

NOA 2021 SPONSORED BIRDWATCH – or Invasion of the Great Northern Divers...

This year's sponsored birdwatch began in the small hours of Christmas Eve morning. I woke about 4.30am and stuck my head out of the window, to look out on a clear starlit and moonlit night, with a light wind but total silence from our sleeping birdlife. At about 5.45 I tried again but a similar silence greeted me, and high wispy cloud was beginning to skim over the face of the moon, hinting at possible visibility issues when daylight came. This year there was some concern that we would struggle with fog and low cloud particularly in the later part of our birdwatch, so we had agreed that we would focus on the sea birds in the morning and look for small birds later in the day.

On leaving the house proper at about 6.45 it was still dark, but there were already a few bird sounds to be heard. Rarely are the local cockerels beaten at this stage of the day, but they don't count, so I was delighted when this domestic herald was swiftly followed by the faithful Mallard, the whimsical Gadwall and diminutive Teal all apparently flying around together above the edge of the village in the darkness. As I walked in the moonlight down towards the village hides I was only following my feet, but a Tawny soon started up, and went on to have a long debate with a nearby colleague; one was near the first of the village hides, the other at the back of the churchyard. In the hedges, a few Redwings and a Song Thrush became audible, a Curlew flew over, with Redshank and Snipe hard on their heels, a Little Grebe calling and a Moorhen alarm call to boot. The first of a stream of 31 Magpies leaving a nearby roost, a few Greylag Geese and then a Blackbird were seen, as suddenly the sleeping birdlife reluctantly responded to the gathering dawn. I walked back in the direction of the house as Roger Skeen and Irene Boston arrived and we headed back for the hides. These two regular companions on our Christmas bird races are invaluable in their abilities not only as birders but to get into the spirit of the birdwatch - and be patient with me! With Roger volunteering regularly at Titchwell and Irene freshly returned from the Isle of Mull [where she helps a friend, Dave Shackleton, with regular winter surveying of Great Northern Divers and Slavonian Grebes on Mull, covering roosts on sealochs and day counts of stretches of the Mull coastline, with a recent high count of 103 on one sealoch being a highlight] both were to come into their own.

It was getting light by now and there were plenty of familiar bird sounds to add; Robin, Dunnock, Wren. What appeared to be a roost of Magpies was coming out of the scrub near the village hides, and a Jay with it. A Heron flushed from near the entrance gate.



Left:

View from hide 1 at dawn

From hide one we had a Marsh Harrier, and I dipped out on my first species of the day – two Woodcock which the others saw but I managed to miss, struggling to see out of the wrong end of the hide. We still did well here; Pinkfeet, Linnets, Goldfinches and Bullfinches were calling, a pair of Sparrowhawks were

displaying, a flock of Long-tailed Tits were in the hedgerow, a flock of Fieldfares went over, a Kestrel and a Buzzard were other very useful additions to the day list. On our return to the car,



our start, Irene and I nearly missed a Barn Owl that was hunting near the caravan park, but Roger was keen enough to spot and call it out. Another very valuable addition to our day. Irene was kind enough to be our driver this time, and we walked out from the Golf Course car park to the beach. Here we found a festive array of winter seabirds. Eider, Fulmar, Red-breasted Merganser, Long-tailed Duck, Red-throated and Great Northern Diver, Guillemot, Great Crested Grebe, as we



seawatched and it quickly became clear that an unexpected arrival of Great Northern Divers noted along our stretch of the coast recently was very much in evidence at Holme. There had been several days with double figure counts, and 17 noted on the 10th December. We must have seen at least 5 off the Golf Course, and having enjoyed the selection here, we turned and looked at the opposite side of the dunes, where a covey of Grey Partridges and a pair of Mistle Thrushes were excellent species to add at this stage. We also got a pair of Stonechats on the way back and a flock of House Sparrows here before moving on to Gore Point. Dave Nurney was able to join us unexpectedly at this point, which was also liberally sprinkled with Great Northern Divers, Wigeon, Shoveler, Oystercatchers, Brent Geese, a Turnstone, and Dave found us a flock of Grey plover and a Red-necked Grebe, we also added Stock Dove and a Great Spotted Woodpecker flying out in the open. Heading on down to the Observatory the

weather was already beginning to close in as expected, with drizzle beginning just as we got onto the viewing platform. We were able to add Coot, Tufted Duck, Canada Goose, Lapwing, Goldcrest, Coal Tit and Chaffinch before we went out for one further look at the sea. The light was poor by now and drizzle was increasingly obscuring the distant horizon. Just as we said 'we need a Goldeneye', a female flew past close, after which we said 'we only need a Common Scoter, but where else are we going to get them?' and Roger picked up a female flying the other way. It was almost birding to order for a time, but it couldn't go on like that forever. We had been very lucky though, and as we'd seen so many of our target species for the day and the weather was getting worse, we decided to go inland and look for small birds, starting with Old Hunstanton churchyard. We've done well in this area before, but as

Hunstanton Park is only open on a Thursday we went to the back of the churchyard instead, which looks onto some of the interesting woodland near the Park entrance.

