

## **Birdwatching bonanza, Sunday 14th January 2018**

It's January, so what better way to start your bird list for the year than going on a BNA birdwatching bonanza walk. It had rained all day the previous day but that didn't deter members as there was a good turn out and all those going to Hungary later in the year were able to meet the organiser of Hungarian Bird Tours, Roy Adams, who previously had been a wild life crime officer based in Exeter.

The temperature dropped to 1°C at one point as we drove over Exmoor but by the time we had reached Darts Farm the early morning mist had cleared. As we walked down the field towards the lagoons we could see an impressive number of brent geese grazing away quite happily on the fields backed by good numbers of Canada geese, black tailed godwits and curlews. But what was more spectacular was the explosion of birds as they all took off having been spooked by a passing peregrine. All the time a buzzard sat passively in a nearby oak tree quietly surveying the excitement taking place below. Once down to the hide (well it's more of a shelter really) we managed to see some of the smaller birds such as stonechat, chaffinch, blue tit, great tit and an overwintering chiffchaff.

This Winter there had been an invasion of hawfinches (the last major influx was some fifteen years ago) but as usual they stayed in South Devon rather than come up to the northern part of the county. However two had been seen in the nearby Topsham cemetery the previous day, so in great anticipation off we went. We had a robin, pied wagtail and a couple of greenfinches- which are not so common this year- and over the hedge in the adjoining field busily feeding amongst the hooves of quite a few ponies were some fearless redwings.

Then high up on a tree was a hawfinch, although some of us had seen them before in other countries, this was the first time nearly all of us had seen one in this country. It soon flew off but it (or another one) reappeared and stayed long enough for everyone to enjoy a good view of it. By now it was getting on for lunchtime so a quick look at the RSPB reserve at Goosemoor to see if the bearded tits were there but no they weren't. All we had were some redshanks, black headed gulls, a little egret and a dead mouse.

Into the posh new hide at the RSPB Bowling Green marsh reserve where we sat (some in more comfort than others) and had our packed lunches whilst looking out over the reserve. A solitary greenshank provided some lose up views whilst further out were a wide range of ducks, geese and waders. Someone wanted to see a kingfisher and one duly obliged, not a quick flash of electric blue but a real poser as it stayed for some time, so super views were obtained.

Round now to the Goat Walk, where there were large gatherings of golden plover and avocets (the pride of the Exe estuary) so that satisfied a few more people. Out on the river were several red breasted mergansers. On the way to the viewing platform overlooking the River Clyst, the field alongside had a large pond filled to the brim with wigeon whilst close inspection of the field revealed it was alive with redwings. From the viewing platform we saw more avocets plus shelducks and redshanks to mention just a few.

By now it was a comparatively balmy 6°C and time to go home as the setting sun tinged the gathering light grey clouds with pale yellow and orange and reflect on what a cracking day it had been. Avocets, kingfisher and hawfinch, what more could one ask for?

PS

The following day it poured with rain, so weren't we lucky.

**Annual indoor meeting, Friday 16th February 2018**



We were delighted to have Professor Charles Tyler of the University of Exeter as our guest speaker. Although he currently lives in Ashburton he was brought up at St Giles near Torrington so references during his talk to Torrington Common and Skern were particularly apt. He first talked about his day job as a molecular biologist and ecologist but his passion is for natural history and he was soon illustrating this with his wonderful pictures and anecdotes. Explaining that brimstone butterflies have anti freeze in their bodies which enables them to survive the Winter outdoors. In his eyes he felt that the peacock was the prettiest butterfly in the world. He was soon into moths illustrating the marvellous camouflage that some have enabling them to be safe from predators during the day. He felt that the emperor moth was the most attractive one to be found in Devon.

Next was the many families of insects and other invertebrates with some very impressive close up photographs. How long it took him to get some of these pictures one dare not think because often they don't stay still for very long.

Bees and wasps were next on his list and we were told that parasitoid wasps maybe the most diverse animal group with possibly some two million species worldwide so making them fundamental in ecological systems. Having heard about some of their behaviour we were glad not too many reside in this country.

Dragonflies, spiders, beetles, crickets and flies were all subject to his camera lens before finally turning his attention to slugs.

He finished his presentation by referring to the pressures on open land, loss of complexity, poor hedgerows and the lack of field margins not only in Devon but nationwide. Whilst National Parks and reserves were important, every body could do their bit by having a wildlife section in their garden. He supported fighting proposed development on special sites and recommended leaving legacies to environmental organisations.

There was only time for a few questions before another interesting annual indoor meeting came to an end.

My thanks to all those who helped in whatever way.

### **Isley Marsh, Yelland. Sunday 11th March 2018**

Some ten days prior to the outing we were in the grip of "The beast from the east" then came storm Emma from Southern Europe and deposited a lot of snow on Exmoor, trapping some of our members in their homes for several days. Other areas had very little snow, Isley Marsh being one of them, so our only worry was what time would the latest rainfall forecast by the Meteorological Office actually arrive.

