



Swallowtail Day
7th June 2022
Led by Patrick Barkham & Alice Hunter



Greenwings Wildlife Holidays

Tel: 01473 254658

Web: www.greenwings.co.uk

Email: enquiries@greenwings.co.uk

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The sun was shining as our group of Swallowtail seekers, Claire, Linda, Kevin and Kitty, Bruce and Jackie, Becky, Fiona, Rob, and Andrew gathered at 9am in Wroxham in the heart of the Broads. After three cold and wet days, it was set fair and temperatures were due to warm up considerably so it was with optimism that we set out for Strumpshaw Fen.

We parked at the reserve – some of the group spotting a Speckled Wood in the car park – and paid our entry fees, but rather than walk straight into the reserve, we took Tinker's Lane, a track along its northern boundary, for the legendary “doctor's house”.

This attractive old cottage on land rising up from the marshy bottom of the Yare Valley for many years was the home of Dr Martin George, a renowned ecologist who worked for the Nature Conservancy Council and championed the value of Strumpshaw – leading to its purchase and protection by the RSPB.



Red Admiral © Fiona H.

Today the house is still lived in by his widow, Barbara, who keeps a beautifully-tended garden of flowers designed to provide nectar around the Swallowtail's emergence – and tempt the Swallowtails up from the nearby marshes and reedbeds for some energy-giving sustenance.

We had already spotted two Red Admirals by the time we reached the garden shortly before 10am, and we soon saw a Swallowtail cruising around the vegetable garden, where Barbara had also planted Sweet Williams, which seem particularly tempting to the butterfly. We stood still so as not to spook the butterfly and soon it landed and we were enjoying fine views. It moved between different parts of the garden for some time, and we watched how it almost constantly fluttered its wings to stay aloft while nectaring. Then it appeared to decide it wanted some privacy and headed off up the slope into the back garden and out of sight.

We walked on, turning onto an informal path up the valley side which the farmer had some years ago set aside for wildlife. It had swiftly become a sallow thicket where we enjoyed the song – and some views – of a Whitethroat as well as the ubiquitous Blackcap. Alice also identified a Hairy Dragonfly – an attractive medium-sized dragonfly in blue and green, and not at all like its name.

At the top of the hill was some dry, scrubby grassland, and here we found the first Painted Ladies of the day – faded “grey pilgrims” – and a Common Blue. We also saw several Silver Y moths, a migratory species which would've come into this country on the same winds as the Painted Lady.

After Patrick spotted a soaring Buzzard, his daughter, Esme – an additional spotter for the day and blessed with the sharp eyes of a 10-year-old – correctly identified it as a Marsh Harrier. We continued to see plenty of views of this magnificent bird of prey as it cruised low over the reedbeds in search of Water Voles and vulnerable young birds, also soaring high on the warm thermals. The male showed silver, black and grey on its wings, while the all brown female was significantly larger.

We returned down the slope and onto the valley bottom, crossed the railway line and entered Strumpshaw Fen, the RSPB's flagship reserve in the area, and part of a “living landscape” of precious broadland reedbeds and valley bottom either side of the River Yare, one of the five main rivers of the Norfolk and Suffolk Broads.

The day was warming up and, as is typical after three cold days, the invertebrate life was making up for lost time. The most notable butterfly was the Small Tortoiseshell: there had been a large emergence the previous week and we were now seeing dozens, in particular profusion while nectaring on the flowers of dogwood trees lining the track. While the Tortoiseshells were the new summer generation, female Brimstones that had survived a winter in hibernation were still a common sight as were last year's slightly worn Peacock butterflies.

Another sight which became a feature of the day were the large, hairy brown-and-beige Drinker Moth caterpillars which were frequently sitting up high on reed stalks – tempting food for the cuckoos which called from a distance at quite regular intervals. As we walked through the marsh, we heard plenty of song from Reed and Sedge Warblers, Cetti's and also the lovely somnolent descending song of the Willow Warbler.



