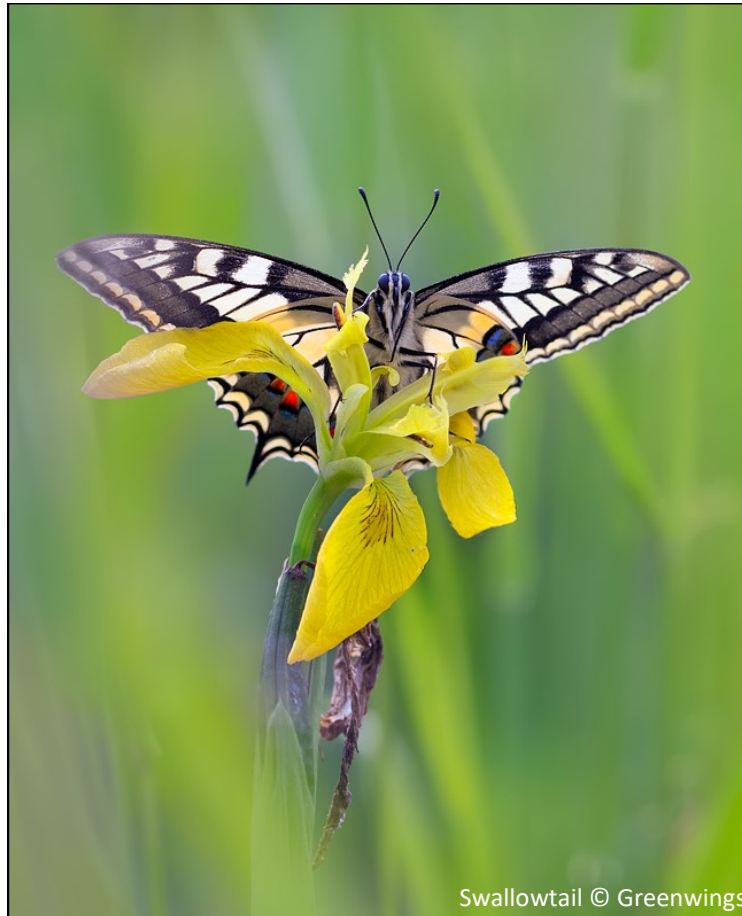


# Swallowtail Weekend in Norfolk

Holiday Report  
16 - 19 June 2017  
Led by Patrick Barkham



Swallowtail © Greenwings

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## Introduction

The Broads, part of the National Park family, boast booming Bitterns, playful otters and darting Kingfishers, native white waterlilies and rare fen orchids. It is also the only place to see the rare and beautiful Swallowtail, which was the species we dedicated significant time to during our stay.

Our plan was to visit several of the best sites in the area to see Swallowtails. They included Strumpshaw Fen (RSPB reserve), Hickling Broad (Norfolk Wildlife Trust), How Hill (How Hill Trust), Wheatfen (Ted Ellis Trust Reserve) and Catfield Fen (Butterfly Conservation reserve managed in partnership with RSPB).