So armed with waterproofs, lunch and various pieces of optical equipment we set off. Our spirits were soon raised as a skylark flew above us singing it's joyous song. Then a stonechat and reed bunting stayed long enough to be photographed. It was a fairly low high tide so wigeon and teal could still be found feeding at the river's edge. Further along we had super views of a grey plover and a turnstone - the latter actually standing still for a change. Several skeins of Brent geese flew up the River Taw along with an occasional cormorant. Soon we reached the Isley Marsh viewpoint and sure enough there were the spoonbills with their bills tucked

under their wings so it was a while before the doubting Thomases were convinced that they actually were spoonbills. Whilst waiting for the spoonbills to unravel themselves there were other waders such as curlews, redshanks, lapwings, and oystercatchers to be seen plus some handsome shelducks. A flock of dunlin busied themselves on an ever decreasing sandbank. A kestrel hovered overhead but didn't find anything for its lunch. But it was time for our picnic lunch which we enjoyed in one of the hides on the Gaia Trust Reserve at Home Farm Marsh which is adjacent to Isley Marsh. Blackbirds seemed to be the most frequently seen bird plus an occasional blue tit and meadow pipit. Sheltered by the hawthorn hedges which were about to burst into leaf we made our way to the river bank having seen a small selection of gulls on the way. When the sun broke through the clouds it emphasised the yellow flowers of the lesser celandine, dandelion, gorse and escapee daffodils.

Amazingly the river was almost devoid of birds and even the surrounding fields which are normally full of corvids were particularly quiet, not even a redwing or a fieldfare or even a pheasant. Had the cold wind driven them away or had birds which are normally in the recently covered snow areas been forced to come here and had eaten all the food before returning to their normal habitat? We did however manage to clock up a greenshank and some little egrets on the return journey.

By now it was a balmy 11 degrees as the sun was winning the battle with the clouds and none of the forecast rain had materialised.

Although we didn't see any sand martins some had been seen that day in both South and North Devon, so perhaps Summer is on the way.

### **Dawn chorus walk, Sunday 22nd April 2018**

April 22nd was Earth Day and what better way, with nearly 15 hours of daylight, to celebrate it than to get up early and go for a dawn chorus walk. This year it was at Parkham Ash, another new venue, courtesy of Pete Chanin who runs a higher level stewardship scheme there on 34 acres of culm measures. The area is a mixture of established trees, relatively new woodland with interlinking open spaces which are grazed by Exmoor ponies, specifically for the benefit of the marsh fritillary butterflies.

There was a good turnout considering it was a 6.00 am start. The Exmoor ponies soon lost interest in us when they realised that we didn't have any carrots or Polo mints for them. Scattered throughout the site were 50 dormice boxes but at this time of the year a good number are occupied by nesting birds, mainly blue tits. The primroses everywhere were making an impressive show and the bluebells were just starting to come into flower as was an early purple orchid.

The dawn chorus was in full swing with a continual cacophony comprising willow warblers, chiffchaffs, blackbirds, robins and an occasional song thrush. Nuthatches chipped in with a variety of calls and the repetitive call of great tits resonated through the trees. A heron flapped lazily by, a swallow flashed past and a greater spotted woodpecker did its undulating flight. Red deer and roe deer are to be found on the site and the latter bounded off once it had wind of us.

There were several sheets of corrugated iron around the place which were lifted gently in great anticipation of what we might discover but all we found were some disgruntled toads. The occasional breeze caused the petals of the wild cherry trees to flutter to the ground like confetti.

On the way to the pond there was a blackthorn tree in full bloom but also densely covered in a pale grey lichen so much so that it was difficult to tell which was which until you were very close. Back to the starting place for a well deserved hot drink where willow warblers and blackcaps flitted about in the nearby hedges and then the highlight of the day, not one but a pair of willow tits. This pleased Pete because this was the first time he had seen them there although he had been told they had been present in years gone by.

Round now to Peppercombe and as we walked down to the coast the bluebells were more advanced than at the previous site and an early purple orchid was in full bloom. There were several tracks leading off the lane

caused probably by deer and badgers, although the claw marks in some cases made us think that “the beast of Peppercombe” may still be around.

Down at the coast the sea was absolutely flat and all we saw was a cormorant and some herring gulls. The approaching sea fret had probably deterred a lot of the birds. So it was back up to the pub for a well earned drink and lunch. On the menu was half a roast chicken and there was some debate as to whether it would come cut lengthwise or across. We left the pub duly sated with goldfinches, house sparrows and collared doves accompanying us to our cars before setting off to Julie's for a nice cup of tea.

### **Gooseham Mill, 20th May 2018**

Congratulations to everyone for not only finding the reserve but also for arriving on time. Normally Gary Pilkington, the warden, shows us around but unfortunately he had been called away at short notice.

So the first obstacle to overcome was crossing the stream, which, because we hadn't had any rain for a few days was not too deep. Orange tip butterflies and speckled woods were soon encountered as we made our way out of the wooded area into the meadow. The steep sided valley was wooded on one side but on the other south facing side the bracken had been controlled to allow violets to flourish which is the food plant of many of the fritillaries' caterpillars.

We marveled at the tranquillity of the area as the sun shone down from a pale blue sky with just the occasional wispy white cloud floating by. It was obviously this serenity that first impressed Christopher Cadbury (grandson of the Cadbury of chocolate fame) when he visited the site during the war. So much so that he said that if he survived the war he would buy the relevant parts from the adjoining farmers. So the purchases were made in the 1950's and 1960's. It was then gifted to the Royal Society for Nature Conservation who in 1997 handed over the running of the reserve to Devon Wildlife Trust. So now the area known as the Marsland Nature Reserve of which Gooseham Mill is the centre piece extends to some 400 acres, most of which was designated an SSSI in 1952.

The previous day the country had been decked out in red, white and blue for the royal wedding. Today the countryside was awash with the red, white and blue of the red campion, greater stitchwort and bluebells.