Drinker Moth Caterpillar © Alice Hunter

We also enjoyed good views of the Norfolk Hawker, the big brown dragonfly with a bright green eye that is a national rarity but relatively common on the Broads, several pristine Scarce Chasers and a Black-Tailed Skimmer.



Common Lizard © Fiona H.

As we circled the reserve in an anti-clockwise direction, we periodically encountered Swallowtail flypasts, with these big, mobile butterflies cruising across the reedbeds in search of mates or egg-laying opportunities. We had our first views of the Swallowtail's foodplant, Milk Parsley, on a short boardwalk into the reedbed where Common Lizards basked on the wooden slats as we approached. Swallowtail eggs are quite large by the standards of butterflies, and visible on the plant. One small plant had two eggs laid on top of each other.

We followed the River Yare downstream on the southern boundary of the reserve, looking back north across the marshes and reedbeds to see two chicks being carried on the back of a Great Crested Grebe. Alice and Rob also heard the faint booming of a Bittern, who then decided not to call again once the rest of the group was all ears. Andrew spotted a Great White Egret as it got up from the reedbeds.

We circled around and crossed the meadow before stopping in the wood-edge to have our picnic lunch. The meadow was full of Ragged Robin and some Yellow Flag Iris and as the group loitered, a Swallowtail dutifully appeared, slowly making its way across the meadow, pausing at most Ragged Robin as it passed. Here we also spotted our first and only Large Skipper of the day – quite an early emergence for the species in this part of the world.

As we were leaving Strumpshaw shortly before 2pm, we found a Swallowtail immediately outside the small visitor centre, hungrily nectaring on the Sweet Wild Rocket grown in a small patch (very deliberately) by the RSPB. We had more fabulous views here and plenty of photo opportunities from all angles. By the time we left Strumpshaw shortly before 2pm,



Swallowtail © Rob C.

we had seen six individual Swallowtails over the morning and some excellent views.

We drove north-eastwards, across the Bure and Ant valleys and into the most north-easterly of the Broads' river systems, the Thurne, to visit the largest of the Norfolk Broads – Hickling. This national nature reserve was protected by Norfolk Wildlife Trust, which had recently doubled the size of its landholding here. Just three miles from the low-lying north-east Norfolk coast, this is the wildest and most open of the broadland nature reserves and a vast expanse of reedbed and waterways, and a stronghold for Cranes and Bitterns. Six booming male Bitterns had been counted here this year, with each male potentially servicing up to five nests.

The sun still shone and although Hickling is barely 20 miles from Strumpshaw as the Crane flies, the temperature here was noticeably cooler, with a cool sea breeze at work. While we saw more than 50 Small Tortoiseshells at Strumpshaw, the dominant butterfly here was the Red Admiral and we soon clocked up more than a dozen of both species. The Red Admirals were almost certainly migrants swept onto the east coast from continental Europe.

At Hickling we heard bursts of Cetti's Warbler song and alongside more Drinker moth caterpillars found lots of "woolly bears", the delightfully hairy caterpillars of the Garden Tiger moth. Alice pointed out the purple flowers of Bittersweet, a member of the Nightshade family, and we then heard a mysterious moaning-groaning from the reeds that was never repeated. We decided it could be a Bittern clearing its throat but it will remain an unsolved mystery from the day!



