

# Norfolk – Autumn in the Broads

Naturetrek Tour Report

8th – 10th October 2021



Eurasian Bittern



Western Cattle Egret



Mediterranean Gulls



A blizzard of waders



Pink-footed Geese



A melee of Grey Seals

Report & photos by Mike Crew



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: [info@naturetrek.co.uk](mailto:info@naturetrek.co.uk)

W: [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk)



Tour participants: Mike Crewe (leader) with seven Naturetrek clients

## Summary

Migration time is so weather-dependent that it's virtually impossible to predict what may or may not show up during a weekend break on the East Coast, but this uncertainty can lead to some wonderful surprises – and this weekend was full of wonderful surprises! The early morning mists across the wet grasslands provided a fabulously picturesque backdrop as great skeins of Pink-footed Geese meandered across the sky and Common Cranes – those amazing cranes – glided, trumpeted and bugled as they arrived at their feeding grounds for the day. The great sea of reeds around Hickling Broad gave us ample opportunity to track down Bearded Reedlings and even produced a close encounter with a Bittern, lit up by a golden, afternoon sun. Open pools provided us with an array of ducks, geese and waders, including a Long-billed Dowitcher that was half a world away from where it should have been. The nearby beaches provided good encounters with Red-throated Divers, Common Guillemots and Razorbills – and those marvellously personable Grey Seals.

Memories of this trip will be many and varied; they could involve any of the above, or perhaps they will include the unexpected, great flocks of Mediterranean Gulls, drifting like a snow blizzard over recently tilled fields, or that huge, swirling mass of assorted waders and ducks, flushed up by an overly optimistic Marsh Harrier... or maybe it was the wonderful food – especially those desserts!!

## Day 1

**Friday 8th October**

Our long weekend in the Norfolk Broads began with a mid-afternoon meet up at our accommodation, the assignment of rooms and the obligatory tea and cakes! We then headed out for a first attempt at finding some of the local Common Cranes – which took all of 30 seconds when we spotted a small group of them from the roadside right outside the front door! Fathoming out where they might be proved tricky, but a drive round turned up large numbers of Pink-footed Geese in the field and impressive gatherings of Mediterranean Gulls. The cranes did their usual trick of showing briefly through inconveniently placed gaps in hedges, but we persevered and eventually had the spectacular sight of 39 cranes lifting off from behind a hedge and heading off to their night roost. We rounded the day off with a little distant but nevertheless welcome views of both Short-eared and Barn owls, hunting over the grassland.

## Day 2

**Saturday 9th October**

Is there such a thing as a perfect day? It's hard to say, but if there isn't, then this surely was the next best thing! Most of us were tempted by a 7am start so as to be out and about as the local wildlife – and perhaps any autumn migrants – began their day. We left our accommodation to the sound of bellowing Red Deer and with the amazing backdrop of low mist hanging just above the ground in the damper spots. We headed the short distance to the coast, parked up, and walked up onto the coastal dune ridge. From here, we immediately had a commanding view over the flat landscape of the north-eastern corner of Broadland – and what a view it was! The mist lay in great sheets, but we were above and we watched thousands of Pink-footed Geese as they circled around, gingerly testing their willingness to drop through the mist to the ground. With the geese came the Cranes – and what a treat they were; in total, 28 Common Cranes circled around bugling loudly and being answered by the few brave individuals that had dropped into the mist.

While all of this went on, we had a light trickle of migrants passing through, Meadow Pipits, Skylarks and an assortment of finches mostly. In the Sycamores close by, a Yellow-browed Warbler called a few times but fell silent before we had more than a glimpse – but it was a good start. In the fields nearby, several hundred, ghostly white, Mediterranean Gulls wafted to and fro over recently ploughed land and, above it all, the sun gradually rose and stole away the mist. Breakfast beckoned all too soon and we hadn't even had time to look at the sea!

