

## Norfolk Swallowtail Weekend

15th - 18th June 2018  
Led by Patrick Barkham



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### Friday 15<sup>th</sup> June 2018

Norfolk had been enjoying the early weeks of the 2018 heatwave when our group of fifteen Swallowtail seekers assembled on the riverside terrace of the Hotel Wroxham to meet each other on Friday evening. After long journeys, many guests were desperate to stretch their legs, so I took them on a little walk east through Wroxham along the banks of the River Bure. Wroxham is a little tourist town where people hire boats and enjoy fish 'n' chips and, apart from happy holidaymakers, there wasn't much wildlife out on this evening apart from the chip-munching Swan population and plenty of House Sparrows, Blackbirds, Robins and Dunnocks. It was nice to rest our eyes on the limpid waters of the Bure, however, and scan the willow and alder-festooned banks for an otter. We were as likely to see an otter among the boatyards of Wroxham as anywhere on the Broads: they are thriving here.

Not tonight, but we kept our eyes peeled as we enjoyed a very pleasant evening meal at the hotel at a table overlooking the River Bure, pleasure-boats and motor cruisers slipping past. Of course, the conversation turned to Swallowtails. Britain's biggest and most spectacular native butterfly had emerged early this year – in mid-May – and had already been out in good number. With the weather forecast threatening a cooler, cloudy weekend, would they be here still?

### Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> June 2018

As the Met Office promised, Saturday dawned cool and grey but there was a hint of brightness behind the clouds and the promise that the breeze might give us some chinks of blue sky. We drove our two minibuses (Helen Greenwings drove a Transit; my group lucked out with my hired Mercedes people-carrier) 30 minutes to Strumpshaw Fen. This renowned National Nature Reserve had been saved by the RSPB in 1974. As soon as we stepped out into the grassy carpark, a Norfolk Hawker swooped overhead. This superb dragonfly is unmistakable because it flashes its vivid fluorescent green eyes at you as it pilots its large rust-coloured red-brown body through the sky. Like the Swallowtail, the Norfolk Hawker is a rare and spectacular insect, and only reliably found in the wetlands of Norfolk. By the end of the weekend, everyone was more than familiar with this magnificent aerial predator.

We checked in at the visitor centre and then left the reserve, setting out along a track beyond the reserve to "the Doctor's House". This is the beautiful old home of Dr Martin George, a renowned ecologist who played a key role in saving Strumpshaw and getting protection for the natural history riches across the whole of the Norfolk Broads. His widow, Barbara, still lives in the private house, and generously endures the butterfly-seeking paparazzi who gather beside her south-facing front garden because she stocks it with plants such as sweet williams which provide nectar for the Swallowtails just as they emerge. In a rough grassy field before her home, Julian Dowding, my fellow Greenwings guide, spotted the whizz of a Large Skipper but nothing else was flying in the cool grey.

I was warning that it might take a while to find a Swallowtail, and idly admiring Barbara George's vegetable patch when – "There! There!" A Swallowtail slowly flapped its way over from the reserve, flew past the potato patch, pirouetted and flapped out of sight. The whole group had seen their first Swallowtail and this exciting-but-brief encounter left us wanting more.

We crossed the railway line and re-entered Strumpshaw reserve. As Willow Warblers and Sedge Warblers sung in the sallow thickets, we identified and inspected the rather fussy Broadland plant Milk Parsley, searching for Swallowtail eggs or first instar caterpillars. The scarcity of Milk Parsley is the reason for our Swallowtail's rarity: the British Swallowtail, *Britannicus*, is a subspecies of the continental Swallowtail and, foolishly, the caterpillars of *Britannicus* have eschewed the Catholic

tastes of its continental cousin and only thrive on this fussy, marsh-edge-loving Milk Parsley. The first instar caterpillars look a little bit like bird droppings but unfortunately we didn't find any in this corner of the reserve.

We continued a slow amble around the reserve, clocking up a Small Tortoiseshell and a Red Admiral, although it really wasn't good butterfly weather. We kept an ear out too, and heard what was my first cuckoo of the year in the distance. We climbed the wooden steps to the high bird hide at the far side of the reserve and sat watching the pools below, with a panoramic view over the marshes of the Yare valley. Here we got our first good visit of another rarity which is glorious ubiquitous over the Broads: the Marsh Harrier. People are always amazed to hear that this large, slender-winged raptor of the reedbeds is rarer than the Golden Eagle.

