

Swallowtail day trip

15th June 2021

Led by Patrick Barkham & Alice Hunter



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Our group of ten plus guides Alice Hunter and Patrick Barkham met for the day in one of a great wealth of car parks in Wroxham, in the heart of the Broads. We decided to tweak our itinerary because the best views in recent days for Swallowtails had come at Hickling Broad, and with the weather set fair we decided to head straight there.

Hickling Broad is the largest of the Broads, the shallow lakes created by Medieval peat diggings which make up England's largest wetland and smallest National Park. The National Nature Reserve is owned and managed by Norfolk Wildlife Trust, and famed as a breeding ground not only for unique broadland species such as the Swallowtail and Norfolk Hawker dragonfly but also Bitterns, Bearded Reedlings and Cranes. It is very unusual to see all these charismatic species however, but we hoped for good Swallowtails and were confident of some fine views of Marsh Harriers.

There was a prize (a signed copy of one of Patrick's books) for the first person to spot a Swallowtail, which was claimed by Eirian whose spotting skills had been honed on the previous Greenwings' Swallowtail weekend. She saw the first and second Swallowtails, which flew past us as we made our way on the path into the reserve. Peter followed with the third, but the most ubiquitous butterfly in the first hour at Hickling was the Red Admiral. There must have been a migration event because Red Admirals were arriving quite regularly and travelling in a north-westerly direction. Hickling is only two miles as the butterfly flies from the coast, and these were likely to have come in over the North Sea from the Netherlands and Belgium.

We continued into the reserve, enjoying the calls of Reed Warblers and the similar Sedge Warbler from within the reedbeds. We also had fine views of Marsh Harriers and Norfolk Hawkers, a big brown dragonfly with a spectacular emerald eye.



Swallowtail © Peter Vaughan

In the middle of the reserve, we entered a path cut in a crescent into the reedbed, close to the edge of the Broad. This was sheltered from the wind and had good views of a number of Yellow Flag Iris which were now in flower. Here we lingered. Soon the Swallowtails started arriving. It was cooler than previous days and slightly overcast, which actually made for perfect viewing conditions. In hot sun, the Swallowtails race around restlessly, and rarely pause, but here a number of them stayed to nectar on Yellow Flag Iris for long enough to obtain some excellent photographs. We had a multitude of sightings over the next 45 minutes – probably only five or six distinct individuals, including some large females – but at least 20 different sightings as the Swallowtails kept returning to nectar on the flowers.



Swallowtail egg © Alice Hunter

While we admired them, Alice was scouring their food plant, Milk Parsley, and she soon found two eggs to show to people. These showed up yellowy-orange and quite large and round on the delicate-looking green leaves of the Broadland plant.

We reluctantly tore ourselves away from the Swallowtail hotspot and Alice showed us a Golden-Bloomed Grey Longhorn Beetle. We also saw the first of the fresh new generation of Small Tortoiseshells, which were just starting to emerge on the Broads.

We also identified male Azure and Variable Damselflies – small brilliant electric blue insects – and picked up other brightly coloured beasts including a Cardinal beetle and a Cinnabar Moth, a day-flying moth which lays its eggs on Ragwort.

After the thatched former wildfowling lodge, we turned back towards the visitor centre along one of the raised flood banks. Here we heard a male Bittern booming – a wonderful surprise because we thought they had stopped for the season. Another visitor we bumped into helpfully showed us the point in the reedbed where two Bearded Reedlings had been seen provisioning a nest. We paused and soon heard their distinctive “ping-peep”-like call and then had fine views of them darting back and forth into the reeds.



Variable Damselfly © Eirian Edwards

Even better, while looking at a very distant hobby over the southerly reedbeds, we saw a stately Bittern flying long and low over the reeds. This was a splendid view of an elusive bird. Several of the group then caught a fleeting glimpse of a Crane flying low over the reeds – it is possible to mistake a Grey Heron for a Crane but those who saw it were convinced it was the latter! Hickling is currently home to four Crane nests with five chicks in them, so the Cranes will be busy seeking food for their offspring.

Just before we returned to the woods close to the visitor centre, Alice saw the first Meadow Brown of the year. Then on the wood edge, we enjoyed fantastic views of not only a Whitethroat but a Grasshopper Warbler, which sang and sang, in full view. What a treat!

After an excellent cooked lunch at the Station Smokehouse at Hoveton & Wroxham station, we undertook the 25-minute drive to Strumpshaw Fen. This is the RSPB’s “flagship” Swallowtail reserve on marshes beside the River Yare, only five miles from Norwich.