There were seven Jays feeding in the field behind the churchyard, two each of Great Spotted and Green Woodpeckers, Feral Pigeon and another Stock Dove and a group of Redwings. A Red Kite drifted over. From here we weren't able to add any other woodland species, so walked along towards Chapel Bank. Roger and Dave were further back, and saw a Marsh Tit on the feeders here, but Irene and I missed it and it had disappeared by the time we got there. We resolved to go on to the Downs, but this time we weren't able to add anything more. From this point the birdwatch got more difficult, the sea, shore and marshes were very generous but the woods weren't on our side and nor was the farmland.

We added Yellowhammer at Ringstead but there was no sign of Tree Sparrow or Corn Bunting sadly. We did add a pair of Carrion Crows, but our next success wasn't until we reached Thornham Harbour.

Here there was a good range of waders roosting as it was now past high tide. The species we were able to add included Rock Pipit, Knot, Ringed Plover (yey!) Bar-tailed Godwit, Dunlin, Golden Plover, and there was another very smart Great Northern Diver in the channel, together with Red-breasted Mergansers and a hoard of Teal and Wigeon hauled up on the beach. We looked in vain for any other raptors, or any Twite, with some reports but no confirmation that any have returned to winter this year. We decided to move on to Titchwell, and arrived there at a very prompt 12.30, far ahead of our normal schedule for the day. Here we headed straight for the café and had a Chiffchaff flying through on our way. As we settled down to eat an excellent sausage bap and drink hot chocolate at the feeding station, two Water Rails were calling. We moved quickly on deciding to go back to the sea while we still could, and pick up any species on the way. By now we knew we were on 94 and our target was really feasible. First species to add was Mute Swan, then a very obliging drake Pochard sitting just in front of it, and a group of Avocets. We then headed to the Island Hide as there had been a few Jack



Snipe reports from there recently. We had a good view of Common Snipe, but no Jacks this time, so we moved on. Nearer to Parrinder was an impressive flock of Golden Plover, Teal and Dunlin, with a few pipits in among them but we couldn't turn any of them into Water Pipits. Skylark was another addition along the sea bank, and Roger found a Spotted Redshank on our way out to the sea, with Black-tailed Godwits either side. As we approached the beach a birder told us there was a Purple Sandpiper close just on the other side of the dunes. Bill and Cindy were there when we arrived and it was right in front of us as they obligingly pointed us in the right direction. It was one of the best views I've had of this fantastic shorebird, so stocky and dumpy and yet so dainty, in among a raft of Turnstones picking at the cockle and mussel shells on a shingly part of the beach just off to the east of us. 100.

Sanderling, the only wader we hadn't secured by the time we'd done Thornham, was numerous among this feeding flock too – 101. As we admired this little treasure we began to scan out towards the water. There were several more Goldeneye close in offshore, and with these a Razorbill was diving. 102. We spent time here trying to add other species, with hopes of Black-throated Diver and Slavonian Grebe slow to dwindle as they had been reported that day. Eventually we retired to look closer to home, as the weather was closing in. We had a welcome sit in the Parrinder hide trying to dry our optics and find a Water Pipit, but failed to add much more. I realised I'd miscalculated our list, having left off Guillemot; a Bearded Tit was heard briefly from the Island Hide, and we decided to go and give the Fen Trail a go, leaving our scopes in the car and having a wander around the car park. Firecrest, Siberian Chiffchaff and Lesser



Whitethroat had all been reported, and we had another glimpse of a Chiffchaff in the far corner when the Lesser whitethroat popped up in the top of some willow bushes for all to see, a very peculiar sight after such good views of Purple Sandpiper and Great Northern Diver that we had just been enjoying. Despite a visit to the Fen Hide and a return to the sea bank to look for Hen Harriers coming into roost, this proved to be our final bird, **105**, a most respectable total for a thoroughly enjoyable day.

In the morning we couldn't really believe our luck as so many species we often struggle to find seemed to fall into our laps, but the farmland birds were hard to come by today – it was the sea that won it, a really lovely array of coastal birdlife which propelled us to success once more. The pedometer indicated we had covered 8 miles in the course of the day. We'd had a lovely time, it was never really cold even though we got wet, and overall the day had gone as well as we could have hoped, with so many good species already found by the time we reached Titchwell, unusually with enough time to look for songbirds as well as the rest. My thanks go to Irene for being taxi-driver for us today, to Roger for his patience and enthusiasm, to Dave for coming and joining in at such short notice, and to Titchwell for their welcome and their excellent catering, not to mention a great array of winter birds. We think we saw at least 13 Great Northern Divers in total – not a common sight!



HAPPY CHRISTMAS TO ONE AND ALL, AND A VERY HAPPY NEW YEAR!!