As we pondered the Black-headed gulls and their chicks and nests on the island in the foreground, who should come flying past directly below us but our second Swallowtail of the day. This was a marvellous view for all of us, looking down on those yellow and black wings.

We walked back through the meadow area, which was full of red campion and, in the field beyond, impressive Highland cattle doing their bit for conservation grazing. It was fast becoming a decent dragonfly day with good views of Scarce Chasers, Broad-bodied Chasers and Black-tailed Skimmers, as well as the more common Banded Demoiselle and the Common Blue Damselfly. Different members of the group began to reveal their skills, with Caroline proving herself to be a real invertebrate enthusiast, turning up various species of longhorn beetle, including the Black and Yellow Longhorn Beetle, as well as the Dock Bug.

It was time for lunch. While I returned to the van to pick up our lunch, I found a Swallowtail circling the Marsh Valerian and other flowers by the Visitor Centre. I sprinted back through the woods to grab everyone but, of course, by the time we all returned to the garden this particular prospecting Swallowtail had sauntered on. Swallowtails are big butterflies and live at a low density, constantly roaming their Broadland home. I knew in sub-optimal conditions we would never see many, but I hoped for more sightings. Nym, who didn't fancy a big walk, did some gentle sauntering in the meadow on her own and was rewarded with another Swallowtail. Sometimes you just have to sit back, relax, and let them come to you.

We paused for our picnic lunch (including genuinely local strawberries – I'm relieved that our discerning guests immediately tasted the difference) in the woods of Strumpshaw. After lunch, we admired another of Strumpshaw's eight species of orchid – the pale-green Common Twayblade orchid in the woods.

Then it was time to drive back through Wroxham and on to How Hill, my favourite local patch. This is a National Nature Reserve of marshes besides a beautiful Arts and Crafts house built on a small hill overlooking the River Ant. It's always peaceful here, and a more intimate landscape than the wide-open spaces of Strumpshaw.

We had a look round the tiny Toad Hole Cottage which was once a cottage for the local marshman and is now a tiny museum and visitor centre. It's pretty cottage garden is often a magnet for Swallowtails. Then we went onto the meadow, my favourite Swallowtailing turf. The Marsh Thistles and Yellow Flag-Iris here often attract nectaring Swallowtails. Julian was the first to find one, but it only became visible when there was a flash of sunlight. Once we had it in our sights, we got several views. I dashed off along the banks of the Ant to see if I could find any warmer flowery patches but only succeeded in seeing a Peregrine Falcon, high in the sky above the "skeleton pump" – an old water pump made from a frame of wood.

We walked on through the woods and along the marsh edges, admiring more Marsh Harriers and some fine stands of Foxgloves. More skimmers, chasers and hawkers came into view. We then discovered How Hill's "secret" garden, planted up at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and so hidden away that even a regular like me is never quite sure how to find it. The formal planting was a big contrast to the reedbeds all around but of course the reedbeds were an equally human-shaped landscape. Without the regular harvesting of reed and sedge for thatch (the reeds go on the rough; the tougher sedge provides the waterproof cap on a roof's peak), the Broads would soon become thick alder carr – our own temperate swamp-forest. How Hill is a wonderfully calm place to end a day which is surprisingly tiring – in a good way. Five Swallowtails was a decent haul for such a grey day and it gave me confidence that we can find this creature in almost any weather. We ate well at the hotel that evening before the poor guests were subjected to one final trial: an illustrated butterfly talk by me!

### **Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> June 2018**

I had high hopes that Sunday was going to provide more sunshine than the fleeting glimpses of Saturday. Unfortunately, it wasn't to be. It was cool and more implacably grey than before. We drove north-east to the jewel in Norfolk Wildlife Trust's crown: the broadland reserve of Hickling. This giant nature reserve is beside the biggest of the broads, and it's in the river system of the Thurne, which is the closest to the fragile coast of north-east Norfolk, barely three miles as the Crane flies. (These magnificent birds returned to breed in this area of their own free-will and were kept secret for many years; these days, their population is thriving.) Hickling is a big reserve with huge reedbeds; the best way to explore this living landscape is by boat. So boat we took.