There had obviously been a recent hatching of both marsh and small pearl bordered fritillaries as lots of very smart examples of each were seen. Now and again a brimstone would put in an appearance and at the recently created pond was a broad bodied chaser and lots of froglets. Beautiful demoiselles fluttered by as a buzzard soared overhead.

There was hardly a sound to be heard, not even a lot of birdsong as we meandered through the sunlit glades with flashes of yellow from gorse, tormentil, celandine, buttercup and primroses. An early purple orchid offered a bit of variation. Another stream to navigate and we were back for our picnic lunch.

After which we walked alongside the sparkling stream known as Marsland Water through the wooded area with oak, ash, hazel, beech, mountain ash, sycamore and holly interspersed with swathes of bluebells. Then out on to the open meadows and down to the coast. This different habitat produced different flowers such as spring squill, kidney vetch, stonecrop and bladder campion. There were very few birds at the coast as the Atlantic Ocean gently lapped the jagged rocks, just the odd gannet, shag and herring gulls although a couple of mallards landed in the stream before quickly departing. Another buzzard overhead was being harassed by a raven. On the way back we had a couple of moths, a brown silver-line and a colourful speckled yellow. The silence was the broken by a song thrush whose repetitive song varied from two to six repeats.

Back at the cars a grey wagtail was perched on top of a post as if waiting for us. We had spent so long on such an enjoyable outing that we didn't have time for a cream tea but we had a nice cup of tea back at Julie's.

## **Hungarian bird tour, 28th April - 5th May, 2018**

Ten members of the Taw and Exmoor branch of The British Naturalists' Association enjoyed an eight day bird watching expedition to the Hortobagy National Park in eastern Hungary. It is part of the great plain and was designated a national park in 1973. It is Hungary's largest protected area and the largest semi-natural grassland in Europe. A significant part of it is a biosphere reserve and a quarter of it's area enjoys protection under the Ramsar Convention on the conservation of wetlands. In 1999 part of it became a world heritage site due to it's cultural landscape and pastoral society.

The trip was organised by Hungarian Bird Tours but is actually run by Englishman, Roy Adams, who was the wildlife crime officer based at Exeter police station. By sheer chance we were able to meet him here in January when he was visiting relatives in South Devon and he joined us on our bird watching bonanza trip to the Topsham area.

So the appointed day arrived and everyone got to the minibus on time for an uneventful journey to Heathrow but what was more surprising was the speed with which we booked in and then passed through customs and security.

We tried to guess which bird would be the first one to be seen at Budapest airport but nobody came up with house martin. We did however see white storks and marsh harriers during the one and three quarter hour minibus journey to the hotel in Eger. We were met by Roy at the very nice hotel but the receptionist took so long to allocate the rooms that the restaurant closed. However they kept some food back for us and after twelve hours travelling we would have eaten anything. Outside a scops owl was calling but it was too dark to see it.

Next day dawned bright and sunny despite a spectacular thunderstorm in the early hours of the morning. So full of a good breakfast and anticipation we boarded the minibus only to find that Roy was not very well. So much so that an ambulance was called and he was whisked off to hospital.

But Louis the driver came to the rescue and as he has been doing the job for six years he had become quite adept at pointing out birds and would stop where necessary so we could all get a good view (I don't think health and safety rules on where you can stop have reached Hungary yet!). So we were able to see more marsh harriers, red footed falcons, kestrels and corn buntings. At our first coffee stop was our first nightingale and a bee eater nesting site but without any occupants,yet.

After a picnic lunch we boarded the Hortobagy open sided narrow gauge train which took us out into the reserve by a large lake. Amazingly the first thing we saw was a stoat and I don't know who was more surprised as he kept popping out to have another look at us. Out on the lake were little and great white egrets, grey, purple and squacco herons. It was nice to see spotted redshanks in their summer plumage as opposed to our normal views of them in the winter. White winged black terns were whizzing about and Louis pointed black headed gulls with great excitement. Nobody had the heart to tell him we get the occasional one or hundred at home. Back on the return journey on the train some got off at the halfway point to walk back to the station and saw a cuckoo. Back at the station, nightingale and golden oriole were heard and a black redstart, crested lark, a pair of lesser grey shrikes were seen along with a scarce swallowtail butterfly. Back to the hotel for a much needed refreshing swim before dinner.

Next day Louis took us up the mountains to Bukk National Park iand on the way we stopped to see several lesser spotted eagles and a couple of turtle doves. At the next reserve we only had glimpses of wood warbler, black woodpecker and middle spotted woodpecker. We could hear lots more but it was a bank holiday and it seemed the birds had been frightened off by the noise of a motorbike time trail taking place very nearby. We did see some interesting orchids and several butterflies including male orangetips. On to Vargit and had a posing tawny owl, a pair of nuthatches and some shaggy ink cap mushrooms. It was now quite warm so another swim was needed before dinner, after which some of us played bridge whilst others explored the hotel surrounds.

Tuesday dawned warm and sunny again and we were joined by a nice couple from Yorkshire but this time not only no Roy but no Louis either. The relief driver was a bit quick so it was a bit difficult to see and identify some of the LBJ's. We went to the Hortobagy station again but this time we were met by the warden who took us to a part not open to the public. Immediately we had red backed shrike and yellow wagtail followed by the egrets and herons as before but also spoonbills, garganey, whiskered terns, caspian gull, hoopoe and finally a white tailed eagle. There were many more so it was cracking morning's birding. After lunch we went on what amounted to a safari around large flat fields planted with maize, peas, oats, barley and sunflowers. We did see some hares, red and roe deer, yellow wagtails and some high speed unidentified larks.

