

NOA Christmas Eve Sponsored Birdwatch 2024

By Irene Boston and Sophie Barker

Our Christmas Eve Sponsored Birdwatches are always a great team effort and even more so this year, with a slightly different MO as we tackled several of the locations separately, to save time and for various health-related reasons. Last year's birdwatch was postponed until January 1st as Sophie was suffering from what turned out later to be long covid, and this was more of an issue a year later, to the extent that an entire day spent in the field was simply out of the question. We therefore agreed a piecemeal approach to our regular itinerary.

Irene joined up with Roger at Heacham and they started the count at dawn at Ringstead Downs as it was on their way to the coast. A location normally tackled late morning, the early start still proved productive, picking up Wren, Greylag, Blackbird, Robin, Meadow Pipit, Song Thrush, Wood Pigeon, Buzzard, an unexpected but very welcome Yellowhammer, along with more expected Pheasant, Black-headed Gull, Chaffinch, Dunnock, Jay and the first of at least 20 Red Kites during the day, along with a helpfully calling Tawny Owl. (16)

Irene and Roger added Collared Dove, Jackdaw and Kestrel on the way to Holme golfcourse, where they met up with Dave Nurney, who'd caught up with Barn Owl, House Sparrow and Long-tailed Tit before they arrived. Heading out across the golfcourse, the first of at least 5 Stonechats in the area is always a cheery sight, along with the welcome addition of Linnet, Magpie, Skylark in the Sueda and the first of many flyover Rock Pipits as they reached the beach.



The intention was to walk further than the usual viewing spot, which is just at the start of the beach, as there had been a Glaucous Gull present for a while feeding on a seal carcass on the beach towards Old Hunstanton. The white-winger duly obliged after a short wait but we sadly failed to connect with the Shorelarks and Snow Buntings that had also been in the area, which are always terrific species to see on any day. (28) [Glaucous Gull Photo by Ben Rackstraw]

But the beach and sea more than made up for it with a super mix of waders in the masses of birds on the shoreline and a pick of interesting seabirds further out, and we added Oystercatcher, Herring Gull, Common Gull, Curlew, Grey Plover, Redshank, Great Black-backed Gull, Brent Goose, Cormorant, Little Egret, Bar-tailed Godwit, Goldeneye, Fulmar, Shelduck, Eider, Wigeon and Sanderling in quick succession, though we couldn't magic up any more interesting grebes or divers. (45)

Moving to Gore Point for another stretch of seawatching and searching the wide shoreline on a rising tide, we were joined by Steve Newman, who'd earlier saved us time by visiting the Holme village and Redwell Marsh hides, where he'd been able to add some very useful species, including Heron, Sparrowhawk (neither of those species are always a certainty on the day), Woodcock (of which two

were seen along the trackway beyond the entrance to the village hides), Coot, Moorhen, Blue Tit, Cetti, Fieldfare, Lapwing, Greenfinch, Red-legged Partridge and Stock Dove. (57)

With extra pairs of eyes scanning the sea and beach from Gore Point and the inland fields towards Holme village, it yielded some very useful additions including Marsh Harrier, a distant Cattle Egret perched on a Konick pony, (Dave suggested subspecies *Bubulcus ibis equinus* maybe?), along with Pinkfeet, Great Tit, Reed Bunting, Teal, Shoveler, Mallard, Snipe, Dunlin, Great-crested Grebe, Turnstone, Ringed Plover (which is often one of our bogey birds at this time of year), plus Red-breasted Mergansers, Common Scoter, and Steve added very welcome Red-throated Diver and Long-tailed Duck. (74)

Next stop was Holme Observatory where Little Grebe, Tufted Duck and Pochard on the pools were helpful, along with Crow on the fields. Coal Tit and Goldcrest timed it well to pop up in a pine right in front of Roger and Irene on their way to the usual seawatching spot in the dunes, and after being joined by Steve and Dave, we all caught up with the 2 Velvet Scoter offshore which had helpfully lingered from recent days. (81)



Meanwhile Sophie made a brief set of calculated visits; all three attempts for Grey Partridge at the Pitch and Putt during the day were unsuccessful despite a recent covey of up to ten birds there, but the back of the churchyard in Old Hunstanton can offer opportunities for valuable woodland species which are always a stretch at other points of the birdwatch route. An unfortunate complication of symptoms meant that using binoculars was making her horribly dizzy, so it wasn't something that could be attempted in a rush!