We walked slowly through the reserve, learning to differentiate between the song of the Sedge Warbler and the Reed Warbler, and along by the water to a gap in the reeds where our chariots awaited. We hired two electric boats, which were piloted by knowledgeable Norfolk Wildlife Trust guides, great blokes, good birders and repositories of lots of fascinating stories about this watery landscape and the people it inspired. We motored slowly past Turner's Island, named after Emma Turner, a brilliant Edwardian ornithologist who lived alone on a houseboat here for 20 years and was responsible for discovering that the Bittern was not extinct as a breeding bird in England. She found and photographed its nest amongst the reedbeds of Hickling.

As we motored I pondered why our electric boat wasn't quieter. Ah: one of the electric boats had broken down, and I was in the group with a petrol motor boat! To be honest, it was almost as quiet. We crossed the broad, went down the river and got out to go up the viewing platform – a metal tower more than 100ft high. A little bit of elevation goes a long way in a flat landscape and this gave us a panoramic view of this unspoilt landscape, from Medieval flint-towered churches to the low line of sand dunes that protected this land from the North Sea.

During our trip, which included time in two wooden hides only accessible by boat, we saw more Marsh Harriers, Kestrel, and some nice waders and water birds including Redshank, Spotted Redshank, Greenshank, Great-crested Grebe and Great White Egret (enormous compared with the more common Little Egret). Last time I was here I saw a Bittern but this bird eluded us on this day. Julian is a brilliant field naturalist and I don't think it's a coincidence that he was in the "lucky" boat. While my luckless companions didn't see a single Swallowtail as they are supposed to be seen, flying beside your boat at the height of the reed tops, Julian and the wise guests who hopped onto his boat got just such a view, as well as another Broadland speciality, the Bearded Tit. We did at least hear it!

We enjoyed our packed lunch back by the visitor centre before setting off to the most secret spot on the Norfolk Broads: the nether reaches of Catfield Fen. This Butterfly Conservation nature reserve is not open to the public but today was a special open day and Judy Dunmore and Andy Brazil of Norfolk Butterfly Conservation kindly stayed to show us the contents of their moth trap, which they had set on the fen the previous night. This haul included charismatic favourites such as the Puss Moth, Poplar Hawkmoth, Eyed and Elephant Hawkmoth but also Buff Ermine, Green Silver-lines, Pinion-streaked Snout and the Small China Mark. Then Mike Gasson of Butterfly Conservation and Keith Bacon of Catfield Parish Council – and a fascinating local historian – took us on a very different kind of boat ride.

We navigated along the narrow creeks of Catfield Fen in a reed lighter, a flat-bottomed boat which the reed-cutters still use to haul their great piles of reed off the fen each year. This was such an atmospheric trip. With sunshine, it would've brought Swallowtails but the sun had been well and truly swallowed up. Instead, Mike showed us a profusion of the very rare (and small) Fen Orchid, which would be impossible to find here without (a) a boat and (b) an expert.

My highlight of the weekend came as we strolled quietly off this middle-of-nowhere kind of marsh. Over the marsh and in front of the oak wood flashed a hobby, darting along and back, a superb close-up view of the most thrilling of sharp-winged raptors. Some of us saw it grab a dragonfly (probably one of those merciless-looking Norfolk Hawkets) in mid-air and continue its flight. It is moments like these, in places of complete tranquility, that make up the magic of this weekend.

### **Monday 18<sup>th</sup> June 2018**

In what is becoming a favourite Swallowtail Weekend tradition, we rounded up the group and forced them to walk over to my house which is picturesquely situated next to an industrial estate. Here, they were compelled to inspect the contents of the moth trap I'd put out the previous evening. What sounds like torture is actually quite fun. I get to show guests my wildlife gardening (which to some eyes probably looks like scandalous neglect) while Greenwings' moth guru Helen Saunders goes through the moth trap.

