

Norfolk in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Report

28th – 30th May 2021



Tour report by Kevin Elsby



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Tour participants: Kevin Elsby (Leader) with five Naturetrek clients

Day 1

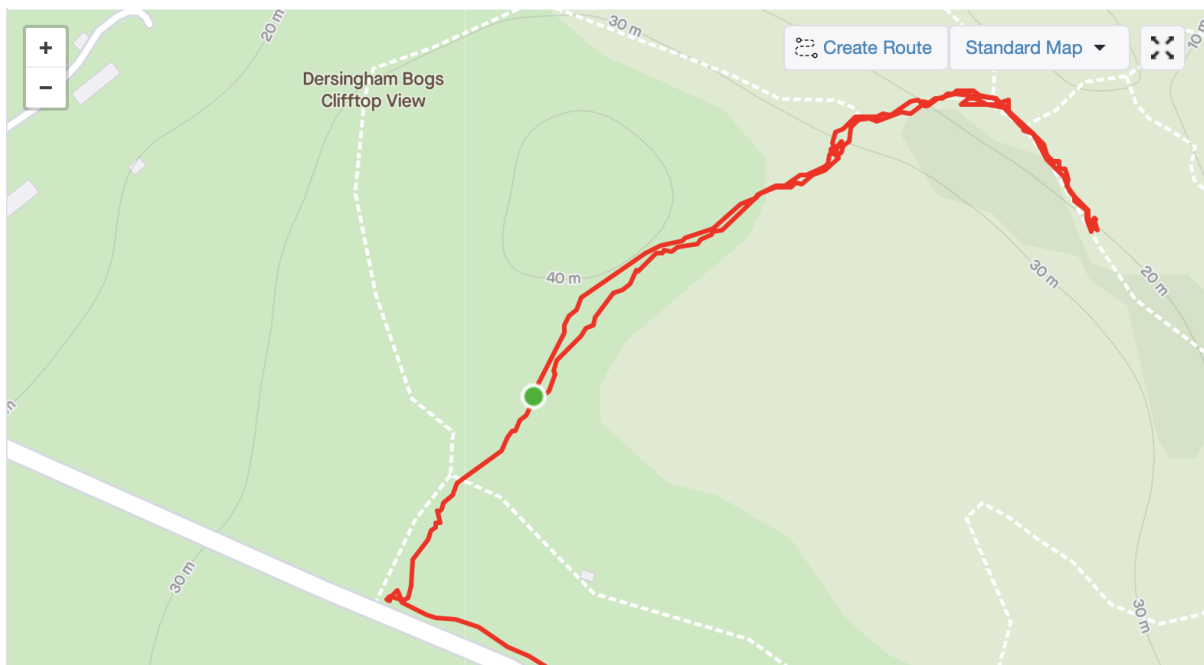
Friday 28th May

The five clients in the group met with Kevin, at 6pm at the Le Strange Arms hotel in Hunstanton, our base for this single centre holiday. After dinner we decided to visit the nearby Dersingham Bog at dusk. We had two targets – Nightjar and Woodcock. Almost upon our arrival we heard our first Nightjar calling with its characteristic churring note, a real sound of summer. These birds spend the northern winter in Africa and they are always one of the most popular birds people want to see. Soon after this we heard the equally distinctive call of a Woodcock male, flying over the bog, in its ‘roding’ figure of eight display flight.

We made our way down some steps to the bog area itself and over the following hour we had excellent views of several more Nightjars – males, with their easily visible white patches on their wings, and the less well-marked females. We were able to view them in the telescope perched on bushes and short trees as well as in display flight. We were happy to put up with the biting midges whilst we enjoyed our views!

We got back to the hotel at about 10.30pm, pleased to have started our break in such fine style. Following a protracted spell of simply awful weather in Norfolk and most of the rest of the UK, with rain, wind and cold temperatures leading up to the trip, it was delightful to be out in the countryside in calm, cloudy conditions which were perfect for watching Nightjars and Woodcock. The omens were looking good.

