

# Norfolk's Spring Highlights

Naturetrek Tour Report

13th – 17th May 2022



Meadow Pipit



Long-tailed Tit



Titchwell RSPB Reserve

Tour report and images by Kevin Elsby



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: Kevin Elsby (leader) with three Naturetrek clients.

## Day 1

Friday 13th May

Weather – breezy from the south west, but clear, sunny and reasonably warm.

The three guests met Kevin at the Le Strange Arms hotel in Hunstanton, mid-afternoon, for this five-day trip exploring the wildlife of north Norfolk in the spring. After time to freshen up after our journey and a briefing of the plan for the next few days, we headed out in the hire car for the short journey to Holme-next-the-Sea Norfolk Wildlife Trust reserve. We wanted to make the most of the lovely sunny weather and the trip paid dividends.

After negotiating the heavily pot-holed road to the reserve, we parked then climbed up onto the flood prevention bank and started our walk. Immediately we were being serenaded by a Common Whitethroat. His delightful song filled the air around us and he continued to deliver this during his aerial display flight which was wonderful to watch.

Nearby a fine summer plumage male Linnet also regaled us with his summer song before flying a little further away from us. Next we spotted a male Stonechat typically posed on top of a hawthorn bush. This bird was just about as smart as male Stonechats get - he was a truly beautiful bird. As is so often the case with Stonechats, they occur in pairs and it did not take us long to find his mate, a much more subdued bird.

A Great Egret landed in a nearby field to feed, whilst on the other side of the bank two Little Egrets were feeding in the shallow water of a ditch. In the same area, several Oystercatchers repeatedly chased off marauding Marsh Harriers which were looking for a tasty meal. No doubt the Oystercatchers would have eggs or even chicks at this stage.

We then became aware of visible migration happening all around us. Many Swallows, House Martins and Swifts were heading west along the coast. This continued the observations which had taken place along the Norfolk coast over the last couple of days when thousands of these migrants had been counted passing through on their way to breeding grounds elsewhere in the country.

Then we heard and shortly afterwards saw, at close quarters, a Cuckoo – the first we had all seen this year. Later another one was calling further down the track. This is a much-treasured sound to hear these days, with this species in steep decline as a British bird. A single Little Tern was added to the list, as it flew over the sea about half a mile from us. Another summer migrant returned.

Other birds we saw included Meadow Pipit, Redshank, Woodpigeon, Black-headed Gull, Skylark and Wheatear. We were also treated to the 'explosion' of sound which is the song of the Cetti's Warbler, at relatively close range. However, this bird did not show itself – we were not surprised as they often don't!

We then retraced our steps and returned to our hotel in time for dinner, well satisfied with our brief excursion to Holme which had produced 35 species of bird, in glorious weather, and we had the reserve pretty well to ourselves as well.

## Day 2

**Saturday 14th May**

Weather – clear sky, warm. Slight cloud at lunchtime, less wind.

We awoke this morning to a cloudless sky, which apart from an hour in the middle of the day, lasted throughout. Leaving our hotel after breakfast we spent the majority of the day at the RSPB reserve at Titchwell, a 20 minute drive from the Le Strange Arms. Picking up our picnic lunch from a supermarket nearby, the reserve was not busy when we arrived.

We made our way to the path which points nearly due north and ends at the sea about a kilometre away. Before we got to the path, though, we were entertained by a couple of Blackcaps which were in full song and one of which was very 'showy', performing in full view for us all to admire.

Then, soon after starting our walk to the beach, we picked out a couple of Marsh Harriers over the salt marsh to the west. Getting our binoculars on them we realised that there were in fact three birds – a male and two females. As we continued our observation the birds got a bit closer and we were able to witness a classical 'food pass' where the male drops a food item for the female to catch it in mid-air. It was spectacular to witness. Only one of the females was involved, the other one continuing to fly nearby. A great start to the day.

Moving further down the track, we next had a truly lovely encounter with a Reed Warbler, which posed out in the open not more than 10 yards from us. We were able to note all the identification features. As we watched, the bird was noted to be gleaning items from the reed stems it was perched on, and we soon realised it was collecting spider's silk from webs, with which to adorn its nest. This bird was not singing and after a couple of minutes, it flew directly to another part of the reed bed, immediately followed by another bird which had been hidden from our view. We had clearly been watching a female, which was then joined by her mate as both flew to their nest site hidden in the reeds – another excellent experience.

We were now in shirt sleeves as it was quite warm and was a day for sunscreen and hats.

Next up came a fine male Reed Bunting which was issuing forth his plaintive song from the top of a bush on the saltmarsh. We all admired this bird with his ultra-distinctive plumage. Then we heard some Bearded Tits in the reeds and had very brief views of them as they flew across a ditch.