Swallowtail © Harry Faulk



Before entering this large reserve of vast reedbeds and meadows, we walked down the shady track to “the doctor’s house”. This is actually the former home of Dr Martin George, an ecologist who wrote a definitive account of the Broads and helped persuade the RSPB to purchase and protect Strumpshaw Fen. His widow, Barbara, still lives in their house and maintains a floral garden with plentiful supplies of nectar in June

deliberately for the Swallowtails. Kindly, she hasn’t screened her garden with a fence, and so passing Swallowtail lovers often wait with long lenses raised on the border of her south-facing garden. This was the position we took up, beside patches of Sweet Williams, which the Swallowtail seems particularly fond of. Happily, there was one Swallowtail seemingly intent on nectaring on Sweet Williams all afternoon.

The group took their time, and got fantastic close-up views and some excellent photographs of the nectaring Swallowtail. It dwarfed a Small Tortoiseshell which was also enjoying the garden.

Swallowtail & Small Tortoiseshell © Eirian Edwards





We walked on and up the short river cliff to look at a meadow of agricultural “weeds” and wildflowers which had been deliberately left by the landowner. There was a spectacular field of poppies which looked glorious but very few butterflies. Much of the grassland was rapidly scrubbing up with willow, which was excellent for warblers but not so good for sun-loving butterflies.

We moved onto the reserve by crossing the railway line which takes trains from Norwich to Great Yarmouth. We walked on to a short circular boardwalk which gave us an opportunity to look

more closely at the plants and flowers of the reedbeds, and get amongst good Swallowtail habitat. We had good views of a Red Admiral, with Willow Warblers singing all around.

We then went into the main entrance of the reserve, refuelled with Norfolk ice-cream, and walked on to the meadow area. This looked in excellent shape – full of flowering Ragged Robin and Marsh Thistle, pink flowers which the Swallowtail is particularly partial to. In previous years, on a warm summer’s day like today, we would expect to see Swallowtails flying through and nectaring every ten minutes or so. Today, however, they were bafflingly absent from the meadow.

Strumpshaw in the late afternoon sunshine was lovely, however, and it was nice to experience the usually-busy reserve with so few other visitors. We extended our day and enjoyed some fantastic sightings of Marsh Harriers close and overhead, and also found a lot of Norfolk Hawkers perched – a rare thing – and willing to be photographed with their emerald eyes glinting in the sunshine. Alice pointed out an Orange Tip caterpillar on some Garlic Mustard in the small garden by the entrance as we made our way back to the carpark at the end of the day.



We returned to Wroxham by 6.30pm. It had been a fantastically productive day – not only more than 20 high-quality Swallowtail sightings, including close-up nectaring and basking views, but also the full range of charismatic Broadland wildlife: Marsh Harriers, Bitterns, Bearded Tits and the Norfolk Hawker dragonfly.



Species Lists

Butterflies & Moths

Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon britannicus</i>
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>
Small Tortoiseshell	<i>Aglais urticae</i>
Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>
Orange Tip Caterpillar	<i>Anthocharis cardamines</i>
Cinnabar Moth	<i>Tyria jacobaeae</i>
Silver Y	<i>Autographa gamma</i>
Drinker Moth Caterpillar	<i>Euthrix potatoria</i>

Dragonflies & Damselflies

Common Blue Damselfly	<i>Enallagma cyathigerum</i>
Azure Damselfly	<i>Coenagrion puella</i>
Variable Damselfly	<i>Coenagrion pulchella</i>
Hairy Dragonfly	<i>Brachytron pratense</i>
Four-spotted Chaser	<i>Libellula quadripunctata</i>
Black-tailed Skimmer	<i>Orthetrum cancellatum</i>
Norfolk Hawker	<i>Aeschna isosceles</i>

Other notable invertebrates

7-spot Ladybird	<i>Coccinella septempunctata</i>
Common Malachite Beetle	<i>Malachius bipunctatus</i>
Golden-bloomed Grey Longhorn Beetle	<i>Agapanthia villosoviridescens</i>
Harlequin Ladybird	<i>Harmonia axyridis</i>
Red-headed Cardinal Beetle	<i>Pyrochroa serraticornis</i>
Roesel's Bush Cricket	<i>Roeseliana roeselii</i>
Scorpionfly	<i>Panorpa communis</i>
Twenty-four Spot Ladybird	<i>Subcoccinella vigintiquatuorpunctata</i>

Birds

Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>
Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>
Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>
Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>
Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>
Bearded Tit	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>
Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>
Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>
Grasshopper Warbler	<i>Locustella naevia</i>
Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>
Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>
Willow Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>
Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>

Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>
Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domestica</i>
Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>

Notable Plants

Common Reed	<i>Phragmites australis</i>
Greater Reedmace	<i>Typha latifolia</i>
Saw Sedge	<i>Gahnia aspera</i>
Marsh Fern	<i>Thelypteris palustris</i>
Bloody Cranesbill	<i>Geranium sanguineum</i>
Bogbean (not in flower)	<i>Menyanthes trifoliata</i>
Bog Myrtle	<i>Myrica gale</i>
Climbing Corydalis	<i>Ceratocarpus claviculata</i>
Common Cudweed	<i>Filago vulgaris</i>
Common Poppy	<i>Papaver rhoeas</i>
Cuckoo Flower	<i>Cardamine pratensis</i>
Dog Rose	<i>Rosa canina</i>
Field Pansy	<i>Viola arvensis</i>
Fox-and-Cubs	<i>Pilosella aurantiaca</i>
Great or Giant Water Dock	<i>Rumex hydrolapathum</i>
Greater Water Parsnip	<i>Sium latifolium</i>
Guelder Rose	<i>Viburnum opulus</i>
Hairy Tare	<i>Vicia hirsuta</i>
Hemlock	<i>Conium maculatum</i>
Lesser Spearwort	<i>Ranunculus flammula</i>
Marsh Pea	<i>Lathyrus palustris</i>
Marsh Stitchwort	<i>Stellaria palustris</i>
Marsh Thistle	<i>Cirsium palustre</i>
Milk Parsley	<i>Peucedanum palustre</i>
Mouse-ear Hawkweed	<i>Pilosella officinarum</i>
Ragged Robin	<i>Lychnis flos-cuculi</i>
Southern Marsh Orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza praetermissa</i>
Scarlet Pimpernel	<i>Anagallis arvensis</i>
Yellow Flag Iris	<i>Iris pseudacorus</i>



Swallowtail © Harry Faulk



Avocet & Lapwing © Eirian Edwards

Orange Tip Caterpillar
© Alice Hunter



Swallowtail © Eirian Edwards



Drinker Moth Caterpillar
© Eirian Edwards



Bittern © Harry Faulk



© Eirian Edwards



Black-headed Gull © Eirian Edwards



24-spot Ladybird
© Eirian Edwards



Black-tailed Skimmer
© Eirian Edwards

Swallowtail egg © Harry Faul



Swallowtail © Harry Faul

Norfolk Hawker © Eirian Edwards



Roesel's Bush Cricket nymph © Alice Hunter

Swallowtail © Eirian Edwards



Little Egret © Eirian Edwards



Swallowtail © Eirian Edwards



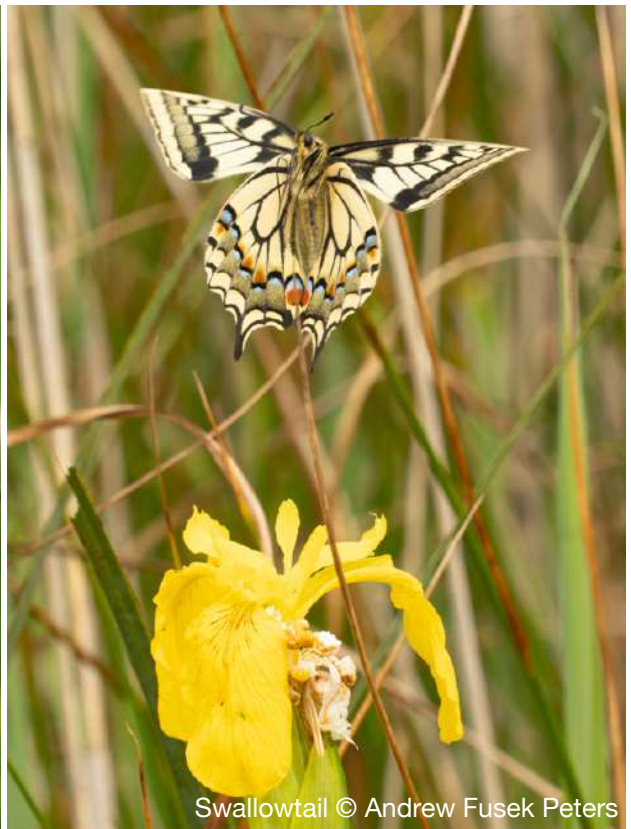
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Common Malachite Beetle © Eirian Edwards



Norfolk Hawker © Harry Faull



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