After breakfast, we headed out to spend the morning around Potter Heigham. Our route took us out onto the marshes, and we soon picked up a circling flock of Lapwings with a few Golden Plover mixed in to give a nice comparison of the two species. House Sparrows chirped as we passed through the village, and we picked out a passing Brambling overhead. A couple of Stonechats were mixing in with a few Reed Buntings and what was to become a day-long challenge to see Bearded Reedlings began (more of them later!). The first of three Great Egrets for the day came across the marsh as we reached the first body of open water. A good mix of ducks included Eurasian Wigeon, Gadwall, Northern Shoveler, Common Shelduck, Eurasian Teal and a single female Common Pochard. Little Egret was soon added to the list and small parties of Common Cranes continued to pass over and were to become a regular feature of the day.

The second area of open water that we checked had many Greylag Geese and not too much more it seemed at first, but we soon found a couple of sleeping Spotted Redshanks (which eventually woke up!), two Green Sandpipers, a Little Egret and a selection of ducks. Suddenly, a grey bird with a long, snipe-like bill that looked like it had eaten a whole melon popped into view – a Long-billed Dowitcher! This bird had been reported previously, but not for several days, so it felt good to have re-found it. Nice birds continued to come our way as we scanned further on and found three Black-tailed Godwits, a Little Stint, Common Snipe, three Ruff flying around with a group of Starlings and a surprise Cattle Egret that breezed right by us. We later spotted two more Cattle Egrets lurking amongst the Great Cormorants and assorted ducks, while Bearded Reedlings continued to keep their heads down – for most of us, anyway!

Heading back to the vehicle, we stopped to get lunch provisions in Martham, then headed to the Norfolk Wildlife Trust's reserve at Hickling Broad. After we had eaten and refreshed ourselves, we made a circuit around the reserve, seemingly always with invisible Bearded Reedlings in tow! A party of nine Barn Swallows hunted over the reeds, Mediterranean Gulls continued to escort us around and both Common Kestrels and Marsh Harriers hunted busily. But the day's highlights were still not done, as we spotted a Bittern flying by, its plumage looking amazingly golden-brown in the rich afternoon sun. The day had provided some fabulous birding highlights, as well as masses of Common Darter dragonflies on the wing and we would have happily retired feeling replete, but there were still more fly-by Cranes to enjoy, Chinese Water Deer to watch, and Cetti's Warblers to listen to.

Our day was almost done, but we took a final drive down the private track that we had been given access to and, as the mists returned to the grazing marshes, we watched a wonderfully obliging Hare that was adamant that it wanted to cross the concrete bridge, even though we had parked right next to it, while all of the time, Rooks and Jackdaws gathered on telephone poles that rose mystically through the mist like the masts of a ghostly galleon. What a remarkable day it had been – all we could have asked for, and then some!

## Day 3

## Sunday 10th October

After yesterday's heaven-sent day, it was hard to imagine that we could do better today and a change in the weather looked set to spoil things and made life a little more difficult. We again took the opportunity for an early start and spent an hour before breakfast back at the coast. It had been much quieter at the accommodation for birds, though mammals had been very entertaining with the bellowing calls of rutting Red Deer stags competing with the shorter barks of a Red Fox and a Chinese Water Deer. Indeed, we had started better than yesterday by managing to see a Red Deer stag as he called loudly and strolled along the edge of the neighbouring field.

Up on the dunes, the mist hung as yesterday, but the birds were notable by their absence across the fields, so we turned our attentions to the sea. This proved to be a good move, as we found a number of Red-throated Divers feeding or loafing not too far away, while a scattering of Common Guillemots and Razorbills was noted. A single adult Northern Gannet cruised by, and a Ruddy Turnstone was new for the weekend. As we headed back for breakfast, Redwing and Grey Wagtail were both added.

After breakfast we needed to pack and vacate our rooms so that we didn't need to return part way through the morning. This done, we saddled up and headed round the coast to Horsey. The weather was heavy and grey as we arrived, but we walked up the dunes, pausing to take in the rare Grey Hair-grass, before we enjoyed a mad cacophony of sound and action from the local Grey Seals. It was too early in the season for any pups, but many males and a handful of females were already on the beach and gave us plenty to watch. Two Harbour Seals were also present and nicely showed the size difference between the two species. Unfortunately, a mess of what was neither rain nor mist but somewhere in between, closed in on us and we eventually admitted defeat and headed back to the car park. Continuing southward, we took a quick look at the interesting little church at Horsey, by which time the rain had eased off.

