

## NOA SPONSORED BIRDWATCH 2023

(Postponed from Christmas Eve to New Year's Day 2024)



This is the first Sponsored Birdwatch we've had to postpone for many years, Christmas Eve being the usual date each year for the sponsored event. So having struggled for several days with one of these un-named winter 'cold' viruses that wouldn't identify itself as COVID, I just wasn't able to do it and there was no alternative but to pick another day. Since most birders are already doing their New Year's Day bird races, it seemed sensible to join them! Gary Elton, Roger Skeen, Irene Boston and I all met up before daylight on the 1<sup>st</sup> January, having been stirred by the sound of everyone's fireworks going off at midnight! I went out first on the corner between Eastgate and Kirkgate in Holme just before 7am and walked out along the footpath beside Whitehall Farm in the dark, with a high wind making auditory identification pretty nigh impossible.

Tawny Owl has often been heard first on the day list, but this time it was a sighting, as an obliging Tawny came and sat in a lone tree on the edge of the trackway, silhouetted against the dawn. A flyover Black-tailed Godwit was unexpected, followed by a Little Egret, many Pink-feet, Blackbird, Robin, Snipe and then a couple of Woodcock dropped into the field on the corner, which I could see, as it got light, was really saturated. A further sighting of a bird crossing the field low confirmed their interest in the spot.

Roger and Irene arrived to witness the Woodcock and Little Egrets, and we moved on to the village hides just down the trackway, where we added Cetti's Warbler, Coot, Mallard, Gadwall, Shoveler, Grey Heron, Marsh Harrier, Little Grebe, Greylag Goose, Moorhen, Black-headed Gull, Common Gull, Herring Gull, Stock Dove, Kestrel, Magpie, Jackdaw, Lapwing, Starling, Dunnock, Linnet and Reed Bunting among others.

Coming back it was suggested that we try to add Bullfinch by going back along the trackway running north-south at the back of the farm, and this was successful, as we added two Barn Owls hunting on both sides of the fence, and found a pair of Bullfinches in the hedge along the ditch. We then drove through the village picking up Collared Dove on the way, and walked out to the Golf Course finding House Sparrows and Greenfinches in the hedges there, a Stonechat in the buckthorn through the dunes, and then on the sea it was very rough in the high winds, but we saw Red-throated Diver, a small party of Knot and many Fulmars (which were a feature throughout the day).

Visibility along the shoreline in the dunes is getting more difficult and we didn't stop long off the Golf Course, moving on to Gore Point where we saw Common Scoter, Red-breasted Merganser, Great Crested Grebe, many Kittiwakes (almost on the other side of the Wash), and on the beach a Sanderling, a flock of Oystercatchers, and a party of Turnstones flying east.



Left: The Black-throated Diver showing at close range in the channel near Gore Point. This bird had been seen here for a number of days before the Birdwatch, and obligingly showed well between feeding dives.

But the best bird of the morning was a beautiful Black-throated Diver which was feeding in a channel close to the path out to Gore Point. We enjoyed superb views of this bird, which had been seen in the previous week and was showing throughout the seaway. We made a detour to the west side of Park Piece where 9 Cattle Egrets were feeding on the floods there (3 pictured below).



We carried on round to the Observatory to have a snack and go through the geese. On the way in we heard Water Rail, and found Goldcrest and Coal Tit with the Long-tailed Tits in the pines. A flock of several thousand Pink-feet were on the marsh but some Brents and Greylags were also in there, some Golden Plover were in with the Lapwings, and a Buzzard was calmly watching over it all. Tufted Ducks were on the Broadwater and another Black-tailed Godwit got up from the waters edge.

On the sea we tried again, where Gary found a Long-tailed Duck, some drake Eider passed west, and Fulmars continued to move through. We decided to move inland to get some woodland birds, and headed for Old Hunstanton where it is often worth listening and looking for birds on the edge of the churchyard. We added Pied Wagtail on the roof of St Mary's, and a Great Spotted Woodpecker was heard calling, but there was little else here. Some Redwings were sheltering near the footpath through to the back of the Old School House, but we decided we needed to go to the Downs to try for more woodland species. This was well worth it, with Nuthatch, Treecreeper, Red-legged Partridge and Chaffinch new for the list here, and we went back into Ringstead to pick up the Burnham Road, as a large flock of Fieldfares had been seen along here in recent days. Sadly there was no sign, so we continued in to the back of Thornham and coming back down the hill into the village we found a mixed flock of Yellowhammers and Goldfinches.

We were very surprised not to have found a Red Kite by this stage, and at Thornham Harbour more than anywhere else we realised why we don't usually do the Sponsored Birdwatch on New Year's Day! We could barely find space to park and lots of others wanting to enjoy a walk outdoors in the sunshine were having the same problem. Traffic and visitors had certainly contributed to the whole day taking longer, but it was well worth the effort when we added Shelduck, Spoonbill, a male Merlin, Greenshank and - Bless Me! We had not just one bogey bird, the Ringed Plover, but Irene actually stopped counting at 31!! We had spent the day noticing that once we'd seen one of the birds we were looking for we generally found loads more of the same. But we weren't complaining. A Red Kite was finally showing on the ridge before we left.



Above: Thornham Marsh from the sea wall looking towards the pines at Holme.

Having had such success at Thornham we decided to make a B line for Titchwell, and again we were waiting a long time for food simply owing to the number of others queuing at the café, though it was very welcome when it arrived. I nipped off to look across the marsh while we were waiting, and had a couple of Siskins in the alders near the feeding station. A short walk down the Meadow Trail was meant to help locate the wintering Chiffchaffs (both Common and Siberian species) seen there recently, but I walked past the main tit flock and then came back, finding that others had located both the Common Chiffchaff and also the Siberian Chiffchaff, both of them coming out to give good views near the trail path. We couldn't believe our luck! It was great to compare the two side by side. As we emerged onto the main bank we didn't pick up the remaining species particularly quickly. We'd already had 92 on arrival at the reserve, adding Siskin, the Common and Siberian Chiffchaffs, Pintail and Pochard on the freshmarsh, a pair of Goldeneye on the sea, then heading back from the sea we found an Avocet, and 2 Lesser Black-backed Gulls came in to the gull roost, followed by 4 Ruff dropping in with the hundreds of Golden Plover already there. As the light began to fade we struggled to add more but a Sparrowhawk came low over the reed pool as we checked over and again for a Hen Harrier coming in to the reedbed roost without success. We agreed to bow out gracefully on 103, which on such a windy and mild New Year's Day was a very respectable total, especially considering that most of us were still for various reasons feeling a bit below par!



A very enjoyable day was had by all, even those still under the weather, and it was a great team effort. My thanks as always go to Gary, Irene and Roger for their time and support, we always manage to get into the spirit of it, and were rewarded with some really remarkable birding, not to mention a chance to catch up with many of our birding friends on the way round.

A huge thankyou to everyone who has supported the birdwatch this year, and especially in light of the change of plan just before Christmas. Your continued support and generosity are so very appreciated. We hope you have a very Happy and Prosperous New Year, and great birding in 2024. THANKYOU!!



Top: Titchwell Reedbed in the late afternoon sunshine

Bottom: Three of the four Ruff which dropped in—our last but one species of the day, with a Lapwing looking on.