Eventually we stopped and had grey lag geese, whiskered terns, ferruginous duck and a black necked grebe. We nearly collected an inattentive policeman on the way back to the hotel before a well earned swim. There were only a few people in the hotel that night so we could choose from the menu rather than the normal self service buffet. Another person joined the tour group and Roy put in an appearance to say he was fit enough to join us on the next day.

The following day dawned warm and sunny as the warden joined us again to take us to another part of Hortobagy National Park. He showed us nesting red footed falcons, avocets, nesting black winged stilts and a black necked grebe in breeding plumage. Some Hungarian grey cattle with large horns also put in an appearance so we decided to move on. After a picnic lunch with distant views of various water birds, we had another safari around cultivated fields and finally had distant views at Noyyvvan of five great bustards but not before we had been stopped by the police. We were late getting back to the hotel so no time for a swim just a quick shower before dinner so we could watch Liverpool versus AC Milan in the second leg of the UEFA Champions League semi final, on TV.

Thursday dawned warm and sunny as Roy joined us for a 6.30 am walk before breakfast to try and see woodpeckers and owls. All we had was more woodpecker holes and the same tawny owl as before although we did have a pair of ravens back at the hotel. After breakfast it was off to the village where Roy lives, so he was now on home ground and he produced red backed shrikes, a displaying barred warbler, golden orioles and a pair of turtle doves. Several butterflies were alighting on some soft mud (presumably getting some minerals from it) including common blue, green veined white and a scarce swallowtail. A quick stop for coffee then off to the plains, lots of kestrels, collared flycatchers, rollers and a marsh sandpiper but the long eared owl remained elusive. After a picnic lunch, a very distant view of a nesting saker falcon, one of only sixty pairs in Europe and a syrian woodpecker not making much of an impression on a concrete electricity pole but there were plenty of yellow wagtails, whinchats and skylarks. A quick ice cream before back to the hotel for a leisurely swim before dinner. Only 30 degrees today as there was a slight breeze

Friday dawned warm and sunny so another 6.30 am start and again with 100% attendance to try and find some woodpeckers. We found some holes again and heard some calling but no sightings so consoled ourselves with breakfast back at the hotel. Then off to Heves Plain, plenty of kestrels and innumerable marsh harriers, some more corn buntings and red backed shrikes. Alongside the grounds of a sanatorium we looked for woodpeckers and found plenty of holes. We did however have a spotted flycatcher and a swimming grass snake. At long last we saw a house sparrow as up to then it had always been tree sparrows and to make us feel more at home a lovely cock pheasant put in an appearance. At Lake Tisza we had grey, purple and night herons plus a great reed warbler. After lunch came the highlight of the tour for some, an eastern imperial eagle on it's nest which then took off and cruised around for a while before returning to it's nest. Back to Eger where some went shopping, some went into the hotel pool, still 30 degrees, and some had a sleep ready for a dinner at an award winning typical Hungarian restaurant. On the way we had to visit one of the local wine cellars where a round of drinks for seventeen people came to the equivalent of £7.50. The town centre was very impressive and the central square which had numerous fountains and recessed lights was surrounded by imposing buildings. The meal was very good and an interestingly laid out menu.

Next day, time to go home and another cloudless sky. A short trip to a nearby lake with extensive reed beds. Immediately an impressive display by a short toed eagle, a cuckoo was heard and then seen, golden oriole and marsh warbler also put in an appearance. Then newly arrived bee eaters, which was a real treat especially for those who had not seen them before. There were red deer on the skyline as Louis discovered and caught a

mole for us all to see. Amongst the butterflies was a large copper - now extinct in the UK. Then yet another excursion to try and see these elusive woodpeckers. After waiting quietly for what seemed an age at a discreet distance from a large hole we were rewarded by a black woodpecker flying in to relieve it's mate.

A leisurely lunch before saying our goodbyes. An uneventful journey back to Budapest airport where we were allowed just two minutes to unload ourselves and our luggage from the minibus. The flight home was quicker than scheduled and then another 200 mile, three and a half hour journey home arriving in Barnstaple just after 1.00 am

A super trip to places with unpronounceable names, 133 different birds seen/heard, edible food, lovely warm weather and a nice hotel.

Would you believe that half of the group who probably got to bed about 2.00 am were up early that morning to go on a birding trip on Exmoor where there were redstart, stonechat, whinchat, pied flycatcher, cuckoo, wood and garden warblers.

### **East Anglia, 1st-7th June 2018**

The group consisted of thirteen members of the Taw and Exmoor branch of The British Naturalists' Association plus two guests. Most of us flew up from Exeter to Norwich after circumnavigating the hold ups on the North Devon Link road whilst the rest drove up the day before. The latter had time to inspect the lovely city of Norwich and see the peregrines nesting on the cathedral. On arrival at sunny Norwich airport the fliers found there was no sign of their pre-booked self drive minibus. After several telephone calls it appeared about an hour and a half late. Apparently it had developed a fault that once the engine stopped it could not be restarted so it had to be returned to it's depot in Birmingham!! Luckily those who had driven up had found somewhere for us to eat that evening that was within walking distance of the guest house. It was a Pizza Express which had a very interesting selection of pizzas from which to choose. Instead of getting a discount for quantity they tried to charge us an extra 12.5% service charge. Eventually it was discovered in minuscule print on the menu that this charge was optional, so that solved that problem.