Arriving at the first hide there was a good selection of birds on the freshwater pools – Shoveler, Tufted Duck, Pochard, Mallard, Gadwall, Shelduck, Canada Goose and Greylag Goose were all on show. Other birds to take in were Avocets – many of which were on nests on a small island in front of the hide. A flock of about 60 Black-tailed Godwits were joined by a single summer-plumaged Dunlin and Turnstone – both looking really dapper! We heard the distant booming of a male Bittern, but it only called briefly.

Soon after arriving in the hide we picked out the Little Gull which had been present for a couple of days. This is the world's smallest gull and was being harassed not only by the larger Black-headed Gulls but also by a Common Tern which was also nesting on the islands.

Several more sightings of Marsh Harrier were had as we then made our way further along the path, pausing to visit the other hide. Here we came nearly face to face with a female Muntjac Deer which stared back at us from a short distance away. This was the second species of deer for today as we had earlier seen and heard calling a male Chinese Water Deer.

Birds from this hide included Meadow Pipit and Little Ringed Plover – we all had excellent views of these in the telescope.

As we got closer to the beach we felt the breeze get cooler and it was time for us to don sweaters, for the only time today. The tide was out so we walked towards the tideline and had views of several Brent Geese which were feeding on algae on the exposed rocks. Many Oystercatchers and a couple of Ringed Plovers were present and we were continually entertained by a barely-visible Skylark singing from on high.

Making our way back to the visitor centre we enjoyed our lunch in perfect sunshine. After which we took a walk around another part of the reserve where we found a Whitethroat and a singing male Goldfinch. A pair of Great Crested Grebes were on a pool, and a Cuckoo was calling nearby.

We then retraced our steps to the car park and drove east to view some pools known as North Point Pools, just east of Wells-next-the-Sea. Our target bird was Spoonbill and soon enough we spotted one roosting with some Little Egrets. It was an adult in breeding plumage.

Over to the west we picked out a single Wood Sandpiper but it was tricky to see well as we were looking into the sun.

Finally, we managed to hear, but not see, a singing Lesser Whitethroat in some hawthorn bushes.

Having had a wonderful day, we returned to our hotel to reflect on a splendid list of birds.

## Day 3

**Sunday 15th May**

Weather – dull, grey most of the day. Slight rain at times. Cooler than yesterday.

Today dawned dull and grey, and there had been some overnight drizzle. This was our transfer day from Hunstanton to the Dairy Barns near Hickling.

Our route took us initially back to the North Point Pools at Wells, where this time we had a very approachable Sedge Warbler which seemed to sing non-stop for a long time. He was perched some of the time on a dead hawthorn bush, and at times performed his display flight – all the time singing continuously. We all had great views of him in the telescope. We didn't find yesterday's Spoonbill or Wood Sandpiper, and after about half an hour continued our route east.

Next destination was Blakeney, where, after parking at the National Trust car park on the quay, we located a small group of Brent Geese, in which was the single Red-breasted Goose we wanted to see. This rare bird from eastern Europe has been in Norfolk for the last three months or so, always associating with the Brent Geese. It was a very colourful bird compared to the Brents and we all took time to enjoy this rare wanderer.

Then it was on to Cley-next-the-Sea to the Norfolk Wildlife Trust reserve of Cley Marshes – Britain's oldest bird reserve, dating from 1926. After first calling in at the delicatessen to buy lunch we proceeded to the reserve car park, paid our entrance fee then walked to the nearby hides.

We noticed Wild Celery, Water Mint and Bittersweet growing at the side of the board walk.

It was relatively quiet for birds but we did enjoy great views of Black-tailed Godwits feeding as well as interactions between noisy groups of Avocets and Shelducks. Several Lapwings were nesting and we saw five very young-looking chicks, with a parent bird keeping a watchful eye over them. A male Reed Bunting was also perched on a prominent bush.

We managed to find a couple of Sand Martins hawking for insects. Then we spotted a single Common Sandpiper – a new bird for the trip – and all got good views of it in the telescope.

We finished our time at Cley with a walk along the East Bank, reputed to be the most famous bird walk in Britain. After about 500 metres we arrived at the shingle beach. The sea was calm but there were virtually no birds to be seen on or over the water. On our way back to the car we came across more Lapwings, Shelducks and a single Kestrel, while a couple of Pied Wagtails were feeding on the edge of some pools.

