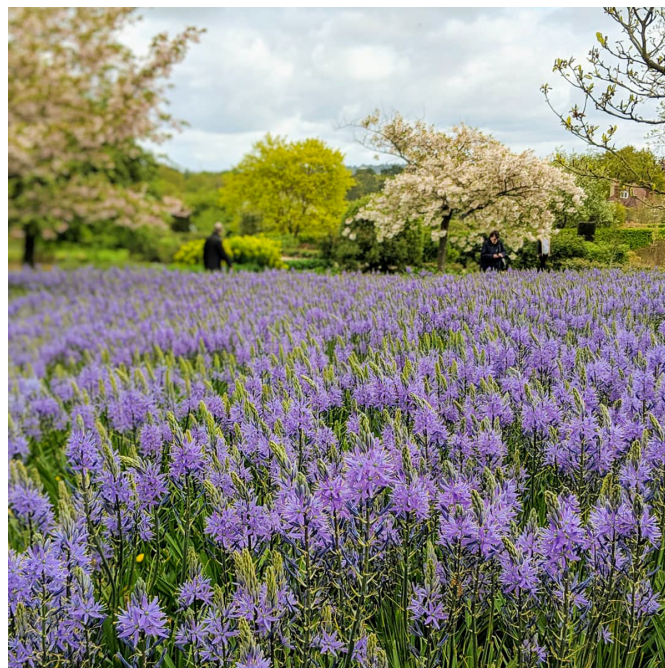


England Birds & Gardens: Southwest 2019 Trip Report

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April 27 - May 8, 2019 Leader: Mike Hoit Day 1 - Arrival Our small but very keen group assembled at our hotel close to London's Heathrow Airport on a somewhat stormy Saturday for a first get together. After getting to know one another and a filling meal we retired early to recover from our travels and prepare for the first day of the tour. **Day 2 - RHS Wisley & Stodmarsh NNR** It was only a short journey into the countryside of Surrey to Royal Horticultural Society's garden at Wisley, our first of nine fantastic gardens on the tour. Here we were met by our extremely enthusiastic and knowledgeable tour guide Linda, who was keen to show us absolutely everything the site has to offer. We started in the woodland areas, with the first (of very, very, many) rhododendrons and azaleas, past the incredible dandelion sculptures and purple Camassias to the perfectly designed alpine gardens. The orchids in the tropical glasshouse were particularly memorable, before a much-needed refreshment break. From there, Linda led us along the tranquil riverside walk, with a variety of native woodland flora, to a bird hide which gave close views of some common species. Lastly it was back through the pinetum, with mats of the strange, root-parasitic Purple Toothwort, and back to the walled gardens and its view of Wisley Cottage.



RHS Wisley © Mike Hoit

Having been unable to tear ourselves away from such a brilliant tour, I was a little concerned that we might not have much time to visit Stodmarsh; however, with everyone happy to eat a packed lunch on the drive, we were soon on the road to Kent! Unfortunately, we timed our walk with a downpour (our only really bad weather of the trip), so it wasn't just the meadows and reedswamps of the lower Stour valley that were wet! Luckily, we were soon in the shelter of a hide, and the birds were making up for the soaking - I think... Excellent views of both Eurasian Hobby and Common Cuckoo perched out in the open were much appreciated, a migrant Wood Sandpiper and a rare (though increasingly regular) Great Egret were surprises, and displaying Common Redshank and Northern Lapwing put on a show. On the walk back to the vehicle Blackcaps, Eurasian Reed-Warblers and Sedge Warbler played hide and seek. The final drive of the day took us to a small market town in East Sussex, where we settled in to a lovely old pub and were treated to their excellent food.

Day 3: Dungeness Nature Reserve & Sissinghurst Castle After an earlyish breakfast (which was to perhaps become a theme...), it was off to the Dungeness peninsula. This flat expanse of grazing meadows, marshes and pools ends at a large expanse of shingle which juts out into the English Channel from the Kent coast - we could even see the white cliffs of Dover in the far distance. It's an excellent area for birding, and we first checked the bird observatory and lighthouse area for any signs of migration. In the fine weather, not much was on the move, but we did spot a Harbour Porpoise offshore, Peregrine Falcons on territory on the power station, and have excellent views of breeding European Stonechats and Greater Whitethroats alongside some Early Purple Orchids.