It was a warm night and this year we got a fantastic haul. The big ones (which thrilled my children when they got home from school) were the Privet, Poplar and Elephant Hawkmoths. But my favourite was the Burnished Brass, a spectacular metallic-coloured moth. Besides these we had a fine array: Buff Ermine, Dark Arches, Green Oak Tortrix, Heart and Dart, and one of my favourite names: the Setaceous Hebrew Character. We drank tea and coffee and munched biscuits while Helen did the hard ID work!

A few days earlier I had found more than 20 Orange Tip caterpillars on the Garlic Mustard in my garden but after boasting about this to Sandy I was unable to show her any of these brilliantly camouflaged cannibalistic caterpillars. Had they somehow eaten each other? Finally, I was relieved to find three, so I could show Sandy how my wildlife gardening had bore some fruition!

It was lovely to meet this really nice group of people and show them my local patch. I was sorry the weather didn't deliver us the Swallowtail riches of the previous year but we did at least all enjoy some good views and I think we all got many other peaceful and memorable encounters with wildlife great and small, in one of the most unique human-made wildernesses in the whole world. (Okay, I'm biased!)

## Swallowtail Weekend in Norfolk



15<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> June 2018

Common Name	Scientific Name	15th	16th	17th	18th
<b>Lepidoptera - Butterflies</b>					
Swallowtail	Papilio machaon		✓ x5	✓ x1	
Large White	Pieris brassicae		✓		
Small White	Pieris rapae				
Green veined White	Pieris napi		✓		
Brimstone	Gonepteryx rhamni		✓		
Red Admiral	Vanessa atalanta		✓ x11	✓ x3	
Painted Lady	Vanessa cardui		✓		
Meadow Brown	Maniola jurtina		✓		
Ringlet	Aphantopus hyperantus				
Speckled Wood	Pararge aegeria		✓		
<b>10</b>					
<b>Lepidoptera - Moths</b>					
Brown China Mark	Elophila nymphaeata		✓		
Blood vein	Timandra comae				✓
Buff Ermine	Spilosoma luteum			✓	✓
Burnished Brass	Diachrysia chrysitis				✓
Cinnabar Moth	Tyria jacobaeae			✓	
Clouded Border	Lomaspilis marginata			✓	
Clouded Silver	Lomographia temerata			✓	✓
Common Footman	Eilema lurideola				✓
Dark Arches	Apamea monoglypha				✓
Dot Moth	Melanchra persicariae				✓
Drinker Moth	Euthrix potatoria		larva		
Elephant Hawkmoth	Deilephila elpenor			✓	✓
Eyed Hawkmoth	Smerinthus ocellata			✓	
Flame Shoulder	Ochropleura plecta				✓
Garden Tiger	Arctia caja			larva	
Green Oak Tortrix	Tortrix viridana				✓
Green Silver-lines	Pseudoips prasinana			✓	
Heart and Club	Agrotis clavis				✓
Heart and Dart	Agrotis exclamationis			✓	✓
Hummingbird Hawkmoth	Macroglossum stellatarum				
Marbled White Spot	Protodeltote pygarge				✓
Pale Prominent	Pterostoma palpina			✓	
Peach Blossom	Thyatira batis			✓	
Peppered Moth	Bisto betularia				✓
Pinion-streaked Snout	Schrankia costaestrigalis			✓	
Common Wainscot	Mythimna pallens			✓	
Poplar Hawkmoth	Laothoe populi			✓	✓
Privet Hawkmoth	Sphinx ligustri				✓
Puss Moth	Cerura vinula			✓	
Reed Leopard	Phragmataecia castaneae			✓	
Setaceous Hebrew Character	Xestia c-nigrum				✓
Silver Hook	Deltote uncula			✓	