Further on, we parked up and took a short walk out to Breydon Water, the great, tidal estuary through which all of the waters of Broadland pass on their way to the sea. We had timed it just right with the tide, as a particularly high tide was just slightly below its peak and was gradually tweaking the wader flocks ever closer together onto the remnants of saltmarsh that remained above the water. Many hundreds of Common Redshank and Dunlin jostled for places and careful scanning turned up good numbers of Eurasian Curlew, Eurasian Oystercatcher and Black-tailed Godwit, with smaller numbers of Pied Avocet, Red Knot, Bar-tailed Godwit and a single Ruff. Many Little Egrets fed on the saltings and flotillas of Eurasian Wigeon and Northern Pintail were dabbling further out. Great mayhem ensued when a male Marsh Harrier decided to chance his arm and stirred up the seething masses. Birds wheeled in all directions and gave us plenty of opportunity to study the flight patterns of the various species.

Stopping off for lunch provisions, we parked up for a while beside the deeper waters of the Trinity broads, where Eurasian Coots were present in large numbers, and we picked out a few Tufted Ducks and Great Crested Grebes. A final circular hunt for a last look at the Cranes came to naught, but no matter, it had been another great day and it was time to head for home with some great memories of a very exciting weekend in the Norfolk Broads.

Many thanks to all for being great company throughout the weekend and for sharing some great birding, great stories and a few dodgy jokes! See you all again soon!!

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## Species Lists

Common name	Scientific name	8/10	9/10	10/10
<b>Birds</b>				
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			3
Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>		2	
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>		25	
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	200	3,000	✓
Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>	5,000	10,000	✓
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	10	✓	✓
Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>		30	10
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		2	35
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		25+	
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>		✓	15
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>		✓	✓
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>		20+	
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		✓	✓
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		1	4
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		1	4
Feral Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		20+	20+
Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	25+	30+	10+
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>			10+
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>		h	
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		2	
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>			✓
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	39	28+	
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>			2
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>			11
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>			40+
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>			12+
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		40+	500
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>			2

Common name	Scientific name	8/10	9/10	10/10
<b>Birds</b>				
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		3	
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	h		60+
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>			30+
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		3	75+
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			3
Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>			5+
Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>		3	1
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>			✓
Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>		1	
Long-billed Dowitcher	<i>Limnodromus griseus</i>		1	
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		2	10
Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>		2	
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			✓
Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>		2	
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>	150	250+	250+
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	5+	20+	20+
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		20+	✓
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			2
Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>			3
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>			5
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>			10+
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>			1
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓	✓
Eurasian Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>		1	
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		3	
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	4	10	4
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		3	
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		2	20
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	1	2	3
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	2	2	8
Western Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>	1		
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>			h
Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>	1		
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		1	
Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>		h	
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	4	5+	4+
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	2	5+	✓
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	2	✓
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓
Hybrid Crow	<i>Corvus corone x C. cornix</i>		1	
Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>		h	
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓
Bearded Reedling	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>		✓	
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	h	15+	10+
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		10	
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		h+1	
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	h		
Yellow-browed Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus inornatus</i>		1	
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		1	
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	h	h	h
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓

Common name	Scientific name	8/10	9/10	10/10
<b>Birds</b>				
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>			1
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		h	
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		2	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓	h
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			2
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓	✓
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓
Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		1	5
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓
Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>		1	
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓	✓
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	6	5+	✓
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	6+	✓	
Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	3+	2	✓
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		5+	
<b>Mammals</b>				
European Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>		✓	
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓		✓
Eastern Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>			✓
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		✓	✓
Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>			✓
Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>			h
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>		h	✓
Chinese Water Deer	<i>Hydropotes inermis</i>	✓	✓	✓
Reeves's Muntjac	<i>Muntiacus reevesi</i>	✓	✓	
<b>Butterflies</b>				
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>	✓		
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>	✓	✓	
<b>Dragons &amp; Damsels</b>				
Western Willow Spreadwing	<i>Chalcolestes viridis</i>		✓	
Migrant Hawker	<i>Aeshna mixta</i>		✓	✓
Common Darter	<i>Sympetrum striolatum</i>		✓	