Dungeness © Mike Hoit

Moving round to the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds reserve, we walked a circuit around the scrub and man-made pools (formed by gravel extraction), continually being distracted by great views of the abundant birdlife. Many warblers and wildfowl put on a show, hunting Hobbys put on a great aerial display, and some brilliant looks at migrant Whimbrels were a highlight. We had mixed luck with rare herons: a Great Bittern called nearby but wouldn't show, but two Western Cattle Egrets were with, well, cattle! It was finally time for a late lunch, which we shared with friendly Robins and House Sparrows at Sissinghurst Castle. Making our own explorations of the 'garden rooms', we began with the aerial view from Vita Sackville-West's writing tower, reflecting on why

she might have hidden away so much! The ordered coloured gardens were delightful - especially the white garden - with arched trees of the lime walk, and unmown meadows in the orchard with wildflowers including a few orchids. At the end of another long day we were glad it was only a very short trip back to the accommodation to sample more of the delicious fayre on offer.



Sissinghurst © Mike Hoit



Sissinghurst © Mike Hoit

Day 4: Great Dixter & Leonardslee Lakes and Gardens A slightly more relaxed start had us at Great Dixter House and Gardens by 10am, which I think it's fair to say was one of the highlights of the tour! We were privileged to be shown around the beautiful surroundings by the head gardener, who talked us through the amazingly vibrant displays. It was enlightening to hear just how much thought and effort goes into these riots of colour. Impressively, Great Dixter pays particular attention to the ecology of the gardens, eschewing the use of pesticides to encourage a wide variety of invertebrates and allow a natural balance. This was evidenced by the meadows - and even lawns - carpeted in Green-winged and Common Spotted Orchids. Many common species of birds were in evidence, with Goldcrest, European Greenfinch and Goldfinch obliging with good views.



Great Dixter © Mike Hoit



Great Dixter © Mike Hoit

By lunchtime we had crossed to Leonardslee in West Sussex. Only recently reopened, this huge site is still being restored from years of neglect. Another excellent tour guided by a gardener took us through the quite staggering number of rhododendrons - over 15,000! - and azaleas under woodlands with carpets of bluebells. With many rare and even unique hybrids, Leonardslee is a valuable botanical garden in all but name - quite the contrast with this morning's garden. Perhaps the main thing we took away was the antics around the fiercely competitive early twentieth century expeditions to plunder rhododendrons!



Leonardslee © Mike Hoit

Moving on again, we found ourselves in the heart of rural Hampshire at a particularly grand hotel in fantastic countryside. A shame we were only staying for a single night... After another great evening meal in a local hostelry – once we'd parked, anyway - a final bonus for the day was a pair of calling Tawny Owls in the hotel grounds. **Day 5: The New Forest** The focus of today was to explore the variety of habitats of the New Forest in search of the many bird species that call it home. This huge area was Our first stop was the heathland along the Beaulieu Road. As is often the case, the birding was somewhat slow, with Wood Lark and Cuckoo only singing distantly, but we had excellent sightings of many common birds, notably Eurasian Siskins and Stonechats. Moving on to the ancient open beech and oak forest at Denny Wood, we tracked down a superb singing Redstart, along with close views of Mistle Thrush and Marsh Tit. We took our picnic lunch to the higher-altitude parts of the area with a view to finding breeding raptors and specialities of the mixed woodlands; however, low cloud and a bit of drizzle weren't particularly conducive to this. So after watching singing Firecrests and a herd of Fallow Deer, I opted for Plan B! Heading to the nearby nature reserve of Blashford Lakes- via a last look at the wild New Forest Ponies.



Watching a Redstart, New Forest © Mike Hoit



Fallow Deer, New Forest © Mike Hoit

We were soon watching a wide variety of waterbirds from a comfortable hide. As well as the commoner species, we could watch Bar-tailed Godwit, Dunlin, Common Sandpiper and Little Ringed Plover at ridiculously close range, plus Egyptian Geese with chicks and a bonus Little Gull. The first big arrival of migrant Common Swifts of the spring was a nice spectacle, before it was time to check into our hotel overlooking the natural inlet of Poole Harbour for two nights.



Dunlin, Blashford Lake © Mike Hoit



Bar-tailed Godwit, Blashford Lakes © Mike Hoit

Day 6: Arne & Compton Acres The main location this morning was the RSPB reserve at Arne, but first we made a stop at a small sheltered heathland on the edge of a marsh. The hoped for species didn't play ball, but great views of Nuthatch and Long-tailed Tit were nice. Moving on to our main destination to wander the gentle trails across expanses of heather and through woodland to tidal areas, we found a great array of birds including Dartford Warbler (although they were very furtive!), Osprey, Little Egret and Great Spotted Woodpecker, plus Red and Sika Deer. The well-located visitor centre kept us refreshed, while the feeders allowed exceptional views of a number of species, while the views of this beautiful part of Dorset were much enjoyed.