Map of route walked at Dersingham Bog near Wolferton, shown in red:-



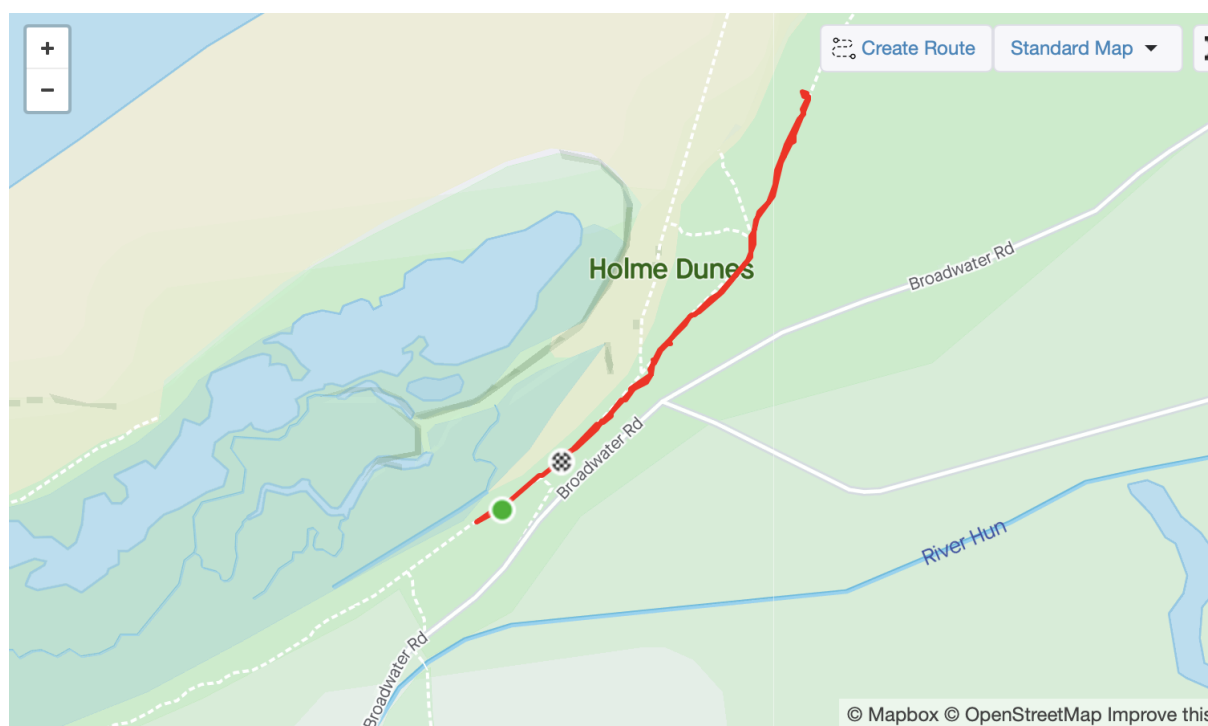
Day 2

Saturday 29th May

Dawn broke with a clear sky, completely calm. All the group met up at 6am for a pre-breakfast visit to the nearby Holme reserve. In the space of an hour and a half we were able to get excellent views of a good variety of species – a pair of Stonechats; a noisy but impossible-to-see Cetti's Warbler; slightly less skulking Reed Warblers, several Meadow Pipits and Linnets. A Common Whitethroat entertained us for a time with his song on a prominent perch showing that he really did have a white throat, and the first of what turned out to be many Cuckoos both called and flew past.

The supporting cast included a pair of Avocets, some Redshanks and a very showy male Reed Bunting. We had absolutely perfect conditions and thoroughly enjoyed ourselves.

Map of route walked at Holme nature reserve, shown in red:-



We then retraced our steps back to the hotel for breakfast and soon after departed for our second destination of the day, the RSPB reserve at Lakenheath. Although it took just over an hour to get there (Norfolk is a large county), we spent the next three hours in a totally peaceful, relaxed and bird rich reserve, under conditions which could not have been more different than even a couple of days before. Sunscreen and sun hat were the orders of the day as the temperature climbed to over 21 degrees. With not a breath of wind it was perfect.

Upon opening the doors of the minibus, the first bird we heard was a singing Willow Warbler – a new bird for the trip.

