



England Birds & Gardens: SE Trip Report (Apr 27 - May 8, 2024)

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This year's Birds and Gardens tour proved a great success, and covered everything you might expect from southern England at this time of year! Chocolate-box villages, weather that could be closer to either wintry or summery depending on the day, and of course world-renowned gardens full of spring-blooming shrubs and extensive, wilder, protected areas teeming with birdlife. Of the former, Beth Chatto's Gardens, Barnsdale and especially Kew were a big hit; avian highlights included fantastic views of specialities such as Great Bittern, Bearded Reedling and Eurasian Spoonbill. There were also a few less expected bonuses along the way, and the perennially-popular with visitors European Robin. More than once, it was commented that the food and accommodation was of a higher standard than this part of the world once had a reputation for... We commenced with the flagship Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, in west London. This was, as always, a trip highlight, although it was a damp and chilly start to the tour; we spent slightly longer than normal in the architecturally-impressive glasshouses enjoying plants of rainforests and other ecosystems, and less time admiring the rhododendrons and other flowering trees outside! Birding plays second fiddle at Kew, but plenty of commoner species were seen well (Blue and Great Tits, Mistle and Song Thrushes, Great Spotted Woodpecker), as well as Mandarin Ducks and the entertaining Rose-ringed Parakeets which have found London much to their liking. We also found a family of Red Foxes, completely unconcerned by the procession of people.



Red Fox © Jim Vincent



Kew Beehive © Mike Hoit

Soon it was time to circumnavigate the capital city, and head for our hotel in more rural environs in the county of Essex, ahead of two were a mixing of birding and garden visits. Abberton Reservoir is a huge man-made lake that provides water for Essex and northeast London, but the mixture of habitats is also a hugely important area for wildlife. Waterbirds such as Great Crested Grebe and Pochard were seen alongside Skylarks and Goldfinches, late-staying wintering Common Goldeneyes

brushed shoulders with newly-arrived Swifts and Common Sandpipers from the south, and a colony of Grey Herons and Great Cormorants also held new colonists in the form of Eurasian Spoonbill, Little, Great and Western Cattle Egrets.



Great Crested Grebe © Jimmy Vincent

Abberton is a stronghold for Common Nightingale, but while many were singing they proved elusive with mist only catching a glimpse. A change of scenery took us to Hyde Hall, the Royal Horticultural Society's world-class demonstration garden, where an informative tour guide led the group through flower beds, dry gardens and wooded dells to the hilltop with commanding views over the countryside.



Hyde Hall © Jim Vincent



Hyde Hall Gardens © Jimmy Vincent



Beth Chatto © Mike Hoit

The Markshall Estate was a contrasting experience, as we made our exploration of the wooded landscape. Varied highlights here included long-established walled rose gardens (complete with free-roaming Indian Peafowl...) alongside ornamental lakes, amazing ancient oak trees including the 800 year old Honeywood Oak and, in the slightly incongruous 'Gondwanaland' section of the arboretum, learned about the recently-rediscovered Wollemi Pine, examples here forming a back-up stock for the critically endangered wild population. After the now-standard tearoom lunch, another fantastic guide showed us around the impressive Beth Chatto Gardens. Once disused farmland, a labour of love using ecological principles has resulted in a mosaic of high and dry zones, water gardens, floral beds and native woodlands - a wonderful place in a relatively small area. As ever, the venues today gave us looks at a selection of widespread bird species, with Red Kites, an abundance of Blackcaps, and nest-building Little Grebes on offer. Soon it was time to move onto the next county north, bird-rich Suffolk. Before arriving at our fabulous accommodation, a stop for groceries was required - but even here optics had to be at the ready, for point-blank looks at lingering Bohemian Waxwings! It's amazing what you can pick up at supermarkets these days...



Bohemian Waxwing © Jim Vincent

Over two full days (and another early morning, for some...) of birding within a few miles of our base in the village of Westleton, well over 100 species were racked up, a testament to the impressive reserves and varied landscapes. Areas of sandy heath gave us, with perseverance, Dartford Warbler and Wood Lark among commoner species like Common Stonechat, while nearby we found a pair of the strange dry-land shorebird Eurasian Thick-knees, AKA Stone-curlew or, more evocatively, Wailing Heath Chickens.



Birding in Westleton © Jim Vincent

Dropping down to the marshes of Minsmere, we found a birding banquet befitting of the flagship reserve of the Royal Society for The Protection of Birds, all the more remarkable considering that it was arable farmland as recently as 1940. After being deliberately flooded as a defence against feared invasion during the Second World War, it was colonised by Pied Avocets – the first time the species had nested in the UK for 100 years – and protected as a reserve. Of course, plenty of those elegant black and white waders were present on the scrapes, alongside other shorebirds such as Greenshank and Bar-tailed Godwits, plus Little, Common and Sandwich Terns, Mediterranean Gulls, a feeding Spoonbill and various wildfowl.



Minsmere © Jimmy Vincent

Moving to another part of the reserve, we were targeting the other bird for which Minsmere is famed: Great Bittern. The population has recovered spectacularly from a very low ebb, but even so the repeated close flybys surpassed previous views obtained on previous tours! The strange 'booming' call of this unusual heron was heard emanating from reedbeds alongside the songs of Reed and Sedge Warbler, while the often elusive Bearded Reedling showed superbly well and Western Marsh Harriers made close passes. A final highlight of Minsmere was visiting a demonstration by a ringing group, getting in-the-hand views (perhaps in a bit too much detail when it came to the Dunnock...) as they banded birds for scientific study. Despite being treated to an impressive display of Common Nightingales again, the birds remained annoyingly sneaky when it came to obtaining views.