Arne © Mike Hoit

Back in Poole, we spent the afternoon at Compton Acres. Another knowledgeable gardener accompanied us up and down through the wooded valleys. Between the stunning Italianate zone at the start of the tour, and the Japanese (well, Japanese-ish) garden to finish, we were again witness to the Victorian penchant for controlling one's environment and, of course, for collecting rhodendrons. Displays of flowering heather and tulips overlooking Sandbanks and the Isle of Purbeck were particularly nice. Back at the hotel we enjoyed more views of Poole Harbour over dinner.



Compton Acres © Mike Hoit



Compton Acres © Mike Hoit

Day 7: Lodmoor, Radipole Lake, and Portland Bill Time to move on again, and with a bit of travelling to reach the Weymouth area further west in Dorset, where we would spend most of the day birding. At Lodmoor, the muddy pools were host to a good number of migrant waders, including a fine Curlew Sandpiper, and a pair of Marsh Harriers, before we moved to the semi-urban Radipole Lake reserve. Actually the lower reaches of a river, the reedbeds were alive with the sing of warblers; between here at the previous site, all of us managed views of the very loud but difficult to see Cetti's Warbler. A showy Common Snipe was also scoped up from the visitor centre.



Radipole Lake © Mike Hoit

The next pause of this somewhat whistle-stop itinerary was at Ferry Bridge, where the huge shingle ridge of Chesil Beach meets Portland Harbour. As well as the locally-breeding Little Terns, we notched up a late Red-breasted Merganser and passage shorebirds including more Whimbrel, and some salt-tolerant flora. Portland Bill lies at the tip of a limestone peninsula (almost an island), and is famed for migration counts from the bird observatory. Again, however, conditions weren't ideal for a fall of spring arrivals, but luckily there was plenty else to look at, and an ideally positioned café! We had very close views of Rave, Northern Wheatear and Rock Pipit, a prolonged look at a Kestrel hovering at eye level and - most popular of all - a Little Owl. After lunch, we visited the West Cliffs in somewhat windy conditions, but still had a good look at breeding seabirds like Common Murre (known as Guillemot over here!), Razorbill, Fulmar and European Shag.



Portland Bill © Mike Hoit



Little Owl © Mike Hoit

It was a fairly long drive to our overnight location of Dawlish so we postponed our last planned birding, settled in at our somewhat quirky guest house and sampled the delights of this classic British seaside town.



Dawlish © Mike Hoit

Day 8: Dawlish and Dartmoor As ever, everyone was keen to make the most of the time available to us so an early morning visit was made to Dawlish Warren. The combination of high tide and just a couple of hours to spare before we were due back for breakfast meant estuary birds were few, but the scrub, dunes and golf course gave us plenty of goodies. The Cirl Buntings that have recently recolonised the site only gave frustratingly brief views, but we had more great sightings of Whitethroats, Linnets and a migrant Whinchat. The highlight, though, was probably the flock of over 80 Whimbrels.



Linnets © Mike Hoit

Well fed, we moved onto the heaths and woodlands of East Dartmoor. The cool and breezy weather made for low bird action, but we eked out Tree Pipit and Garden Warbler among the common species, plus an excellent dragonfly in the form of a Broad-bodied Chaser. After restorative hot drinks, the day brightened up and we enjoyed a great hour in the warmer valley where we lunched. Singing Pied Flycatchers and Redstarts, a female Mandarin, Marsh Tit and the scarce and tricky Lesser Spotted Woodpecker all made appearances, along with Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary butterfly. Up on the higher tops of Dartmoor National Park we took in the spectacular views across the moorlands, but the cold wind meant we didn't venture far from the vehicle! Travelling across this interesting landscape, we entered Cornwall and dropped down from Bodmin Moor to reach St Austell. The late afternoon arrival left us plenty of time to fully relax after a long day and enjoy the grounds of the extremely comfortable hotel.



Dartmoor © Mike Hoit

Day 9: Lost Gardens of Heligan and Caerhays Castle Gardens After several full days of travelling and birding, today's plan was to visit two special gardens not far from the accommodation. After a leisurely breakfast we made our birding stop for the day where, alas, the normally reliable Dippers were a no-show. The morning was spent at Heligan. Formerly a grand Victorian estate, the gardens were 'lost' as the workforce departed to fight during World War 1, and many tragically never returned, with the result that Heligan fell to rack and ruin. The derelict gardens were rediscovered in 1990, starting a remarkable restoration and now this lovely site stands as a memorial to the fallen local conscripts. The 'productive gardens' - such as the apple bower, vegetable, kitchen and cutting plots - were quite different to the venues we had visited before, while we also enjoyed the verdant walks amongst ferns and camellias.