We walked to the farthest viewpoint on the reserve and had marvellous views of several Cuckoos with one particularly showy individual seen to eat no less than 4 large hairy caterpillars, at close range from us. A pair of Marsh Harriers left us spellbound after they performed a food pass in mid-air. Next, a female Bittern was seen in flight (recognised by an RSPB warden as a female from its slightly 'dangly' right leg). A Great Spotted

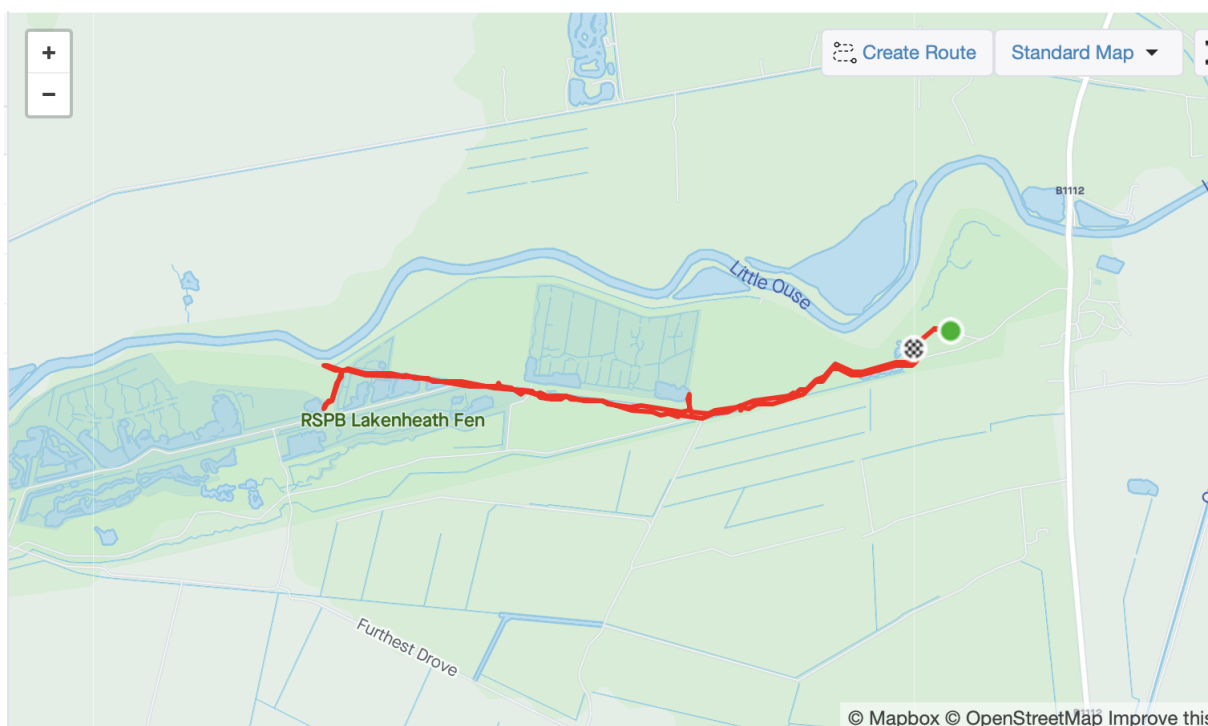
Woodpecker flew into the poplars and was almost immediately lost to view among the leaves. Lots of Rooks were flying around the poplars and a male Common Pochard was swimming on one of the pools.

Arriving at the far view point we were disappointed not to see a Golden Oriole (one was on the reserve a couple of days previously) nor one of the Common Cranes – it's amazing how such a tall bird can be lost in a 'forest' of reeds.

We did, though, see a Kingfisher flash past us, and we also had a single Hobby on our way back to the reserve centre – recently there had been many more on the reserve but we had to make do with this one. In addition to the birds, single Holly Blue, Small White and Orange Tip butterflies were seen, as well as a Hairy Darter dragonfly and Large Red Damselfly.