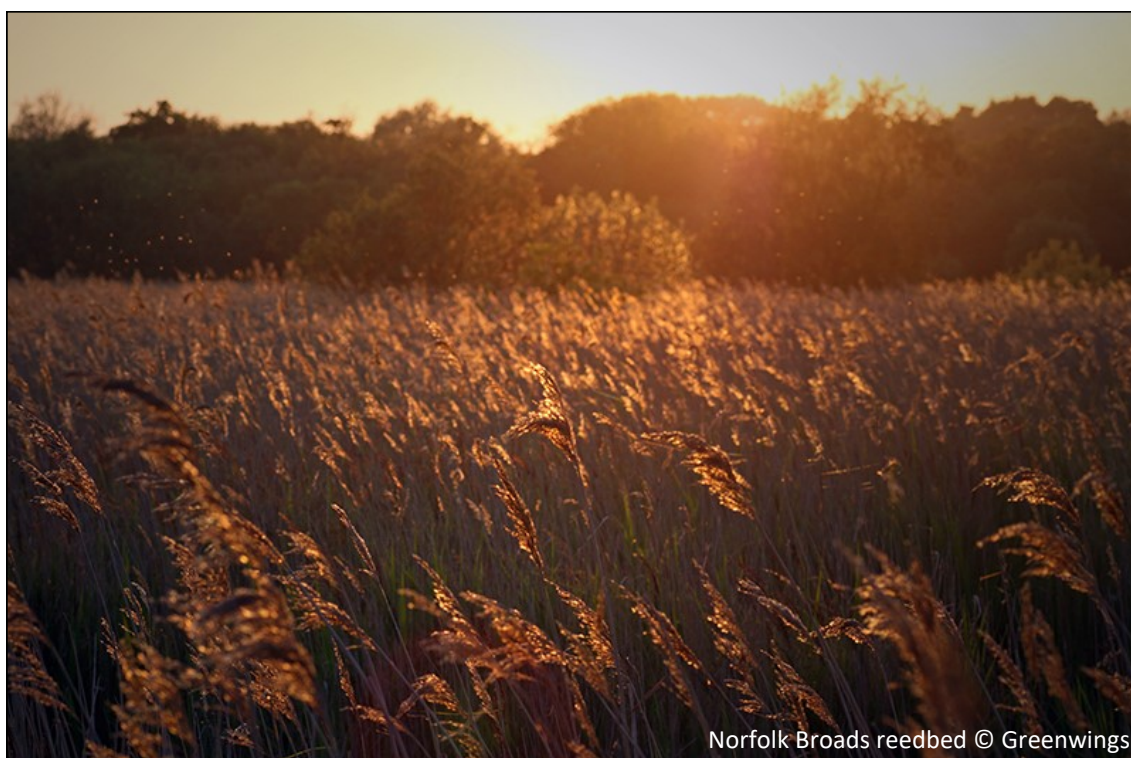
We hoped (depending on weather and the season) to see plenty of Swallowtail activity and plenty of other wildlife too! A boat trip was added to our itinerary, as a fantastic way to experience the Broads. To be afloat becomes a real adventure, with hidden places and close encounters with wildlife at every turn.

Our holiday was led by Patrick Barkham, a Natural History Writer for the Guardian and the author of *The Butterfly Isles* and numerous other books.

He lives in the land of the Swallowtail with his three young children and is very proud of his four-year-old twins for being able to distinguish a Peacock from a Painted Lady at 100 yards. There could be no better person to share the Broads and its beautiful butterflies with than Patrick!

After a weekend of hot sunny weather we enjoyed seeing a very high number of majestic Swallowtails during our days out. Good weather, wildlife and fine company in the beautiful surroundings of the Broads - Britain at it's very best!

**The following is an outline of the week with a daily diary, followed by a gallery and species list.**



Norfolk Broads reedbed © Greenwings

## **Day 1: Friday 16th June**

An afternoon & early evening arrival for most so after a dinner together to discuss the plans for the weekend we all retired to our rooms, eager with anticipation for the following morning.

## **Day 2: Saturday 17th June**

Being Britain, you're never quite sure that reality will match any weather forecast but the morning of Saturday 17th June dawned as brilliantly as it was billed. June was flaming; it was not only going to be sunny, but hot, too.

We breakfasted in the Hotel Wroxham overlooking the River Bure in the heart of the Norfolk Broads, and then set out in the minibus for Strumpshaw Fen. Helen was driving and I, as the local boy, was navigating – not an easy task on the little Norfolk lanes. A Swallowtail could probably fly the journey from Wroxham to Strumpshaw almost as speedily as a vehicle. As the butterfly flies, it's only about ten miles but Strumpshaw is on a different river system, part of the Yare valley, so the road route is circuitous. After a 35-minute drive, we arrived at Strumpshaw just after 9am. The day was already heating up.

In the bus, we had a chat about what we hoped to see this weekend: Swallowtails, obviously, but other unique and unusual Broadland species too, such as the spectacular Norfolk Hawker dragonfly and Water Soldier, an aquatic plant. I didn't want to raise hopes but I predicted we would see Swallowtails today; what I couldn't guarantee was that this big, mobile butterfly would pause for any length of time before our cameras; encounters with Britain's biggest butterfly, which resembles an escapee from a tropical butterfly house, are often fleeting.

Our group comprised myself and Helen from Greenwings, and our guests Phil and Linda, Liz, and Rick and Valerie; a mixture of nature-lovers, keen photographers and amateur naturalists (I speak of myself!).