Saturday morning dawned fine and sunny and we saw our first swifts of the year as we assembled at 8.30 am for the replacement minibus, so we could get to the pre-booked tour at 10.00 am at Stumpshaw Fen. No sign of the transport so an advance party went by car to keep the appointment. Eventually, after several more telephone calls the replacement minibus appeared nearly three hours later than the agreed time having come from Birmingham. Don't they have any minibuses in Norfolk? All aboard but now it stalled every time we tried to drive off. A quick call to the driver and on his advice some well aimed kicks solved the problem. So off we went and immediately were rewarded with a marsh harrier sighting. On arrival at the RSPB Stumpshaw Fen reserve, members and friends using the complimentary cards got in for free. We were greeted by a willow warbler singing it's descending trill nearby. From the Fen hide we saw a pair of mute swans with their cygnets and a lonesome black swan. Down by the River Yare there were common terns and several damsel/dragonflies whizzing about at high speed, which made it difficult to identify them with any certainty. Along the riverbank we heard wrens and cetti's warblers and on one pond a pair of great crested grebes were going through their mating display. The tower hide produced gadwall, coot, grey heron, pochard, shelduck and shoveler plus an island where it looked as if the nesting black headed gulls had ousted the previous occupants as there were what looked like goose eggs lying about. Some of the group managed to see a swallowtail butterfly.

We then tried to go to Buckenham Marsh but a heavy rainstorm soon put an end to that idea, so it was back to the guest house in time to see England play Nigeria on TV.

We had a very good meal at The Red Lion which was by the River Wensum so it was ideal for the batty evening which John S had arranged through Nathan, a friend of his daughter's. He gave us a brief run down on bats and with the aid of detectors found daubenton's and two types of pipistrelle. He then produced a rescued one so we could all have a closer look. Then as an extra treat we were taken to a lakeside location where people were trapping bats, weighing, measuring and sexing them. If they were nathusius pipistrelles

they were ringed so that their migration routes could be followed. Apparently they are common on the Continent but not in the UK and could be susceptible to injury by offshore wind turbines when migrating.

The following morning was lovely and sunny as we set off for the RSPB reserve at Lakenheath. Most of the journey was down the dual carriageway of the A11 with an impressive display of poppies on the central reservation and ox-eye daisies on the verges. Through part of Thetford Forest and we arrived at the reserve where once again membership and complimentary cards were used. From its name one would assume it would be heathland but it was mostly very similar to other reserves with ponds and reed beds. We followed the suggested route and had greylag geese, coot and mallard at the first set of lagoons. Cuckoos were calling and eventually very good views of one were enjoyed. Reed buntings were everywhere but not a sign of the much vaunted bearded tit although we had been assured that this was a good reserve in which to see them. Bitterns were heard booming and suddenly one flew in and disappeared into the reeds. A quick bite to eat at the Joist Fen viewpoint where we were grateful to sit in the shade watching marsh harriers and the occasional hobby. As we resumed our walk a low flying bittern was seen and it was airborne long enough for everyone to get a good view. The returning walk along the bank of the Little Ouse River produced more black headed gulls, common terns, oystercatchers and lapwings. A passing boat disturbed some Canada geese and on another lagoon were a lot of swans. Inland from the river it looked as if a very strong wind had blown down a lot of poplar trees but the understorey of elder was unaffected. On arriving back at the visitor centre an ice cream was very welcome as was the sighting of a kingfisher just outside.

On the return journey in the minibus we went via Weeting Heath which is a Norfolk Wildlife Trust (NWT) reserve, which unlike Devon Wildlife Trust reserves, you have to pay to visit. The reason for this detour was the chance to see some stone curlews. We did see some on the reserve and some the other side of the main road which people could view for free. Whilst we were there a mistle thrush was seen on its nest (second brood?) and a spotted flycatcher living up to its name.

Not everyone went on this trip as some went to Buxton Heath, a 67 hectare reserve with both wet and dry areas and is an SSSI. A volunteer warden spent several hours taking them around and showed them male and female brimstone butterflies and their caterpillars feeding on alder-buckthorn. He took delight in pointing out dog vomit slime mould and a spider hunting wasp dealing with a cucumber spider. The flowers included heath bedstraw, pugsley marsh orchid, common spotted orchid, southern marsh orchid, heath orchid, twayblade, sundew, mouse lousewort and marsh club moss which was protected by a fence. Norfolk hawk, four spotted chaser and tiger beetle were also seen.

We all met up again and just got in to the restaurant in time for a carvery dinner.

Monday morning was overcast but not raining as we set off for probably the RSPB's best known reserve of Minsmere. My cousin who lives not far away had volunteered her husband, Ken, to show us around as he had for several years been on the "meet and greet" staff there. As our arrival had been forewarned the warden appeared and gave us a quick run down on the history of the reserve and what we might see. RSPB members again got in free and we used up the last of our complimentary cards. There is a sand cliff there and the sand martins were busy flying in and out of their nesting holes.

The coast trail of some two miles was our choice for the morning and the north hide gave a good overview of the general scrape area. The path to the next hide went past the area well known for bearded tit sightings but none were visible. From the hide itself we had super views of six kittiwakes lined up on a raised bar. There were black headed, Mediterranean and lesser black backed gulls, black tailed godwits resplendent in their summer plumage, three ringed plovers, an occasional redshank, common and sandwich terns plus avocets with their chicks. The geese included barnacle, greylag and Canada. Ken kept us moving along but from the next hide and the public viewpoint nothing new was seen despite the lagoons being sheltered from the cold wind coming in from the North Sea although that didn't seem to deter the flock of some 300 common scoter strung out in a long line off shore. Back to the visitor centre where we were looking forward to a cup of warming coffee or a bowl of hot soup only to have our hopes dashed as there was no water!