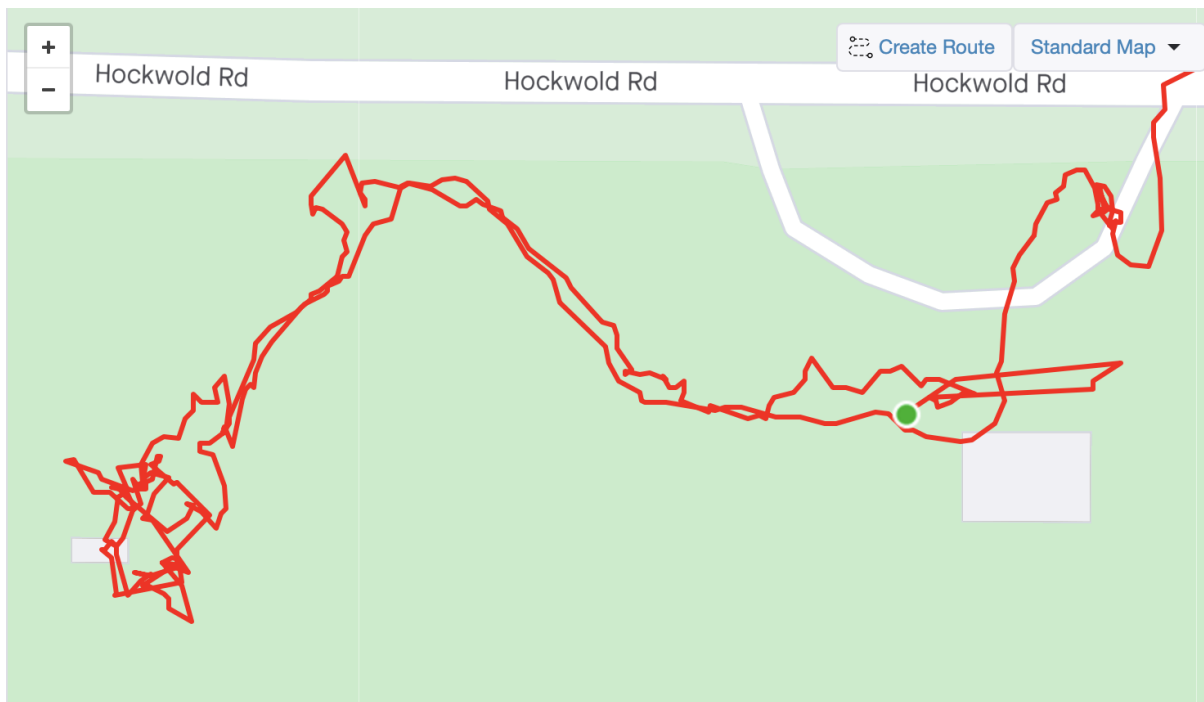
We enjoyed our picnic lunch sitting on the grass and it really began to feel as if summer and a sense of normality had arrived!

Map of route walked at Lakenheath RSPB reserve, shown in red:-



After lunch we then drove the short distance to the Norfolk Wildlife Trust reserve at Weeting. Our target species here were Stone-curlew and Woodlark. We managed to see a rather motionless (they usually are!) Stone-curlew but had to miss out on the Woodlark.

Map of route walked at Weeting NWT reserve, shown in red:-



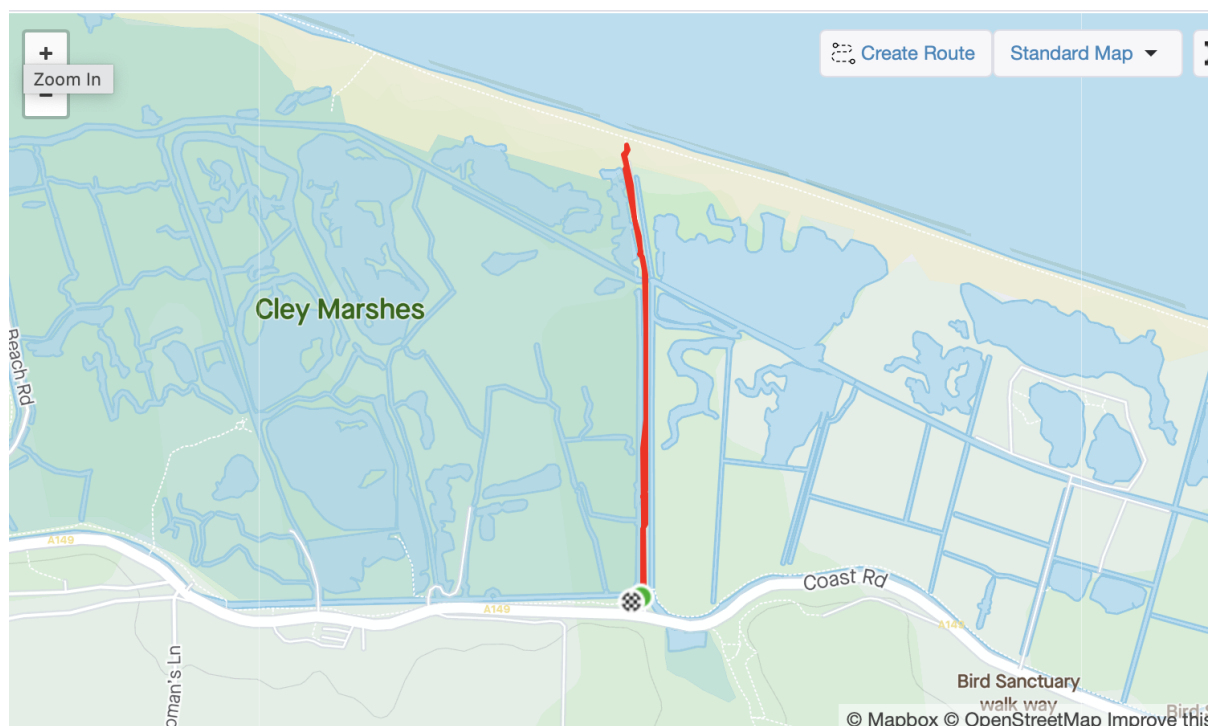
There now followed a trip back north to our final destination of the day, Cley-next-the-Sea. We parked at the famous East Bank and over the next hour walked north to the beach and back, taking in the birds as we went.