We crossed the railway line to enter Strumpshaw Fen nature reserve, a great expanse of wet meadow, reedbed and freshwater pools beside the River Yare which is owned and managed by the RSPB. A marsh harrier floated low over the reeds by the visitor centre, and then we returned to the lane on which we arrived to begin a circuit of the reserve.

We walked in the shady cool of the old track leading towards "the doctor's house" – the beautiful home of Dr Martin George, a conservationist and naturalist who worked tirelessly to protect the Broads. Dr George's garden was planted very deliberately with June nectar, such as Sweet Williams, to attract Swallowtails, and is still a popular spot with photographers today.

Butterflies are often late risers and I was just warning the group that we may have to wait a few hours to see a Swallowtail when we saw a handful of people on the track ahead. They were admiring some bramble flowers. On them, nectaring, was a large female Swallowtail. We crept in, reverently, and obtained our first, superb views of a Swallowtail. I hadn't seen one so close for several seasons, and I told our group it isn't always this easy!

While admiring the Swallowtail we met David Dowding, a young professional naturalist who works for Buglife and had volunteered to join us for the day with his friend Matt. They soon proved to be brilliant all-round naturalists as we continued our walk past the doctor's house (no Swallowtails in the garden today) and into the reserve. By thickets of willow we listened to Blackcaps and Whitethroats, and learned to distinguish their song, alongside two ubiquitous Broadland warblers: the Reed Warbler and the Sedge Warbler.

The day was warming up and we continued a gentle circumnavigation of Strumpshaw in blazing sunshine. Amongst the reeds we found some Milk Parsley, which is the food plant of the Swallowtail caterpillar, but we couldn't find any caterpillars – yet. The scarcity of Milk Parsley is the reason for the Swallowtail's rarity. This rather neurotic plant requires reedbeds which are managed with reed and sedge cut regularly by traditional reedcutters; luckily the guardians of the Broads realised this requirement in time, and large areas of the Broads are now managed in a traditional way to enable this plant to thrive. The RSPB wardens told us where we would find Milk Parsley plants but I doubt they will be so open in future years – last summer saw the theft of one plant with Swallowtail caterpillars on it from another reserve, Hickling Broad – a baffling crime.

We took our time in the sunshine of Strumpshaw, and enjoyed seeing good views of other common butterflies, including large numbers of Small Tortoiseshells, Red Admirals, Comma, Meadow Browns, Ringlets and Brimstones. We also saw all three species of white – Large, Small and Green-veined Whites.

We also enjoyed more Swallowtails – six good sightings, which were mostly fly-pasts but on several occasions we were able to enjoy good views of this insect in a perfect Broadland setting.

It was also an excellent morning for introducing us to dragonflies, which I confess is not a speciality of mine! David was really helpful here, and showed us the difference between the Black-Tailed Skimmer (powder blue and black tail) and the Scarce Chaser (powder blue with a black band around its body and a black tail). We also saw plenty of banded demoiselles. Best of all, we had our first views of the Norfolk Hawker, a hefty, bright brown-bodied dragonfly with distinctive green eyes (the similar Brown Hawker has yellow and brown eyes). I was surprised how easy it was to see this magnificent insect's huge emerald eyes.

As the day heated up, we entered the wooded area of Strumpshaw, and enjoyed a picnic lunch in the shade. Then we went on a little shaded stroll in search of the White Admiral. I spotted one of this most graceful woodland butterfly, gliding through the trees, but unfortunately most of the group missed it. That was one for another reserve. In the woods, we also enjoyed views of a tree creeper.

After lunch we jumped in the van and drove 40 minutes to our next destination – How Hill. This is my favourite Broadland nature reserve simply because it is my local patch, a 10-minute drive from my home in Wroxham. As the name suggests, it is a hill, but Norfolk style – roughly 10 metres above sea-level. That said, it's still quite visible and distinctive in such a flat landscape, particularly as on the brow of the hill is built a beautiful arts-and-crafts house. This is home to an educational trust and national nature reserve.

We strolled across a manicured lawn with fine views down onto the marshes of the River Ant, and had a quick look at Toad Hole Cottage, a tiny, traditional marshman's cottage which is now a visitor centre and miniature museum. Then we went onto the meadow which is my favourite Broadland spot. It had purple marsh thistles, which the Swallowtail loves to nectar upon, as well as yellow flag iris. On the gate-post of the gate into the meadow we stopped just in time to admire a Norfolk Hawker, which posed there for us. It was a lovely view.