Great Bittern © Jim Vincent



Bearded Reedling © Jim Vincent

It wasn't all birding though, as we visited historic Dunwich - once an important town, now a tiny village -and took a stroll around the ruins of the medieval Franciscan friary and along the low cliffs. However, birds were always around, typified by the Whimbrels outside the pub we visited for an evening meal. Our journey next took us inland, on the one really rainy day of the tour. The beautifully laid-out lawns and beds of Bressingham Gardens looked good in spite of the weather, and it definitely helped that we had the privilege of being shown around by the owner, the aptly named Adrian Bloom (causing a certain amount star-struck reaction...). The gardens at Foggy Bottom - a damp, low-lying part of the grounds - look lovely at this time of year, with an array of brightly-flowered shrubs. Wyken Hall is a different venue, with small traditional garden 'rooms' around a country house, orchards and a wildflower meadow. As enjoyable as this was, soon we admitted defeat to the conditions and made the short drive to our next hotel in the village of Mundford to dry out.



Wyken Hall © Jimmy Vincent



Bressingham Gardens © Mike Hoit



Bressingham Gardens © Jimmy Vincent

'Breckland' straddles the border of Norfolk and Suffolk, an area with a somewhat continental climate and a range of special birds to be found in its deciduous riverine woods and open heaths, despite the destruction of most of the latter for industrial forestry during the twentieth century. Our very birdy morning here turned up, amongst others, singing Firecrests, a very showy Tree Pipit giving his rich song, Eurasian Nuthatch, bright green-and-yellow Eurasian Siskins, and Grey Wagtail. The highlight, though, was a chance daytime encounter with a Tawny Owl. It unexpectedly flew from a conifer in Lynford Arboretum - the Forestry Commission showcase of commercial conifers - before Alan relocated it for superb views.



Tawny Owl © Jim Vincent

In the afternoon we visited Fairhaven Water Gardens, with its wildlife-rich gardens and wet alder 'carr' woodland, a classic habitat of the Norfolk Broads. American Skunk-cabbages and natives such as primroses, irises and cuckooflower were in bloom, home to Treecreepers, Eurasian Jays and - for a lucky few - fly-by Common Kingfisher. From here, it was on to our next base - the country town of Holt, where we would spend three nights.



Eurasian Jay © Jimmy Vincent

The time we had in north Norfolk - a very special region of the country, though I may be biased - was graced with warm, sunny weather in which to explore. First up was the Norfolk Wildlife Trust's reserve at Hickling Broad, a place of vast reedswamps and pools under big skies. The birding was somewhat slower than usual, although a dapper drake Garganey (a summer migrant, unlike most other ducks found here) was seen and we had some long flight views of the Common Cranes the region is known for. Lunch was taken at the nearby East Ruston Old Vicarage Gardens, where we wandered the very cleverly designed (but slightly maze-like!) garden, a stone's throw from the North Sea. The highly varied grounds are protected and divided by tall hedges, creating windbreaks and tunnels creating 'borrowed landscapes' of the surrounding countryside, broken up but bright displays. We were also given an entertaining talk on East Ruston by the equally colourful and charismatic owner, Alan Gray. Being a Sunday, dinner could only be one thing: a generously piled-up traditional roast in a country pub, ideal for celebrating a big birthday for one of our number!



East Ruston © Jim Vincent

The next day took us on a meandering trip all along the coast, encompassing RSPB Titchwell Marsh, Thornham (including a picnic lunch from the deli), Stiffkey, Cley-Next-The-Sea and Salthouse. These are some favourite birding locations, particularly at Titchwell where the birds are often very close. A selection of shorebirds included Black-bellied (or Grey), Common Ringed and Little Ringed Plovers, Ruff, Black-tailed Godwits and abundant Common Redshanks and Pied Avocets. More Bearded Reedlings were seen well, as were the reedbed warblers we had become used to, a few flocks of Dark-bellied Brent Geese still hadn't departed the extensive saltmarshes, for Siberia, and yet another Spoonbill was seen. Being Norfolk, there are always scarce species to be seen as well, and today we were able to see Glossy Ibis and some brilliant day-hunting Short-eared Owls





Cley © Mike Hoit

The final day was upon us, and much of it was spent en route back to London. But, importantly, we also visited the final garden of the tour: Barnsdale, in the midland county of Leicestershire. This was the brainchild of the late Geoff Hamilton, creating most of the thirty-eight display gardens here for his BBC TV show *Gardener's World*. The plots include examples to suit every sort of yard and provide inspiration for anyone with green fingers, and we were expertly guided through them on a hugely informative tour courtesy of head gardener John. The pleasant grounds provided a final chance to enjoy birds like European Goldfinch (and of course those Robins), plus the service in the tearoom...



European Robin © Jimmy Vincent



Barnsdale © Mike Hoit



European Goldfinch © Jim Vincent

All that was left was to head back down to our hotel near Heathrow Airport, with many roadside Red Kites to enjoy for those who could stay awake, for a final dinner together. Hopefully, with plenty of happy memories for the onward travels!



EET Birds & Gardens group 2024

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