However, the first thing we noticed after disembarking the minibus was the dramatic change in temperature. It was now feeling distinctly cold, and we all had to adopt colder weather gear, including hat and gloves! A stiff easterly breeze had sprung up, but the sky was still blue (like our fingers!).

Birds encountered included several pairs of Gadwall, a pair of Pied Wagtails, with the male performing an enchanting dance to his prospective mate, a single Ringed Plover and two distant Little Terns. A Little Egret and a single Marsh Harrier were also seen.

Soon it was time to return to Hunstanton. It had been a wonderful day and the weather, especially in the morning, had helped enormously.

Map of route walked at Cley NWT reserve, shown in red:-



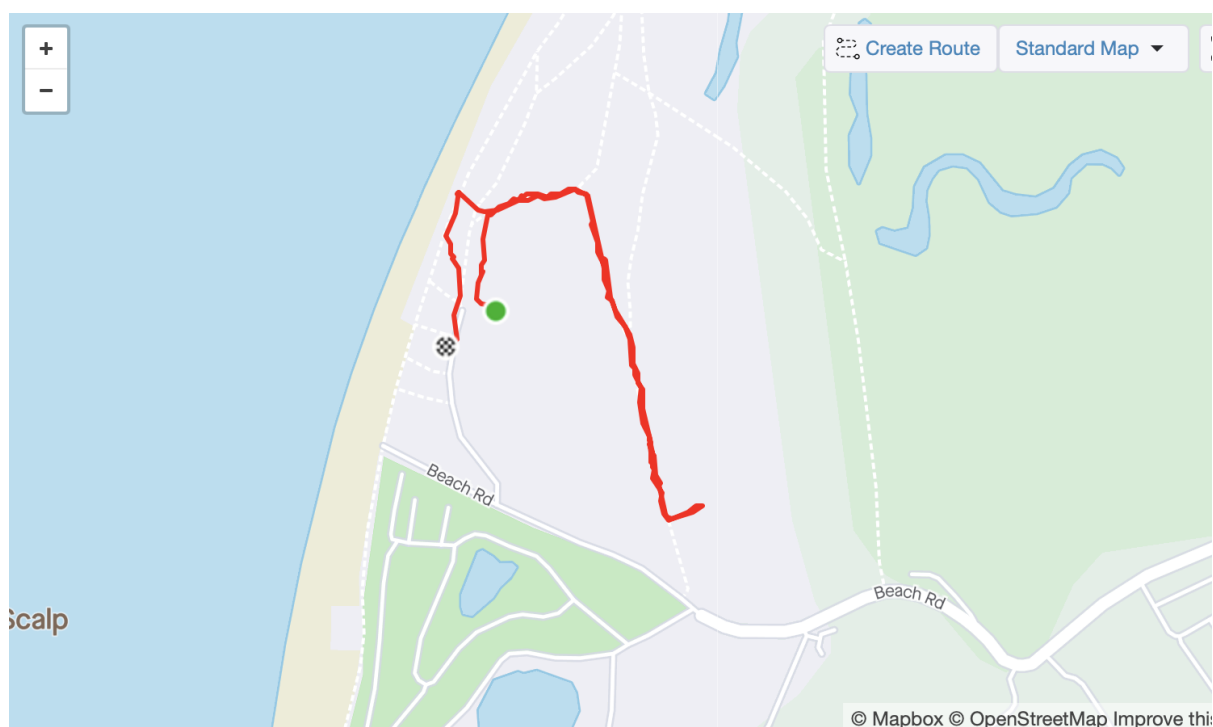
Day 3

Sunday 30th May

In spite of such an early start yesterday morning, the group were all standing ready at the minibus again this morning, at 6am, as we met to leave for Snettisham Coastal Park, a few miles south of Hunstanton. We hoped to see a species which is rapidly declining as a British bird and may well become extinct in the UK in the not-too-distant future, if the current rate of decline continues. I refer to the Turtle Dove, a bird with the most soothing of calls given by the male to entice a mate in spring. The birds migrate from Britain to Africa where they spend the northern winter. Sadly, en route each way, they have to run the gauntlet of a carnage of destruction from rifles, shotguns and other ammunition touted by 'hunters' in the countries the birds migrate through. This is the main reason they are so threatened with extinction.

Acting on a 'tip off' that there were up to four Turtle Doves in the Snettisham area, we drove there, pre-breakfast, for a chance of seeing one. Incredibly, in the still calm morning air, the sound of the male calling was the first thing we heard as we disembarked from the minibus. Over the course of the next hour, we had very good views of at least three individuals and even saw some interaction between two birds on a telegraph pole. A supporting cast of birds included a couple of Common Whitethroats, close views of a Linnet and two overflying summer-plumaged Mediterranean Gulls (identified at first by their cat-like mewing call) and a singing Cuckoo.

Map of route walked at Snettisham coastal park, shown in red:-



After this second successful pre-breakfast trip, we headed to Titchwell, after breakfast, in good spirits. The birding fun continued again as soon as we got out of the minibus. This time, a male Lesser Whitethroat was in full song in the overflow car park. No one else was present to enjoy this marvellous bird and we had him all to ourselves. In the same area a pair of Bullfinches appeared with the male bird feeding his mate. A couple of Blackcaps were also in song, as were several singing Wrens which were trying to outdo each other on the decibel-rating scale. As we made our way along the main track to the beach, we heard the low booming call of a male Bittern, hidden deep in the reed bed; sadly, he didn't reveal himself to view.

We did, though, have fantastic views of a female Marsh Harrier which repeatedly quartered the freshwater pools in search of a prey item. Time and again it approached to within 20 metres of us, before being harassed by the breeding Black-headed Gulls which would not tolerate it and forced it to retreat. Against a perfectly blue sky, with the early morning clouds dispersed, it made a spectacular sight. Thankfully it was noticeably warmer on the coast than yesterday.