How Hill's mixture of meadows, birch and oak woodland and grassy paths alongside reed-fringed drainage channels is a lovely spot and I've always enjoyed the sounds of this watery landscape – mysterious splashings from within the reeds and, occasionally, the pig-like squeal of the furtive Water Rail. (We heard one at Strumpshaw.) But our guest Valerie helped me see the special quality of this landscape. "When we walk in the Chilterns we just don't get this peace," she said.

During our gentle stroll around How Hill we saw another Marsh Harrier and, in the woods sharp-eyed Phil spotted a White Admiral that eluded the rest of us. We also enjoyed seeing Speckled Woods, Large Skippers and more Small Tortoiseshells – it was an unusually good June for this once-common garden butterfly, which has declined badly in recent years.

We also saw more Swallowtails. Liz enjoyed spending time alone in my favourite meadow and was rewarded with three Swallowtails at once.

Investigating the water-ways we enjoyed views of a swimming Grass Snake and David identified Great Diving Beetle Larvae, which is a spectacular grub.

By the day's end, we'd enjoyed seeing 17 Swallowtails and Phil noted he had clocked up 15,500 steps – which must have been among the gentlest and most tranquil 6.76 miles he had ever walked.

After supper at a table overlooking the River Bure at the hotel that evening, I gave a talk about the wonder of butterflies and we had a chat about what we'd enjoyed that day. I honestly don't think I've ever seen 17 Swallowtails in a day before!

### **Day 3: Sunday 18th June**

On Sunday, we headed to Hickling national nature reserve, which at 346 acres is the largest of all the Norfolk Broads. It has 125 miles of waterways and is also one of the most remote spots – being barely three miles as the Marsh Harrier flies from the low dunes of the Norfolk coast.

Today we were joined by Julian Dowding, from Butterfly Conservation, to further boost our spotting skills.

We were really in the midst of a heatwave and this was a hot day. We applied plenty of suncream and resolved to take things steadily. Hickling is famed as the place where the naturalist Emma Turner discovered that the bittern was not extinct as a breeding bird but was actually nesting deep within the reed beds of Hickling. (Turner, a brilliant naturalist and early photographer, lived on a house-boat on the Broads.) I think it's also the place in Britain for the Swallowtail.

We walked along grassy paths by reedbeds and were almost surprised that it took 20 minutes to see our first Swallowtail which looped around our heads several times.

After enjoying a walk through the reserve which brought us sightings of buzzards, a sparrowhawk and more marsh harriers, we met one of Norfolk Wildlife Trust's boatmen, who took us on an electric boat onto Hickling Broad. This is the most appropriate way to see a Swallowtail – from the water.

The boatman was a brilliant guide who told us about the old windmill turned into a studio by the wildlife artist Roland Green. We took the boat across to some inaccessible bird hides. Rushhill Hide must be the prettiest hide in Norfolk with its thatched roof where last year's Swallow's nest has been taken over by a Wren. We enjoyed views of Lapwing, Avocet, Common Tern and, best of all, a Marsh Harrier being mobbed by a Bittern. At the second hide, Swim Coots Hide, we saw four species of geese – Greylag, Canada, Egyptian and Barnacle. There were striking Great-Crested Grebe all over the place.

We then tied up the boat at another "island" of raised ground where there was a small oak woodland. This features a 60-metre high metal tower with a viewing platform over the oak canopy.



A little elevation goes a long way in such a flat landscape and from this tower we got a beautiful view and a lovely sense of why this landscape is so good for wildlife – we could see out to the coast, with almost a dozen flint towers of Norfolk churches also in view. But mostly, the scene was just water and reedbeds and marshes – about as undeveloped and wild as southern Britain can get.

On our boat journey back to the little wooden staithe in the nature reserve we finally saw the iconic Broadland bird that had so far eluded us: the Bearded Tit. It was only a brief sighting but satisfying enough to identify two of these striking little birds.

