

East Yorkshire: The Magic of Migration

Naturetrek Tour Report

10th – 13th October 2023



Bempton Cliffs



Lesser Redpoll



View from lighthouse



Convolutus Hawk-moth

Tour report and images by Matthew Capper



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Summary

A superb few days on the east coast of Yorkshire, taking in two very different but equally unique landscapes, from the high chalk cliffs of Flamborough to the long, sandy peninsula of Spurn.

The birds were as varied as ever, but this year it was probably the owls that stole the show with two Short-eared Owls hunting around us at Bempton Cliffs and a Barn Owl and Little Owl in quick succession at Spurn. Having said that, the ringing demonstration was probably a close second and the magic of migration was very much in evidence with plenty of Goldcrests and lots of thrushes, especially Redwings. We had plenty of other wildlife in the supporting cast too – from Common Scoter which seemed to be moving in large numbers, to a rare American Wigeon and a large selection of waders.

Day 1

Tuesday 10th October

Patrington

We assembled early evening on the Tuesday with Matthew greeting everyone in the bar before we retired to the dining room for an introductory briefing and a chance to get to know each other over dinner. Matthew outlined the itinerary for the next three days, with things having been teed up to try and make the best of the weather.

Day 2

Wednesday 11th October

Flamborough Head and Bempton Cliffs

Our hope was that today we would head north and whilst the forecast did contain rain, our thinking was that we would be driving for some of the day and hopefully the front would move further to our south.

After breakfast we set off, breaking up the journey in Hornsea for a look at the Mere. A few good birds had been reported and we started with a couple of Scaup, although these proved to be tricky to see in the scope, constantly diving with their more common Tufted Duck companions. We weren't able to find the Black-necked Grebe, but a lone male Common Scoter was unexpected and just as welcome. Stonechats were feeding nearby along the fence line and showed very well in the scope, as did a male Kestrel. We could hear Cetti's Warbler and saw the first of many skeins of Pink-footed Geese that we were to see over the trip.

With a decent selection of wetland birds in the bag, we headed north and into the rain. It was still falling lightly when we got out at Flamborough Head and so we wandered down to the seawatching hide. The tide was rising and there was a large group of Common Seal out on the rocks that we watched gradually lose their haul out spots. The sea here is always busy and we had some great views of things like Common Eider, Red-breasted Merganser, Red-throated Diver, Kittiwake, Gannet, Shag and Guillemot and Razorbill.

The walk back to the vehicle brought us some Lesser Redpoll and we moved on to South Landing for a walk down to the beach in now dry weather. Goldcrest, Redwing and Blackbird were much in evidence as we walked down the ravine, clearly recently arrived birds that were fuelling up after crossing the North Sea.

Down at the beach, we had a lovely time, watching a range of waders feed on the rocks and seaweed - Bar-tailed Godwit, Curlew, Turnstone, Dunlin, Oystercatcher, Redshank and best of all, a lone Purple Sandpiper.

Common Scoter were clearly on the move today as there was a large raft of at least 50 out in Bridlington Bay and one or two Guillemot were on the water close by. A small flock of Rock Pipits and a few Stonechat and Linnet completed the scene. It was now getting on and the cooked breakfasts were starting to feel like a memory, so we wandered back up the road, enjoying Great Spotted Woodpecker along the way.

We arrived at Bempton and chatted to the reception staff before buying some lunch to eat in the café. Dave, the Site Manager came down to say hello and whetted everyone's appetite's with tales of Short-eared Owl and Yellow-browed Warbler.

After lunch we wandered over to the feeding station and were joined by lots of smart Tree Sparrows and more Goldcrests along with the more common species. No sign of the Yellow-browed Warbler so it was onto the reserve and down to the cliffs. Halfway down the path and we spotted a Short-eared Owl hunting. It quartered backwards and forwards and then crossed the path in front of us, joining a second before they both landed on the fence on the far side. We had good 'scope views before the first bird decided to hunt back our way and perched close by on a cliffside post. It is fair to say that everyone was truly captivated. What a bird and what amazing yellow eyes! Definitely bird of the day, although the two Peregrines that also flew over had to be worthy of a mention in dispatches.

Down at the cliffs, we watched the parties of Gannets flying by and chatted about the seabird colony, its history and population trends and mulled over some of the threats to the future of this internationally important site. The Short-eared Owl continued to quarter the rough grassland behind us, and we watched a Kestrel hunting as we walked back to the centre. Some of the group made some purchases from the shop whilst the rest of us tried one last time for the elusive Yellow-browed Warbler. Sadly it was one of those 'you should have been earlier' birds.

The journey back was uneventful but the increasing size of the puddles was confirmed by the hotel when we got back – it had rained heavily for most of the day and our tactic to head north had been spot on. It's always nice when you feel you have cheated the weather!