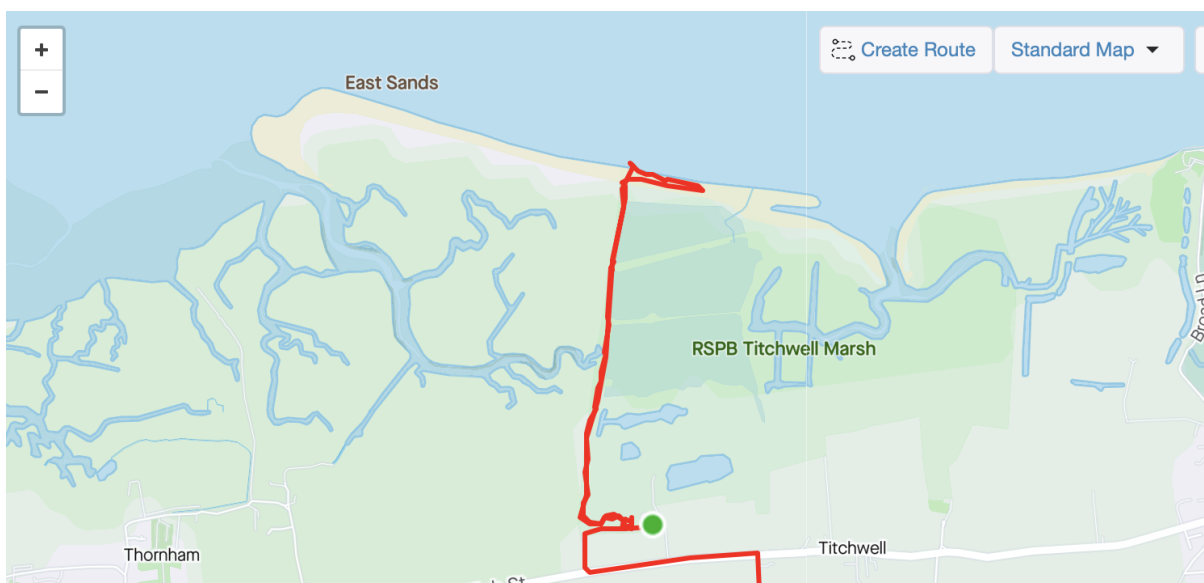
A close pair of Gadwall were swimming on the pool in front of us with seven tiny ducklings in attendance. Several Avocets, Great Cormorants, Canada Geese, Meadow Pipits and Reed Buntings were all seen very well. In addition, the slight breeze encouraged many Swifts to chase flying insects at just over our head height.

We found a few Sedge and Reed Warblers in the reedbed and were able to listen to their subtly different but distinctive songs. A couple of Skylarks were also singing but more difficult to pick out in the azure sky.

More Linnets were in evidence and at one point a Sparrowhawk flew high over the reserve, again being chased by a Black-headed Gull. There was no sign, sadly, of either Water Rail or Bearded Tit but we were more than happy with what we did see.

