most days

Jackdaw: seen feeding in grazing marshes at Holkham on 18/05 and at Cley on 19/05

Carrion crow: several on the grazing marsh at Cley on 19/05

Starling: several feeding on grazing marsh at Cley on 19/05. Also seen in Wells on 20/05.

House sparrow: small flock feeding along the sea bank at Wells on 20/05

Chaffinch: seen and heard at Holkham on 18/05 and on Kelling Heath on 19/05

Goldfinch: seen or heard most days in suitable habitat

Linnet: several on Kelling Heath on 19/05

Reed bunting: seen/heard in most wetland habitats.

92 species