The afternoon's walk was over the mile and a half Island Mere trail which included the bittern hide and island mere hide. We had three sightings of flying bitterns, several marsh harriers and a fly past and back by a hobby from the first hide and from the second one whose approach was lined with southern marsh orchids, we saw a great crested grebe on a floating nest whilst a little egret put in an appearance. Back up Whin Hill was a flock of linnets and the viewing platform used in the BBC's Springwatch programmes. Other flowers of note at Minsmere were yellow lupin, hounds tongue and scarce fiddleneck. So back to the guest house before off to try another restaurant.

Tuesday was again overcast as we ventured forth to the NWT reserve at Cley Marshes on the north Norfolk coast. It was the first Wildlife Trust reserve in the country and started the movement which now encompasses 47 Wildlife Trusts, not all of whom it should be said charge an entry fee. There was no discount for members of the BNA or RSPB or other Wildlife Trusts or even for OAPs. The reserve of 176 hectares contains both fresh and salt water marsh, grazing marsh and reed beds, a section of which is cleared each winter to provide ideal habitat for the bitterns, which the reserve claims is it's star attraction. We visited the three hides overlooking the scrapes and saw lots of avocets, shelduck and black headed gulls. Marsh harriers were searching for food but were often driven off by the delicate looking avocets who were protecting their young. Greylag geese had goslings, mute swans had cygnets and black tailed godwits had some youngsters. Now and again there were lapwing, redshank, greenshank, mallard, shelduck and shoveler.

Someone came into the hide and said they had just seen a bearded tit outside which caused a mass exodus. All we found was a reed bunting and some young wrens. On to to the main hide but nothing extra to report. A quick detour back to the visitor centre for a hot cup of coffee but to no avail as the coffee machine had broken down. A walk along the east bank to the shingle beach to see the horned poppy and curled dock and on the way back we saw a couple of hares, teal, widgeon and a creche of goslings. Other plants seen at this site included celery leaved buttercup, brackish water-crowfoot and button weed.

On the journey back we called in at Saltmarsh Head. Very little to report apart from a yellowhammer, willow warbler and an interesting discussion with one of the local dog walkers. There was supposed to be a goat helping to keep the well fenced areas grazed but it was conspicuous by it's absence. Interesting dinner at a local Spanish restaurant.

Wednesday was warm and mainly sunny as we visited another NWT reserve at Hickling Broad which was relatively close to Norwich. A short trip as we hoped to spend more time seeking out swallowtail butterflies and bearded tits. As it was a NWT reserve we had to pay again to get in, you can't even get a weekly season ticket. We walked through the woods to the first viewpoint and saw greylag, Canada and Egyptian geese. Then in great anticipation we went on to the bittern hide but all we had were marsh harriers, little egret and a coot. Back to the visitor centre to collect our pre-ordered sandwiches before rushing off to go on a two hour boat trip.

We went to two attractive thatched hides which are only accessible by boat but saw nothing extra. Then we landed on the other side of the broad and ascended a 60 ft high metal viewing platform. There were good views all round with close up views of the oak tree canopies with their various shades of green but alas no birds or even a hairstreak butterfly. A fairly disappointing and expensive trip. Having disembarked we returned to the visitor centre via the Secker's and Cadbury hides but nothing of note was seen. So no bearded tits, no kingfishers and only fleeting glimpses of swallowtail butterflies. In the evening some went to the Spanish restaurant again whilst others tried an Indian restaurant.

Thursday – our last day – was again warm and sunny. Those driving home went via the Rex Graham reserve at Mildenhall and had military orchids and a cream-spot tiger moth. The remainder whose flight was not until early afternoon went to Buxton Heath as it was quite close to the airport. It was well worth the visit as we had a singing woodlark and a very smart male yellowhammer. And in case he was getting withdrawal symptoms, Robert managed to get his daily fix of a reed bunting sighting. It was just too windy for the silver studded blue butterflies to venture forth but John found a newly emerged green hairstreak.

Only a short trip back to the airport to return the undamaged minibus. Not only did you have to pay to get into most of the reserves but you now had to pay £10 to fly out of the airport! The flight both ways was scheduled to take 65 minutes but on both occasions it only took 50 minutes. A good car journey home during which we saw a red kite.

My thanks to all those who contributed in whatever way to this interesting trip.

Because of the size of the group and sometimes we went on different trips, then not everybody will have seen everything.

### **Meeth, Sunday 24th June 2018**

It was National Insect Week from June 18th to June 24th, so our trip to the Devon Wildlife Trust (DWT) reserve at Meeth was very appropriate since we hoped to see plenty of butterflies and dragonflies.

For nearly 100 years the site was used for the mining and quarrying of china clay until it ceased in 2004. The quarries were allowed to flood and the site is now owned and run by DWT. Each time we visit the reserve we can see how it has matured. Normally there are lots of small ponds and damp ditches and other areas which are ideal for the dragonfly fraternity.

The sun was already shining down from a pale blue sky as chiffchaffs welcomed our arrival. So off we went down the track lined with hemlock water dropwort, gorse and bramble. Small skipper butterflies were everywhere as were common blue damselflies. Swifts, swallows and house martins were all busy feeding on insects high above us. We looked for the wood white butterfly which is a reserve speciality but couldn't find one. We did however come across a dead water shrew.