© Alice Hunter

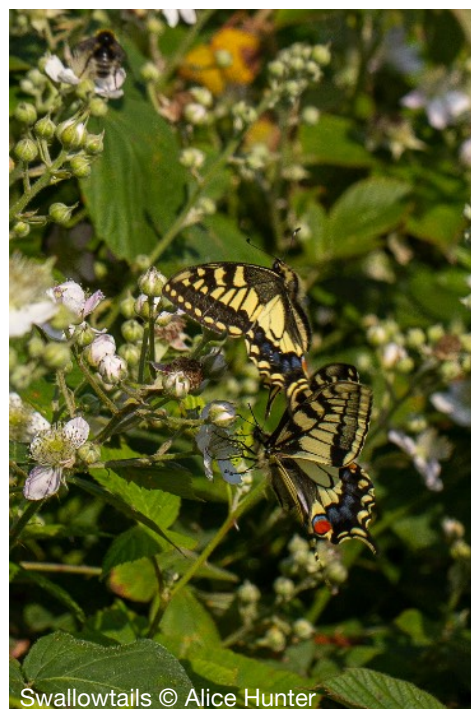
We reached Swallowtail heaven on the far side of the reserve in reedbeds close to Hickling Broad where there was a short oval path into the reedbeds and plenty of Yellow Flag Iris. Here we enjoyed dozens of views of at least five different individual Swallowtails as they roared in to nectar on the flag iris, occasionally jostled with each other – often male/female jousts which looked like mate-avoidance tactics at work – and also sometimes paused to perch high on the tops of last year's reeds. Swallowtails usually give people a wide berth but one did something we've never seen before: it landed on Claire for a minute, possibly mistaking the maroon colour of her top for a Marsh Thistle. It must be a blessing!

It is lovely seeing Swallowtails close-up on garden flowers but to experience them like this, in their "natural" habitat (actually of course, a completely human-shaped "wild" space), is particularly special. We were able to appreciate the way they glide and then race over the tops of the reedbeds, completely at one with their surroundings.

As we walked on the raised bank beside the largest area of reedbed – which stretches almost unbroken up to Horsey wind-pump just visible on the horizon – we heard a Bittern booming twice. Most of the group also enjoyed distant views of a couple of busy Bearded Reedlings (or Bearded Tits) in the reedbeds. Andrew caught sight of a Spoonbill gliding past.

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On the final stretch through the sheltered oak woods and back to the Norfolk Wildlife Trust visitor centre, we found a sunny, sheltered patch of brambles. Here we enjoyed our best views of the day of four more Swallowtails, with some able to photograph two individuals flying together as well as all kinds of close-up shots. We also experienced a close



Swallowtails © Alice Hunter

encounter with some of the Konik ponies which are used by the Trust to graze the marshes – these handsome wild Polish horses are particularly well-adapted to boggy, wet terrain as well as the fierce winter weather on these exposed marshes.

We had seen at least 15 individual Swallowtails at Hickling but scores of different views, and a total of 21 for the day. Encounters with Swallowtails are often fleeting but our prolonged encounters with them in all kinds of different habitats, watching lots of interesting behaviour, was really as good as it gets.

With the weather closing in again the next day, we all realised how lucky we had been today, and made the most of our good fortune! We had also enjoyed so many more fascinating and charismatic Broadland species: Marsh Harriers, Norfolk Hawkers, Cuckoos, Bearded Reedlings and the songs of the warblers. Best of all, we had spent a day imbibing the magic of the Broads, memorably described by naturalist Ted Ellis as “a breathing space for the cure of souls”.

Species Lists

Butterflies & Moths

Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon britannicus</i>
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>
Peacock	<i>Inachis io</i>
Small Tortoiseshell	<i>Aglais urticae</i>
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>
Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>
Green Veined White	<i>Pieris napi</i>
Orange Tip Caterpillar	<i>Anthocharis cardamines</i>
Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>
Small Magpie Moth	<i>Anania hortulata</i>
Drinker Moth Caterpillar	<i>Euthrix potatoria</i>
Garden Tiger Caterpillar	<i>Arctia caja</i>
Silver Y	<i>Autographa gamma</i>

Dragonflies & Damselflies

Banded Demoiselle	<i>Calopteryx splendens</i>
Azure Damselfly	<i>Coenagrion puella</i>
Blue-tailed Damselfly	<i>Ischnura elegans</i>
Large Red Damselfly	<i>Pyrrhosoma nymphula</i>
Hairy Dragonfly	<i>Brachytron pratense</i>
Four-spotted Chaser	<i>Libellula quadripunctata</i>
Scarce Chaser	<i>Libellula fulva</i>
Black-tailed Skimmer	<i>Orthetrum cancellatum</i>
Norfolk Hawker	<i>Aeschna isosceles</i>