Heligan © Mike Hoit

Lunch in the courtyard at nearby Caerhays Castle was followed by a VIP tour by head gardener Jaimie. The staff here are justifiably proud of the magnificent surroundings here, described as 'magnolia heaven'! The national collection of these plants is held here, and renowned among other enthusiasts and horticulturalists around the globe. The private grounds here are another location where the woodland gardens are managed sympathetically for wildlife. During the course of the visit we noted a range of species, such as Raven, Sparrowhawk and Little Egret.



Caerhays Castle © Mike Hoit

Day 10: Trebah and the Lizard Our day began with another lush Cornish garden. Nicky, the archivist for Trebah, took us on an exhaustive circuit around this sub-tropical valley, featuring giant Gunnera and tree ferns along a cascade and – of course! - more rhododendrons than you could shake a stick at! The sheltered locale and water features allow a number of champion trees (the largest of a variety in a country) to flourish, including an incredible Japanese Maple. As well as our final wonderful display of bluebells under the trees, a surprise was two or three more Firecrests on territory. A benefit of having such a knowledgeable guide was being informed of more wartime history: Trebah beach was an embarkation point for the Normandy landings in 1944.



Trebah © Mike Hoit

With a warm, sunny day, a very able group and, crucially, low tide, I decided to try a very special spot for lunch. After a walk down a path and some steps, across a beach and up some more steps, we reached the little café at Kynance Cove.



Kynance Cove © Mike Hoit



Kynance Cove lunch © Mike Hoit

As well as enjoying the stunningly beautiful coast of the Lizard peninsula, we tucked into Cornish cream teas, before taking the gentler track back to the car park. As well as Stonechats and Rock Pipits, the coastal heaths here were rich in scarce flora such as the lovely Spring Squill, and alive with insects including the rare Black Mining Bee. Our afternoon destination was at Lizard Point, another beautiful spot and the most southerly headland on the British mainland. With only limited

time, we couldn't believe our luck when the local pair of Red-billed Choughs immediately swooped in, landed mere metres away and began displaying, calling all the while! A special encounter with a special bird. Yet more showy Whitethroats, Ravens, Stonechats and Fulmars, and some Atlantic Grey Seals below the cliffs, rounded off the time here.



Lizard Point © Mike Hoit



Greater Whitethroat © Mike Hoit

With a last chance to sample real 'pub grub' we headed out in the evening to an inn conveniently close to the hotel. As well as huge portions of food, we got an additional reward for perseverance- at last light one of the White-throated Dippers appeared right next to the bridge! A fitting end to an excellent day in Cornwall. **Day 11: Hestercombe, Theale and back to London** Tearing ourselves away from the hotel for the last full day of the tour, we travelled northeast to Somerset for one final wonderful garden visit. Hestercombe House is another mix of formal gardens and wilder areas, and yet again we had another guide by staff. A thoughtful approach to the landscape gave such delights as a natural waterfall, 'witches tunnel' through trees, and a folly overlooking wildflower meadows. Passing the Dutch Garden and Orangery, we finished the tour at the Formal Gardens which the site is famed for. This stunning collaboration between Edwin Lutyens and Gertrude Jekyll was enjoyed from the Victorian Terrace of the house with the vista of the Vale of Taunton beyond.



Hestercombe © Mike Hoit



Hestercombe © Mike Hoit

Like many of the gardens, Hestercombe also has an excellent café, allowing us to fuel up for the final leg back to London. With a prompt departure and surprisingly rapid progress along a relatively scenic motorway (with views of Glastonbury Tor and the huge Severn bridge crossing to Wales!), there was the opportunity to make one more stop not in the original itinerary. Needless to say, this was agreed to by all! The old gravel extraction pits near Theale in Berkshire are now filled with water and surrounded by scrub, and my childhood birding haunt - and fortunately still have a population of Nightingales. Afternoon isn't the best time and the bird we located only broke cover briefly, but at least we could hear the famous (and loud) song at very close range. With some close views of Red Kites and distant Black Terns, it was time to finally end the tour and reacquaint ourselves with the hotel at Heathrow. **Day 12 - Departure** Much like arrival day, the weather had turned wet and windy - lucky for us that it had held off for so long! During the morning everyone began the journey home, hopefully with some excellent memories of a most enjoyable tour.