A single Common Tern flew over one of the pits with a food offering (fish) in its beak for its mate. When we got to the beach there were very few birds about – a combination probably of the time of the year (most waders were breeding – either on the reserve or in higher latitudes) and a rising tide. We did, though, find some Turnstones roosting on the pool, which were joined by a single Knot. After walking east along the beach for about half a mile, we turned to retrace our steps back to the reserve car park.

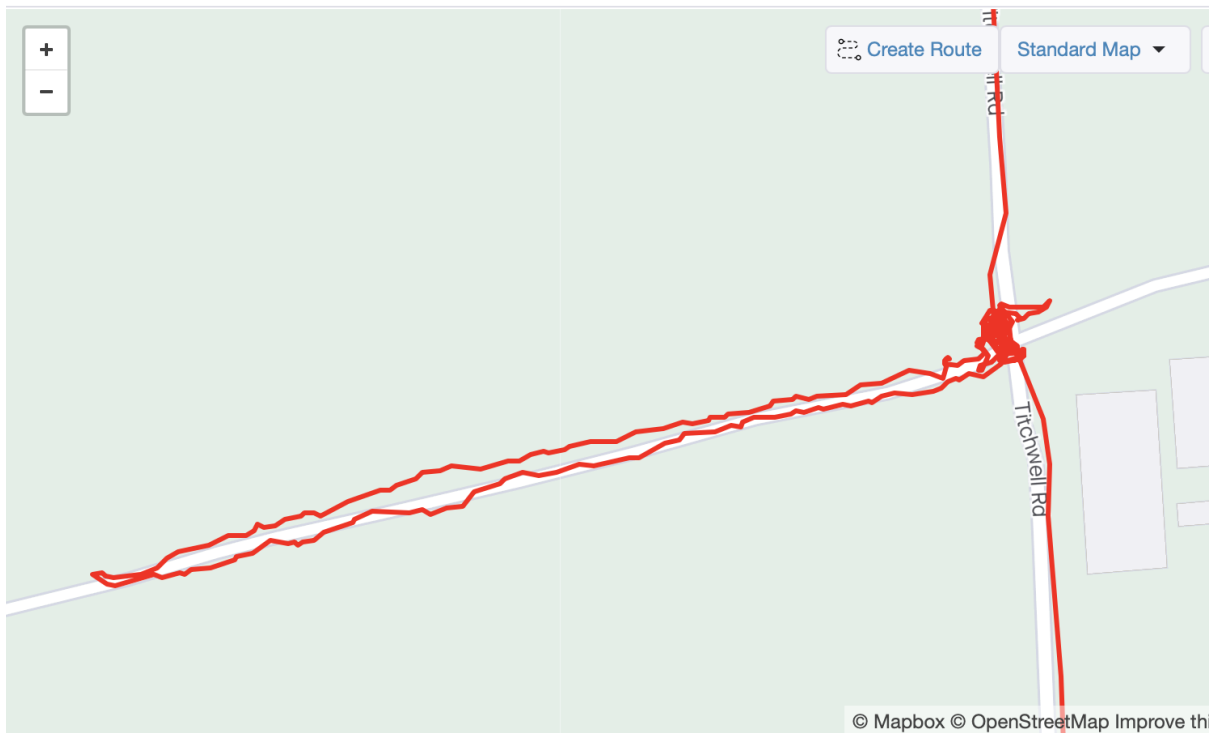
Map of route walked at Titchwell RSPB reserve, shown in red:-