Silver-Y	Autographa gamma		✓		
Small China Mark	Catachysta lemnata		✓		
Small Magpie	Eurrhyncha hortulata				✓
Small Seraphim	Pterapherapteryx sexalata			✓	
Small Yellow Wave	Hydrelia flammeolaria			✓	
Spectacle	Abrostola tripartite				✓
Straw Dot	Rivula sericealis		✓		
Swallow Prominent	Pheosia tremula			✓	
Triple-spotted Clay	Xestia ditrapezium				✓
Water Ermine	Spilosoma urticae			✓	
Willow Beauty	Peribatodes secundaria				✓
Yellow-barred Longhorn Moth	Nemaphora degeerella			✓	
	<b>44</b>				
<b>Birds</b>					
Great-crested Grebe	Podiceps cristatus			✓	
Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo			✓	
Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea		✓	✓	
Little Egret	Egretta garzetta				
Great White Egret				✓ x2	
Mute Swan	Cygnus olor			✓	
Greylag Goose	Anser anser			✓	
Egyptian Goose	Alopochen aegyptiaca			✓	
Shelduck	Tadorna tadorna			✓	
Gadwall				✓	
Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos			✓	
Teal	Anas crecca			✓	
Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus		✓	✓	
Buzzard	Buteo buteo		✓		
Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus		✓	✓	
Hobby				✓	
Coot	Fulica atra			✓	
Avocet	Recurvirostra avosetta			✓	
Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus		✓		
Curlew	Numenius phaeopus			✓	
Oystercatcher			✓		
Greenshank				✓	
Common Redshank				✓	
Spotted Redshank				✓	
Black-headed Gull	Larus ridibundus		✓	✓	
Lesser Black-backed Gull			✓		
Herring Gull	Larus argentatus				
Common Tern	Sterna hirundo			✓	
Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus	✓			
Grey Wagtail				✓	
Pied Wagtail	Motacilla alba			✓	
Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes		✓		
Sedge Warbler	Acrocephalus schoenobaenus		✓	✓	
Cetti's Warbler	Cettia cetti			♪	
Reed Warbler	Acrocephalus scirpaceus			✓	
Willow Warbler			✓	✓	
Blackcap	Sylvia atricapilla			✓	
Chiffchaff	Phylloscopus collybita		✓		
Jackdaw					✓

Great Tit	Parus major		✓		
Marsh Tit			✓		
Magpie	Pica pica	✓			
Blackbird		✓			
House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	✓			
Robin		✓			
Chaffinch		✓			
Dunnock		✓			
Reed Bunting	Emberiza schoeniclus		✓		
Cuckoo			♪	♪	
Yellowhammer			✓		
Greenfinch			✓		
Swift				✓	
<b>52</b>					
<b>Odonata</b>					
Common Blue Damselfly	Enallagma cyathigerum		✓	✓	
Blue-tailed Damselfly	Ischnura elegans		✓ *	✓	
Large Red Damselfly	Pyrrhosoma nymphula		✓		
Emerald Damselfly	Lestes sponsa				
Banded Demoiselle	Calopteryx splendens		✓	✓	
Black Tailed Skimmer	Orthetrum cancellatum		✓		
Scarce Chaser	Libellula fulva		✓		
Broad bodied Chaser	Libellula depressa		✓		
Four spotted Chaser	Libellula quadrimaculata		✓		
Norfolk Hawker	Aeshna isocetes		✓	✓	
Emperor Dragonfly	Anax imperator			?	
<b>11</b>					
<b>Other species of note</b>					
	Rutpela maculata		✓		
	Agapanthus viridensis		✓	✓	
Cockchafer					✓
Dock Bug			✓		
Southern Marsh Orchid	Dactylorhiza praetermissa		✓		
Bee Orchid	Ophrys apifera		✓		
Milk Parsley	Selinum wallichianum		✓	✓	
Marsh Valerian	Valeriana dioica		✓		
Hemp Agrimony	Eupatorium cannabinum		✓		
Scottish Thistle	Onopordum acanthium		✓		

\*Blue tailed Damselfly - Heterochrome Form also seen

Moths – Sunday at Catfield Fen

Moths – Monday at Patrick's

# Photo Gallery



# Photo Gallery



Catfield Fen © Steve Easter



Catfield Fen © Steve Easter



Boat trip © Steve Easter



Konik Ponies © Steve Easter



Brown-China mark moth © Steve Easter

# Photo Gallery



Swallowtail © Nigel Downes



Swallowtail © Nigel Downes



Swallowtail © Nigel Downes



Norfolk Hawker © Nigel Downes



Golden-bloomed Grey Longhorn Beetle © Nigel Downes



Black & Yellow Longhorn Beetle © Nigel Downes



Great white egret © Nigel Downes



Great white egret © Nigel