A quick detour to where there is normally a pond but it had dried up so long ago that there is now a footpath across it. Cinnabar moths were whizzing about and were joined by the occasional common blue butterfly.

Across the Tarka Trail and up to a viewpoint which gave fantastic views of the surrounding Devon countryside and overlooked the second largest pond on the reserve but all it had to offer was one moorhen. Back down to the Tarka Trail accompanied by marbled white butterflies and then in to look at another pond. This was alive with emperor dragonflies, broad bodied chasers, black tailed and keeled skimmers plus azure, blue tailed and large red damselflies.

A picnic lunch overlooking another pond watching more dragonflies and damselflies and some small fish. Then it was a quarter of a mile walk along the Tarka Trail in some very welcome shade to the adjoining Ash Moor Reserve. This too has had an interesting history as in 2001, bulldozers moved in to dig a big pit for the disposal of 400,000 cattle carcasses following the foot and mouth disease. Luckily it was never used and in 2003 it was restored to its original state. It is now a flower rich meadow with such things as water forget-me-not, knapweed and buttercup as well as grasshoppers. Some 20 cattle are employed to keep the grass under control but during our visit were more interested in standing in the shade as a gentle breeze caused the foliage of the aspen trees to shimmer.

Back through Torrington where we enjoyed a very welcome cream tea.

### **Morte Point, 9th September 2018**



This was another outing that had been requested at our AGM last November, to see some seals. We were lucky to get David Jenkins to lead the walk as he is not only involved with the Cornwall Seal Trust but lives locally as well. So he could not only tell us about the seals but threw in some interesting facts about the area as well. Having been held up in a traffic jam on a Sunday in Braunton, we all eventually arrived at the meeting place. So off we went past Morte church and then the cemetery which allegedly has the best view from a cemetery in the country. The hedgerows were laden with luscious blackberries which contrasted with the white of the bindweeds whilst the holly had so many berries we were left wondering if that foretold a severe Winter to come which would not be a surprise after the wet Spring and the hot Summer.

Parasol mushrooms were very much in evidence as we approached an area known as green velvet valley as a buzzard loomed into view and then disappeared again over the ridge. Around to the southern side of Morte Point, where David explained that the craters were still remaining from the gunnery practice in World War Two. To prove his point he found lots of shrapnel. The area is very similar to the beaches of northern France so the Americans practised their Normandy landings here, although one tank sank with all its crew as it left the landing craft. The crew of a Wellington bomber which crashed into the sea here were more fortunate as they made it to the shore in their dinghy. The plane we are led to believe is still there.

Morte Point gets its name from the pointed nature of the Morte slate and in one crevice we saw the remains of a raven's nest. As we were looking a pair of ravens flew past and stonechats were flitting about the bracken. A lot of the low level Western gorse was covered in the parasitic dodder some of which was in flower. As we rounded the headland the sun came out and Lundy Island could just be discerned through the haze. Out to sea, gannets were zooming about with their white plumage glinting in the sunlight. A greater black backed gull patrolled the water's edge and by the footpath we came across an enormous fox moth caterpillar.

At last we saw some seals swimming very close in to the rocky shore and David was able to photograph one which he was able to identify as one known as "rocket". Apparently although they all look uniformly grey, on closer inspection they have individual markings which enable them to be identified, then their location is reported to the Cornwall Seal Trust who monitor all the seals from South Wales, around the Southwest peninsula and across to Brittany. We had our picnic lunch watching the seals although not as many as there had been on the previous day when there had been seventeen seen there.

As we made our way back to the village, yarrow, herb Robert and ragwort were added to the flower list whilst chaffinch, robin and jackdaw increased the bird list.

David now managed to find us a lovely place for the last cream tea of the year as we sat outside in the sunshine and watched the glockles go by. We were indebted to David for his knowledge and for arranging the weather as it didn't start to rain until we got home.



Exmoor is renowned for being one of the least light polluted areas in the country and that was very evident when we arrived at Hillhead Cross at 6.00 am. With no light from the moon there were more twinkling bright stars in the pitch black sky than you could possibly count. Imperceptibly the sky began to lighten as dawn gradually broke giving a pale orange skyline which merged into a pale blue then dark blue sky. The few clouds that were there were spectacularly lit on their undersides with a pink glow.

By now it was light enough to start to pick out the deer and we were ably assisted by Charles Harding – the National Trust red deer warden for the area. There seemed to be nothing there but once you got your eye in, there were deer everywhere. In a field next to one in which there was a Charolais bull and Red Devon cows was a stag with several hinds and in a field the other side to the cattle field was a very light coloured stag and hind attended by a pair of magpies. The lights of South Wales across The Bristol Channel were now fading and as we panned around we found another stag with seven hinds. The occasional raven would fly lazily overhead as some Highland cattle came into view.

We went on a little further towards Stoke Pero and as we bathed in the early morning sunshine an impressive stag with twenty seven hinds was seen across the valley plus an interloping stag that seen off from time to time. In an adjoining field were a few more deer plus several seen on the skyline. In front of us were some Cheviot rams feeding up ready to be put to work in a few weeks time whilst a nuthatch was heard calling from the mature beech trees behind us.