We continued to wander the reserve in the heat, hearing Willow Warblers and the bright burst of song that is the Cetti's Warbler. Julian used his skills to find us not only Swallowtail caterpillars – still small, at barely a week old – but eggs as well. It was really satisfying to see the butterfly in its other life stages, as well as plenty more Swallowtails in adult form. I counted 27 Swallowtails – more than I'd ever seen in one place before – and Phil and Linda saw another three when they took a small detour. We were grateful to find some shade by the visitor centre, where we had a late sandwich lunch: hot, but very satisfied with a memorable morning.

After lunch we drove to nearby Catfield Fen, which is a rather hidden nature reserve a long way down a twisting lane. This reserve is not open to the public except for when Butterfly Conservation hold an annual open day here each year and, handily, this was the open day. Here we had a gentle end to the day, by jumping into another boat, a simple, flat-bottomed metal tray which was used by reed-cutters to cut sedge on a four-year rotation from Catfield Fen – keeping the reedbeds from turning into alder carr woodland, the nearest thing Britain has to tropical swamps.

Catfield Fen has 71 of the rarest Red Data Book insects, including the Swallowtail of course. We took the boat along a tiny channel: low down in the reeds, this was an intimate look at a very quiet Broad, and quite different to the big open channels and broads of Hickling. We enjoyed a close encounter with a Swan and five very young signets and also saw the distinctive spikes of Water Soldier, erectly protruding from the water.

We enjoyed more Swallowtail flyovers but the best views were found in the sheltered meadow where we parked our van. Here, nectaring on bramble in the late afternoon sunshine, we saw close-up Swallowtails and also another White Admiral. We also saw some Meadow Browns, Red Admirals, Small Tortoiseshells and a single Comma and Large Skipper.

It was another memorable day and after a rest at the hotel we headed out to The Station Smokehouse for a lovely evening meal cooked over an oak fire. That evening, Julian set his moth trap in my garden so we would have something to admire on Monday morning...

#### **Day 4: Monday 19th June**

After a gentle start to the day, we walked five minutes from the hotel to my house to inspect the contents of Julian's moth trap. We sat around the garden table in the shade of a beech tree and looked at what we'd found. It wasn't an epic haul but there were some nice Elephant Hawkmoths and Magpie Moths, as well as some vivid-patterned micro-moths.

After that, we said our goodbyes as our guests began their long journeys home. I had never seen so many Swallowtails in one weekend but I'd seen so much more besides. I think it was a vivid and memorable experience for our guests but they made it vivid and memorable for me too – helping me see my much-loved local patch through fresh eyes. Greenwing's naturalist team David and Julian Dowding had certainly taught me a thing or two too!