Making our way back to the minibus, we then drove the short distance inland to the Choseley Barns in the hope of finding either Yellowhammer or Corn Bunting. It was rather quiet on our arrival, so we ate our lunch. During this time a single Red Kite flew right over our heads and circled several times around us, affording excellent views with the sun full on the red tones in its plumage. Another great birding experience. At this point we said farewell to two clients who left in their own cars, as they had a long distance to drive to get home.

After lunch we walked west a short way along a narrow track to try to find our target birds, but with no success. Then as we were beginning our journey back to Hunstanton at the end of the trip we spotted two male Yellowhammers in adjacent oak trees. Both were in full song and allowed excellent close views.

Map of route walked at Choseley barns, shown in red:-



When we arrived back at Hunstanton there were parked cars everywhere – the combination of the sun, Bank Holiday and school holiday had brought thousands of visitors out and we congratulated ourselves on having started our days early and therefore maximised our wildlife sightings.

The rest of the group now went their separate ways; all the clients had a very enjoyable time in the wildlife hotspot that is Norfolk. These have been challenging times with the Covid worldwide pandemic, but this trip gave us a reminder of what we've all been missing and how soon, hopefully, we can regard these holidays as more familiar and routine. Let's hope so!



Kevin Elsby (on the far left) and clients on the beach at Titchwell.

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Checklists

Birds

			May		
	Common name	Scientific name	28	29	30
1	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	1	3	2
2	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		3	2
3	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		35	15
4	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>		4	2
5	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		6	1
6	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		30	20
7	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>		8	18
8	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	4	10	10
9	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		3	
10	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	1		
11	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		2	3
12	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>			2
13	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>		1	
14	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		1	
15	Eurasian Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>		1	1
16	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		1	
17	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		2	1
18	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		10	10
19	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			1
20	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		4	2
21	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		2	
22	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		1	
23	Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>		1	
24	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		2	1
25	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		3	2
26	Eurasian Stone-Curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicephalus</i>		1	
27	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		10	8
28	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		10	20
29	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		6	
30	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		2	
31	Eurasian Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>	2		
32	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		6	4
33	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			5
34	Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>			1
35	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		20	100
36	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>			1
37	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		4	5
38	Little Tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>		2	2
39	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>			1
40	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>		2	
41	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		8	16
42	European Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>			3
43	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		3	2
44	Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>		6	2
45	European Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus europaeus</i>	8		
46	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>		10	30
47	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		1	

	Common name	Scientific name	May		
			28	29	30
48	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		1	
49	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		4	
50	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>		10	10
51	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>		30	
52	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>		1	
53	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>			2
54	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		3	
55	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		3	3
56	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		10	
57	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		1	2
58	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		5	6
59	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		4	2
60	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>		2	
61	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		5	4
62	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>		4	4
63	Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>		6	3
64	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		1	4
65	Lesser Whitethroat	<i>Curruca curruca</i>			1
66	Common Whitethroat	<i>Curruca communis</i>		4	6
67	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		1	
68	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		4	7
69	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		10	20
70	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		3	5
71	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		1	
72	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		2	1
73	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		2	
74	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		1	
75	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		4	1
76	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>		3	
77	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		4	5
78	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		1	3
79	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>			2
80	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		1	1
81	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		8	8
82	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		6	10
83	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>			2
84	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		4	3