Day 3

Thursday 12th October

Kilnsea, Beacon Ponds and Sammy's Point

The first stop this morning was Spurn Bird Observatory and an appointment with the warden Paul. Sarah, the recently appointed chair of the Observatory was also there, along with a couple of visiting ringers, one of whom was being assessed to become a trainer.

Church Field is a superb spot, full of cover that tired migrants make a beeline for once they have crossed the North Sea and today there were Goldcrest, Tree Sparrow, Lesser Redpoll, Blackbird, Song Thrush, Robin, Blackcap, Blue Tit and even a continental Coal Tit all caught in the nets and ringed whilst we had the privilege of watching and learning all about the fascinating insights that ringing brings. We even took part in the assessment of the potential trainer and were pleased to learn that he passed with flying colours. Paul also opened the moth trap for us, and although the pickings were rather slim, the actual moths were stunning and just as much of a delight as the birds.

Having spent a good hour and half chatting and watching the birds being ringed, we decided it was time to move on and stopped in at the Bluebell carpark to use the loos and quickly scan the sea. There were a couple of Red-throated Divers but not much else, although we did add a couple of Little Grebes on the adjacent pond.

Down at The Warren, the tide was out, allowing us to scan through the assorted waders and take in the wide sweep of the Humber estuary. The best spectacle was the Golden Plover that were sparkling in the bright sunshine and the biggest surprise, a couple of Bearded Tits that emerged from the end of a line of reeds and gradually gained height before heading south, giving off their distinctive 'pinging' calls.

Our next stop was the hide overlooking the Canal Scrape and we spent a bit of time here trying to find a Jack Snipe. No joy, but there was a Common Snipe probing the mud and lots of Redwing and Goldcrest in the hawthorns at the back.

We had a relaxed lunch in the café at the Discovery Centre and then headed round to Sammy's Point for a walk. The light continued to be superb, and the Golden Plover flock now number several thousand, swirling around over the mudflats in a giant murmuration. Small birds were relatively thin on the ground, but thrushes continued to be on the move and there was a nice Chiffchaff in amongst the Goldcrests. Our best bird had to be the female Merlin that gave us a close flyby and there were ten Roe Deer visible out in the fields. The tide was rising quickly, bringing the waders much closer to us and allowing us to appreciate species such as Knot, Dunlin, Redshank, Ringed and Grey Plover. Hundreds of Shelduck were dotted along the tide line, justifying why the estuary is of international importance for this species.

Once the tide reaches its peak, the waders lose the exposed mud and the associated feeding opportunities and are forced to find a safe refuge until the tide starts to recede. At Spurn, this is often the freshwater habitat at Beacon Ponds and Kilnsea Wetlands. It was here that we therefore decided to end our day.

There were parties of waders flying in all the time and it was nice to know that our timing was spot on. Redshank were probably the most common but there was a nice assembly of species such as Spotted Redshank, Greenshank, Black-tailed Godwit, Avocet, Knot and Oystercatcher. Gulls included Caspian and Mediterranean in amongst the more common Black-headed, Common, Herring and Great-black Backed

We got word that the American Wigeon that had been around that morning had flown back with the high tide and was now on Beacon Ponds, so we walked round that way and were soon enjoying scope views of the rare American duck, in amongst good numbers of its European cousins.

Having failed to spot a Little Owl here for the past couple of years, it was really pleasing that we should get put onto one, sat on top of the roof of a farm building. Distant but good views were had by all. Better was to come

though as we returned to the car park in the presence of a Barn Owl that more than matched the previous day's Short-eared for prolonged and close views. The perfect way to end what had been a superb day from start to finish.

Day 4

Friday 13th October

Kilnsea and Spurn Point

Our last day was a complete contrast to the others – wet from pretty much start to finish. We decided that we'd have a look around the Observatory garden and Church Field to start the day. It was relatively dry for a while allowing us to see a surprise moth. Someone Matthew knew was staying at the Observatory and came over to let him that they had trapped and released a *Convolvulus* Hawk-moth. It was still resting happily on the trunk of a tree and allowed us to get superb views.

We headed on up the platform in the garden and from here we had a great view over the wider landscape and could see how Spurn funnels and concentrates migrating birds. A Peregrine with prey took off from a nearby telegraph pole and in the distance we could see a large skein of Pink-footed Geese.

Birds were heading over in small parties – Tree Sparrows, Siskin, Skylark, Redwing and the first Fieldfare of the Autumn for all of us. As we left Church Field, the rain became heavy and we quickly hurried back round to the minibus and decided to head to cover in the hide at Canal Scrape. This proved to be a good move. One of the Observatory residential volunteers was also taking cover as we arrived and was able to point out a superb little Jack Snipe bobbing up and down on the far side of the pool. We got it in the scope and soon after, we were able to add a Common Snipe for a nice comparison. Other birds included a pair of Shoveler and we again heard Water Rail – a species we were destined to hear but not to see.