Returning back up the road we then walked up past Great Rowbarrow towards Dunkery Beacon and then through the ling, whortleberry plants and the golden brown bracken on Goosemoor Common we had further views of stags and hinds who in turn watched us very carefully. Meadow pipits were flitting about and now and again a crow put in an appearance. A bird of prey was spotted sitting on a rock and silhouetted against the sun but despite the combined hopes of the group it turned out to be a kestrel and not a merlin. But then another highlight of the day when with a flurry of photographic activity a hen harrier flew by.

It was now a balmy 6° C having been only 3° C earlier on, as we made our way past Chetsford Water to Alderman's Barrow where there were more groups of deer one side of the road and on the other side a herd of prickets and other young male deer.

There are supposed to be over three thousand red deer on Exmoor and it seemed as if we had seen a fair percentage of them. So off now to a local hostelry for a well deserved lunch. It had probably been one of the best deer watching days we have ever had, from the beautiful weather point of view and the number of deer we had seen. It had certainly been worth getting up early for.

However if anyone wants to see this year's red deer rut then Jane (01598-741350) has said she will take you at a more reasonable time of the day although she says she can't guarantee the weather or the deer.

**Annual General Meal. Saturday 10th November 2018**

It was well attended with about half of the branch membership being present plus everybody getting there on time and most people remembering what they had ordered.

Whilst waiting for the food to arrive Julie Turner produced an advertisement for bird food which if bought in bulk was considerably cheaper than buying it locally in smaller amounts. Originally she quoted the prices for single bags of 25 Kgs but it was realised afterwards that it would be easier to handle two 12.5 Kgs bags, a slightly higher price but still a saving that more than covered the cost of the meal.

After the meal which must have been enjoyed as there were a lot of clean plates, we had two slide presentations covering our trips this year to Hungary and Norfolk.

The branch chairman then updated us with the BNA news that David Bellamy had now retired from being the BNA president and had been replaced by Roger Tabor. His position as BNA chairman has now been taken over by Steve Rutherford. After 21 years of running the Taw and Exmoor branch the chairman decided that it was about time that other people played a more active role. So John Short has agreed to to organise the monthly outdoor events, Elizabeth Fowler is to be responsible for exhibitions and long stay UK trips, Endymion Beer will do press releases and publicity, Sally Burman will organise the annual dinner and finally but not least Sandy Madden will take on the job of finding a speaker and running the annual February indoor meeting as from February 2020. But don't worry I shall still be there as chairman, secretary, treasurer and general dogsbody.

The branch finances are such that again there will be no need for a separate branch subscription. However a book of 12 second class stamps will still be required from everyone to cover the cost of the monthly bulletins. I have already received some, so the remainder when you are out buying your stamps for your Christmas cards get an extra book to send to me. You do however have until the end of January 2019 to do so.

It then came to the part of the evening when we decide what outings to go on next year and after some discussion John felt he had enough ideas to produce an outdoor programme commencing March 2019.

Several ideas were then put forward for the long stay trip. It was decided to go to the Brecon area of Wales on 3rd-7th June 2019. Elizabeth will produce a suggested itinerary. Each person is to book their own accommodation at The Old Rectory Hotel, Crickhowell, Tel 01873-810373 and to make their own travel arrangements (it's about 140 miles).

Whilst we were happy with The Thatched Inn at Abbotsham, we thought we would have a change next year and it was agreed to go to The Royal Hotel in Bideford and use their Kingsley room, which if you have not been before is worth seeing in it's own right.

### **Birdwatching bonanza, Sunday 2nd December 2018**

It was a grey dismal morning when we assembled at the Barnstaple Leisure Centre car park to amalgamate into fewer vehicles. Going via the link road we went through suicide alley where the pheasants appear to have some sort of death wish. Over Exmoor we saw mainly corvids and wood pigeons. We arrived at Dart's Farm and met up with the others who had gone direct, so we ended up with quite a reasonable number as patches of blue sky began to appear.

The first port of call was the bird hide/shelter at Dart's Farm. There was a good number of brent geese, some curlews, a few teal and wigeon and the obligatory stonechat. Linnets and chaffinches were the most numerous in the stubble of the former maize patch.

Round now to the other side of the River Clyst and down to the new RSPB reserve at Goosemoor. Redshanks and a greenshank were present and a mistle thrush was guarding some mistletoe high up on a tree. Good views were also enjoyed of a very active tree creeper.

Although it was a low high tide the volume of fresh water coming down the River Exe meant there was hardly any mud for the waders. However we did see a cormorant, a pair of diving red breasted mergansers and a large gathering of avocets.

Back now to the posh new hide at the RSPB Bowling Green Marsh reserve where tucked into our packed lunches. There were large numbers of wigeon which whistled all the time we were there. Teal, mallard, shoveler and a couple of smart looking pintails were the other ducks there plus several grey lag geese and Canada geese. There was a large flock of black-tailed godwits which every now and again spectacularly took off and wheeled around before coming back to where they had started from. The lapwings just flapped lazily about and the curlews carried on feeding. It was unusual for us to see a single dunlin and there was a snipe which hardly moved all afternoon.

As we made our way back to the cars the mistle thrush reappeared and in the same tree was a very acrobatic nuthatch. A quick revisit to Goosemoor where we had a little egret and greater black backed gull. A lovely kingfisher was there for all to see, posing on some railings overlooking the River Clyst

Round to Powderham to see the large herd of fallow deer where we also saw a grey wagtail and a wren. It was now getting a bit dimpsy and time to return home just as it started to rain. On returning home we discovered it had rained on and off all day, so what can I say to those who didn't come but, "O ye of little faith".