It was time to make the rest of the journey to Dairy Barns and we reached there about 4pm. After being made very welcome by Hannah, our hostess and her husband, we took a short drive along a nearby private track and saw our main target bird for this afternoon, Common Crane. We saw two individuals of this species which is still a very rare bird in Britain. The Norfolk Broads are the stronghold for this bird, which returned to Britain as a breeding species in the 1970's after an absence of 300 years.

Tall, majestic and beautifully marked, we all got excellent views in the telescope. Thus ended another highly successful birding day in Norfolk. Not forgetting other wildlife, we had a very close encounter with a large Hare.

## Day 4

**Monday 16th May**

Weather – mainly dry sunny and warm. A brief shower with thunder in mid morning.

We drove south to the RSPB reserve at Strumpshaw for the morning, arriving at 10am. We checked in at reception then started with a walk along the woodland trail. We soon spotted a Marsh Tit, calling in the trees around us. We got very good views which helped us to distinguish it from the (almost) identical Willow Tit (which does not occur at Strumpshaw). Continuing on our way we were constantly hearing the song of many Blackcaps. A Great Spotted Woodpecker was also heard giving its characteristic 'chick' call but it was not seen. Then two Mistle Thrushes were briefly located before Kevin saw a Spotted Flycatcher perched on the branch of a conifer. Before he could get the group onto it, however, it flew. Walking about another 100 yards along the trail, though, we located two birds which this time gave us excellent views. We were well pleased to see this species which is rapidly declining as a British bird.

On our way back to join the fen trail we found a very close Treecreeper looking for insects on the trunk of a tree, and a Goldcrest was singing above our heads in an ivy covered tree, its high pitched sound a challenge to pick out but all eventually heard it.

We had a rest for a while in the fen hide and were entertained by a Grey Heron which landed right in front of us to try to catch a fish – unsuccessful – before it flew off again. A pair of Coots were feeding two well-grown chicks nearby.

Dragonflies were abundant today, a reflection of the warm weather. We saw lots of Banded Demoiselles, a few Azure Damselflies, and a single pristine female Scarce Chaser. The gold / orange colour of her abdomen appeared almost luminous.

Butterflies included several Peacocks, Large White, Orange-tip and Brimstones, but sadly not a Swallowtail – even though this species had already been recorded recently on the reserve – it is emerging earlier as the years pass.

Arriving at the Tower hide we sat down to watch a group of Black-headed Gulls which were nesting on emergent trees right in front of us. It was fun to watch their antics as repeatedly one partner of the pairs brought more vegetation with which to adorn the nest. We counted 10 pairs but only saw eggs under one bird which stood up, -no chicks.

The majority of the other birds present were Gadwall, mainly males, and we were able to scrutinise them very closely and familiarise ourselves with their plumage.

A single male Marsh Harrier came close but three Hobbies were a little more distant, hawking for dragonflies over the reserve.

We had lunch when we got back to the reception area, before moving on to the Bure Marshes at Woodbastwick. We didn't see any new birds here, but it was great to be walking in another lovely area, with only the birds and insect sounds to hear. We did find some Red-eyed Damselflies resting on lily pads and some Large Red Damselflies to add to our insect list for the trip.

Our final destination of the trip was Ranworth Broad, another Norfolk Wildlife Trust reserve. After a short walk through some Alder Carr habitat we arrived at the reserve reception centre which is a two storey thatched building overlooking Ranworth Broad. We made our way up the narrow winding staircase and were able to view over the broad where we saw a group of Black-headed Gulls and some Common Terns nesting on floating platforms put there for them. There were several Great Crested Grebes on the water and two nests were spotted with birds sitting on them.

Finally, as we were leaving we saw a Drinker moth caterpillar. It had been a great day and all the group were pleased with our sightings for the day.

## Day 5

**Tuesday 17th May**

Weather – clear blue skies most of the morning, slight cloud by lunchtime. Warm.

Today we awoke to another clear blue sky and that set the pattern for the rest of the morning, weather wise. We departed after breakfast for the short drive to the Hickling Norfolk Wildlife Trust reserve. The reserve does not officially open until 10am so, after Kevin spoke to one of the wardens, we were given permission to walk down a track to a viewing platform over a 'scrape'. We saw a flock of five Spoonbills, all asleep, standing in shallow water. Three Greenshanks flew in, giving us our first views of these on our trip. There were plenty of other birds

to see – Ringed Plovers, Lapwing, Shelduck, Greylag Goose and Dunlin. Then we spotted our main target bird for the morning – a single Black-winged Stilt. This is a very rare migrant to our shores, which in some years flies north of its usual range of the Mediterranean to end up in Britain.

We all enjoyed views of this bird in the telescope. We could appreciate the fantastically long pink legs these birds have. They are not called stilts for nothing! Indeed they are the birds with the longest legs in proportion to their body size in the world.