With the rain still falling, we did the only sensible thing. Coffee and cake in the Discovery Centre. It's amazing how restorative both can be! Afterwards, we pottered about the immediate area for a while, some of us heading across to the sea where there were close Red-throated Divers and migration was represented by Swallows, Meadow Pipits, Wigeon and Skylarks all going south with a very unexpected Common Swift following suit.

We spent the afternoon down at the Point, taking the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust's Unimog across the sandy breach and down to the end of the road. We saw a few waders on the way down and Brent Geese were a new species for the trip. The Buckthorn and Elder at the point were alive with Redwings alongside a few Robins and Blackbirds. Finches were going over in small parties including Siskin, Linnet, Greenfinch and Chaffinch. We spent some time looking around the old military installations and one of the local foxes put in a brief appearance.

The Lighthouse is always worth a stop and some of the group ascended all of the steps to enjoy the view from the top. The rain was now heavy again and so we put the sides down on the Unimog and drove back, stopping briefly at Chalk Bank in the vain hope that yesterday's Barred Warbler might put in an appearance. It wasn't going to happen so we carried on, giving a lift to an equally soggy birder!

Having thanked Kerry, our Wildlife Trust guide, we decided that it was time to head back to the hotel, dry off and start the, in some cases, long journeys back home. It had been a superb few days with so many highlights and

memorable moments. The East coast of Yorkshire never fails to deliver, whatever the weather.

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Species lists

Birds (h = Heard only)

I=Introduced		October 2023		
Common name	Scientific name	11	12	13
Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>			c50
Canada Goose - I	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓	
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓
Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓	
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		✓	✓
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		✓	✓
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>		✓	
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>		✓	✓
American Wigeon	<i>Mareca americana</i>		1	
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		✓	
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓		
Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>	2		
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	2		
Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>	50+		

I=Introduced	Common name	Scientific name	October 2023		
			11	12	13
	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	4		
	Common Pheasant - I	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓
	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>			✓
	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓
	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>		✓	
	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓
	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓	✓
	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	h	h	h
	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓	✓
	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓		
	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		✓	✓
	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	1		
	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓
	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		✓	
	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>			✓
	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		c8,000	✓
	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>		✓	
	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		✓	
	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	✓	✓
	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>	✓		
	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		✓	4
	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	✓		
	Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>		✓	
	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>			1
	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	✓	✓	
	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>	1		
	Jack Snipe	<i>Lymnocyptes minimus</i>			1
	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		✓	1
	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓	✓	✓
	Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>		1	
	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		2	
	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	✓		
	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓
	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>		✓	
	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	✓
	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓
	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓
	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			✓
	Caspian Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>		✓	
	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>	✓		
	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>	✓		
	Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>	✓		
	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>	✓	✓	

I=Introduced	Common name	Scientific name	October 2023		
			11	12	13
	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	✓		
	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓
	European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>	✓		
	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓
	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	2	✓	✓
	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1	1	
	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		1	
	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	3
	Western Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>		1	
	Little Owl - I	<i>Athene noctua</i>		1	
	Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>	2		
	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	1		
	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓
	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		1	
	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	2		1
	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		2	
	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓
	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓
	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓	✓
	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓
	Coal Tit	<i>Pariparus ater</i>		1	
	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓
	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓
	Bearded Tit	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>			
	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓	✓
	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	1	1	2
	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	✓		
	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	h		
	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓	✓
	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	1	1	1
	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	1	1	
	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	✓	✓
	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓	✓
	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓
	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓	✓
	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓	✓
	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓
	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>			✓
	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓
	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓		2
	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	✓	✓	✓
	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓
	Duncock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓	✓

I=Introduced	Common name	Scientific name	October 2023		
			11	12	13
	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	1
	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓
	European Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>	✓		
	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓
	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>	h		
	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	h		
	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓	✓	✓
	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	✓	✓	✓
	Lesser Redpoll	<i>Acanthis cabaret</i>		✓	✓
	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓
	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		✓	✓
	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>			2
	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓	✓

Others

Common name	Scientific name	October 2023		
		11	12	13
Mammals				
European Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	2		
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>			✓
Weasel	<i>Mustela nivalis</i>		1	
Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>			1
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>	1		
Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	✓		
European Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	1	11+	✓
□				
Moths				
Black Rustic	<i>Aporophyla nigra</i>		✓	
Setaceous Hebrew Character	<i>Xestia c-nigrum</i>		✓	
Large Wainscot	<i>Rhizedra lutosa</i>		✓	
Convolvulus Hawk-moth	<i>Agrius convolvuli</i>			✓