With a rising tide promising continuing helpful conditions, we decided on Thornham Harbour as our next destination, passing by Drove Orchards where 7 Cattle Egrets have bizarrely been right alongside the busy main road for several weeks, although we were unable to find an easy place to stop to enjoy much closer views or get better photos. At Thornham Harbour we couldn't find the hoped for Greenshank or Spotshank, but we did add Gadwall, and a distant Spoonbill which did its best to hide in the creeks, along with a Black-tailed Godwit which Dave picked up as it exploded out of a creek. A flock of Golden Plover overhead we knew would be the first of the many thousands we'd eventually see at Titchwell shortly. (85)

Heading inland for our usual circuit of Courtyard Farm and the minor roads around Ringstead didn't yield the Bullfinches which Roger had found there the day before, or the anticipated flocks of thrushes, as we still needed Redwing, but Brambling was a welcome addition. This stop may only have added one extra species to the tally but the sight of a finch flock several hundred strong was a treat, superbly silhouetted against the sky and actively feeding in the setaside fields. (86)



Dave had to leave at this point, so Irene, Roger and Steve headed for our usual final destination of the day at Titchwell, where Sophie joined the throng with some welcome additions to the overall species total, having spent some of the morning at Old Hunstanton churchyard. That's nearly always a bit of a smash and grab raid on other sponsored birdwatches as time is precious on these short winter days. We've had some very productive spells there, as well as drawn a few blanks over the years, always with the feeling we'd get more if only we had more time. So, Sophie spending more time there proved very worthwhile, with Starling, Pied Wagtail, Feral Pigeon, Goldfinch, and the usually very difficult to find Nuthatch, Treecreeper, Great Spot and Green Woodpeckers all very welcome additions to the growing total. (94)

We had a count up at this point against the census form in case of administrative error (Irene can't count), just to check we hadn't double counted or missed anything. We always try to arrive at Titchwell with the tally in the 90s, so at 94 we felt we were on track. We'd had a message from Ann and Terry Smith about 2 Egyptian Geese on the freshmarsh and were keen to get down the path as that's not always a species we manage to connect with every year.



So, while Sophie did a circuit of the car park bushes and the Meadow Trail, with her exceptional bat ears (and sporting fetching earmuffs), Steve, Roger and Irene headed out along the West Bank to the sea. Passing the reedbeds where Roger had seen very showy Bearded Tits the day before, we sadly drew a blank with this charismatic species.

As we were within reach of our 100 species, it can be a bit nail biting, worrying whether we will achieve our target, but good timing and luck was on our side and the final few species thankfully fell like dominos in quick succession, to push us over the 100. A Water Rail obliged in the usual ditch and Roger's sharp ears picked up Lesser Redpoll calling, and the Black-winged Stilt was pottering around on the Thornham side of the path.



A familiar harsh call caught Irene's attention and a chance glance behind Roger and Steve saw the 2 Egyptian Geese flying away. Avocet and Pintail were within feet of each other in a corner of the freshmarsh, and although we'd talked earlier about Ruff not being guaranteed at all at this time of year, that was the first bird Irene saw when plonking down her tripod.

With 100 in the bag, we could relax and continued down to the sea where we couldn't refind the Spotshank (another 'should have been here yesterday moment') and we did not see Knot, or much else on the sea. But a leisurely walk back up the West Bank resulted in Steve picking up a useful Lesser Black-backed Gull as our final new bird species of the day, bringing the final total to 102.

As always, we managed to miss certain species which we'd hoped to find, such as Mute Swan, Redwing, Mistle Thrush, Marsh Tit, Beardies, Grey Partridge, Bullfinch, and Tree Sparrow and Corn Buntings seem a bit like the Holy Grail these days.

But we did manage some species which are often difficult in this corner of NW Norfolk in winter, and which are often our bogey birds, such as Ringed Plover, Heron, Nuthatch, Treecreeper, Green Woodpecker and Pochard. And this year, the weather was very kind to us, compared to previous years when we'd have done well as sandblasted extras in Lawrence of Arabia or other years when we ended the day very soggy indeed.

The birdwatch is always a team effort but this year's was an occasion when the group really pulled together to get the job done in the face of some difficulty. Sincere thanks to everyone who took part and to all of you who sponsored. You continue to make the day so worthwhile.

HAPPY CHRISTMAS!!