## Photo Gallery - Phil Blanning



Swallowtail larva 2nd instar © P. Blanning



Swallowtail © P. Blanning



Swallowtail © P. Blanning



Swallowtail © P. Blanning



Norfolk Hawker © P. Blanning



Norfolk Hawker © P. Blanning



## Photo Gallery - Phil Blanning



Common White Wave © P. Blanning



Elephant Hawk-moth © P. Blanning



Eyed Hawk-moth © P. Blanning



Riband Wave © P. Blanning



*Scoparia pyralella* © P. Blanning



Swallow-tailed Moth © P. Blanning



## Photo Gallery - Phil Blanning



Toadflax Pug © P. Blanning



Drinker Moth larva © P. Blanning



Scarce Chaser © P. Blanning



Scarce Chaser © P. Blanning



Heart and Dart © P. Blanning



Heart and Club © P. Blanning



## Photo Gallery - Valerie Harland





## Photo Gallery - Linda Morris

Swallowtail © L. Morris



Swallowtail © L. Morris



Swallowtail © L. Morris



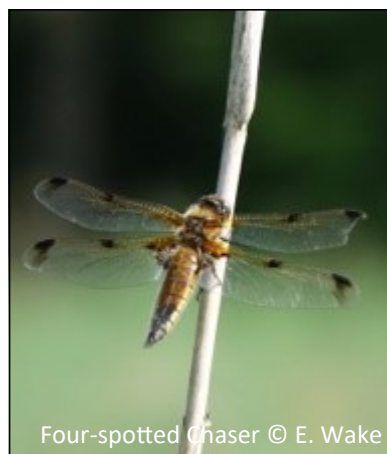
Ranworth Broad © L. Morris



Reed lighter © L. Morris



## Photo Gallery - Elizabeth Wake & Greenwings





## Photo Gallery - Greenwings



# Swallowtail Weekend in Norfolk

16<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> June 2017



Common Name	Scientific Name	Sat 17 June	Sun 18 June	Mon 19 June
<b>Lepidoptera - Butterflies</b>				
Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>	17 (+ ova & larvae)	35 (+ larvae)	
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>	✓	✓	
Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>		✓	
Green veined White	<i>Pieris napi</i>	✓	✓	
Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>		✓	
White Admiral	<i>Limenitis camilla</i>		✓	
Peacock	<i>Inachis io</i>		larvae	
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>	✓	✓	
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>		✓	
Small Tortoiseshell	<i>Aglais urticae</i>	✓		
Comma	<i>Polygonum c-album</i>		✓	
Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>	✓	✓	
Ringlet	<i>Aphantopus hyperantus</i>		✓	
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>		✓	
Large Skipper	<i>Ochlodes venatus</i>	✓	✓	
<b>Lepidoptera - Moths</b>				In trap
Buff Tip	<i>Phalera bucephala</i>			✓
Cinnabar Moth	<i>Tyria jacobaeae</i>	✓	✓	
Clouded Buff	<i>Diacrisia sannio</i>			✓
Common White Wave	<i>Cabera pusaria</i>			✓
Double Dart	<i>Graphiphora augur</i>			✓
Drinker Moth	<i>Euthrix potatoria</i>	larva		
Elephant Hawkmoth	<i>Deilephila elpenor</i>			✓
Eyed Hawkmoth	<i>Smerinthus ocellata</i>			✓
Heart and Club	<i>Agrotis clavis</i>			✓
Heart and Dart	<i>Agrotis exclamationis</i>			✓
Hummingbird Hawkmoth	<i>Macroglossum stellatarum</i>		✓	
Riband Wave	<i>Idaea aversata</i>			✓
Scoparia pyrorella	<i>Scoparia pyrorella</i>			✓
Small Magpie	<i>Eurrhynx hortulata</i>			✓
Swallow-tailed Moth	<i>Ourapteryx sambucaria</i>			✓
Toadflax Pug	<i>Eupithecia abietaria</i>			✓
<b>Birds</b>				
Great-crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓	✓	
Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓	
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		✓	
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓	
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		✓	
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓	



Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>		✓	
Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>		✓	
Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		✓	
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	
Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		✓	
Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>		✓	
Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓	✓	
Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		✓	
Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	
Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓	
Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓	
Moorhen	<i>Gallinulachloropus</i>		✓	
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>		✓	
Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		✓	
Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓	
Curlew	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>		✓	
Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>		✓	
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓	
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>		✓	
Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	
Great Sp. Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓		
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		juvenile	
Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓	
Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>		✓	
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		✓	
Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>		✓	
Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		✓	
Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		song	
Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>			
Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	✓		
Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓		
Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓
Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		✓	✓
Bearded Tit	<i>Bearded Tit</i>		✓	
<b>Odonata</b>				
Common Blue Damselfly	<i>Enallagma cyathigerum</i>	✓	✓	
Blue-tailed Damselfly	<i>Ischnura elegans</i>		✓	
Large Red Damselfly	<i>Pyrrhosoma nymphula</i>		✓	
Emerald Damselfly	<i>Lestes sponsa</i>		✓	
Banded Demoiselle	<i>Calopteryx splendens</i>		✓	
Black Tailed Skimmer	<i>Orthetrum cancellatum</i>	✓	✓	
Scarce Chaser	<i>Libellula fulva</i>	✓	✓	
Broad bodied Chaser	<i>Libellula depressa</i>		✓	
Four spotted Chaser	<i>Libellula quadrimaculata</i>		✓	
Norfolk Hawker	<i>Aeshna isoteles</i>	✓	✓	
Emperor Dragonfly	<i>Anax imperator</i>		✓	
<b>Misc.</b>				
Southern Marsh Orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza praetermissa</i>		✓	
Milk Parsley	<i>Selinum wallichianum</i>	✓	✓	
Marsh Valerian	<i>Valeriana dioica</i>		✓	
Hemp Agrimony	<i>Eupatorium cannabinum</i>		✓	
Scottish Thistle	<i>Onopordum acanthium</i>		✓	

Grass Snake	<i>Natrix natrix</i>	✓		
Common Frog	<i>Rana temporaria</i>		✓	
Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>		✓	
Great Diving Beetle	<i>Dytiscus marginalis</i>	larva		