Shortly a further three Stilts flew in to join the first bird, making four in total! A really enjoyable experience, and one which stands out as one of many highlights on this trip.

A Crane then started 'bugling' in the distance, its distinctive call travelling a great distance in the still air. However, it was keeping its head well down below the tops of the reeds so we never saw it.

Moving back to the visitor centre and being 'officially' allowed on to the reserve, we walked around the trails, initially in the area of the large reed beds, where, appropriately enough, we heard good numbers of Reed Warbler. A smaller number of Sedge Warblers were also present, and a couple of singing male Reed Buntings.

We looked at an obliging Four-spotted Chaser dragonfly, and wondered, since it has two spots on each of its four wings, why it wasn't given the name Eight-spotted Chaser.

Several Brimstone butterflies were seen and we saw our second Chinese Water Deer of the trip in a nearby field.

Arriving at the view over the large Hickling Broad we contemplated the human effort in Mediaeval times which resulted in the formation of these water-filled basins, after the peat which was previously there was dug out for fuel.

We then carried on a little further and we saw three Swallowtail butterflies, newly emerged, probably this morning, as they were all pristine. The reserve had noted its first of these beautiful butterflies a full two weeks ago – much earlier than they would have emerged in the past. Proof, perhaps of a changing climate? Either way, we got excellent views, especially of one individual which conveniently perched for a while on a leaf, allowing us to get the telescope on it.

Then it was on to the Bittern hide. It really lived up to its name, as we heard regular 'booming' by one or possibly two males. Seeing them, though, was not so successful. Sitting in the hide we heard a close Cuckoo and then heard and then saw well a single male Bearded Tit which perched at the top of a reed in full view. This was much appreciated by the group.

By now it was after 1pm and we had had an excellent morning. We therefore 'decamped' to a café / restaurant on the coast to enjoy a lovely 'al fresco' lunch, surrounded in the air by numerous House Martins busy constructing this year's nests on a barn adjacent to the café.

After lunch we drove a couple of miles down the road to view the National Trust's Horsey Mill. The mill was open and the group were able to climb the stairs inside and take a tour of the building.

Afterwards, we said our goodbyes and reflected on what had been an excellent trip, helped in no small way by the beautiful weather.



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## Species lists

### Birds

I = Introduced		May 2022				
Common name	Scientific name	13	14	15	16	17
Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>		✓	✓		
Canada Goose - I	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Red-breasted Goose	<i>Branta ruficollis</i>			✓		
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Egyptian Goose - I	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>		✓		✓	✓
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>			✓		✓
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		✓			
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓			✓
Common Pheasant - I	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓
Red-legged Partridge - I	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			✓		
Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	✓	✓			
Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>			✓		✓
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓			
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓		✓	✓
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>			✓		✓

I = Introduced		May 2022				
Common name	Scientific name	13	14	15	16	17
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		✓	✓		
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		✓		✓	
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>					✓
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		✓	✓		✓
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓	✓		✓
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>		✓			
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		✓			✓
Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>		✓	✓		✓
Eurasian Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>		✓			
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		✓			
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		✓			
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		✓			
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓			✓
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		✓			
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>					✓
Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>		✓			
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyophaga melanocephala</i>		✓			
Little Gull	<i>Hydrocoloeus minutus</i>		✓			
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓			
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓			✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓			
Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>		✓	✓		
Little Tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>	✓	✓			
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>		✓		✓	
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		✓			
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>		✓			✓
Eurasian Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>		✓			✓
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓	✓			
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>			✓	✓	✓
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>				✓	
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓	✓		
Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>				✓	✓
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>Parus ater</i>					
Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>				✓	
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓		✓	

I = Introduced		May 2022				
Common name	Scientific name	13	14	15	16	17
Bearded Tit	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>		✓	✓		✓
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓	✓	✓		
Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>			✓		
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	✓	✓			✓
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓		✓	
Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>				✓	✓
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓		✓	
Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lesser Whitethroat	<i>Curruca curruca</i>		✓			
Common Whitethroat	<i>Curruca communis</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		✓		✓	
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓		✓	✓
Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>				✓	
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓			
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>				✓	
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>				✓	
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓		✓		
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	✓				
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓		✓
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓			
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓		
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>			✓	✓	✓
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	✓				✓
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓		✓
Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>			✓		
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		✓	✓		✓

## Mammals

		May 2022				
Common name	Scientific name	13	14	15	16	17
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓				
Brown Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>		✓	✓		
Reeves's Muntjac	<i>Muntiacus reevesi</i>	✓	✓			
Chinese Water Deer	<i>Hydropotes inermis</i>		✓			✓