Other notable invertebrates

7-spot Ladybird	<i>Coccinella septempunctata</i>
Click Beetle	<i>Athous haemorrhoidalis</i>
Harlequin Ladybird	<i>Harmonia axyridis</i>
Hornet	<i>Vespa crabro</i>
Nursery Web Spider	<i>Pisaura mirabilis</i>
Oak Bush Cricket	<i>Meconema thalassinum</i>
Red-headed Cardinal Beetle	<i>Pyrochroa serraticornis</i>
Scorpionfly	<i>Panorpa communis</i>
Tree Bumblebee	<i>Bombus hypnorum</i>

Birds (🎵 = heard only)

Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>
Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristata</i>
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
🎵 Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>
Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>
Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>
Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</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>
🎵 Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>
Bearded Reedling/Tit	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>
Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>
🎵 Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</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>
Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>
Carion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>
Magpie	<i>Pica pica</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>
Purple Moor Grass	<i>Molinia caerulea</i>
Saw Sedge	<i>Gahnia aspera</i>
Soft Rush	<i>Juncus effusus</i>
Marsh Fern	<i>Thelypteris palustris</i>
Bittersweet	<i>Solanum dulcamara</i>
Bloody Cranesbill	<i>Geranium sanguineum</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>
Common Meadow Rue	<i>Thalictrum flavum</i>
Dog Rose	<i>Rosa canina</i>
Dogwood	<i>Cornus sanguinea</i>
Field Pansy	<i>Viola arvensis</i>
Great or Giant Water Dock	<i>Rumex hydrolapathum</i>
Guelder Rose	<i>Viburnum opulus</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>
Marsh Valerian	<i>Valeriana dioica</i>
Milk Parsley	<i>Peucedanum palustre</i>
Mignonette	<i>Reseda lutea</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>

Photo Gallery

Azure Damselflies © Rob C.



Red-headed Cardinal Beetle
© Fiona H.



Norfolk Hawker © Fiona H.



Scarce Chaser © Fiona H.



Swallowtail © Rob C.



Red Admiral
© Alice Hunter



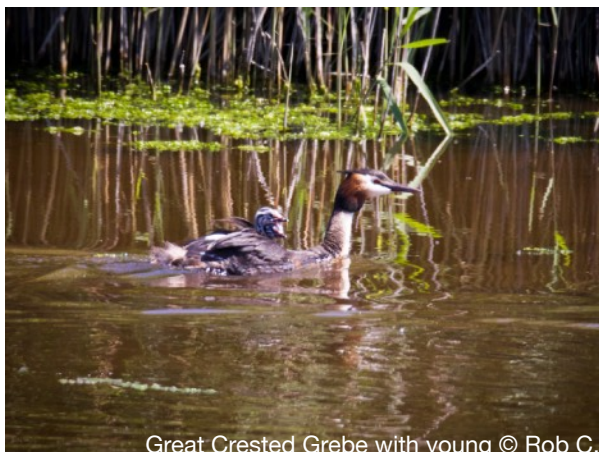
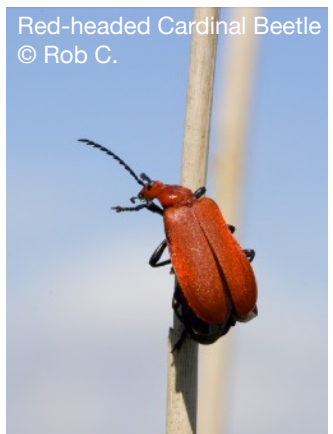
Thick-legged Flower Beetle
© Fiona H.



Sedge Warbler © Rob C.



Red-headed Cardinal Beetle
© Rob C.



Great Crested Grebe with young © Rob C.



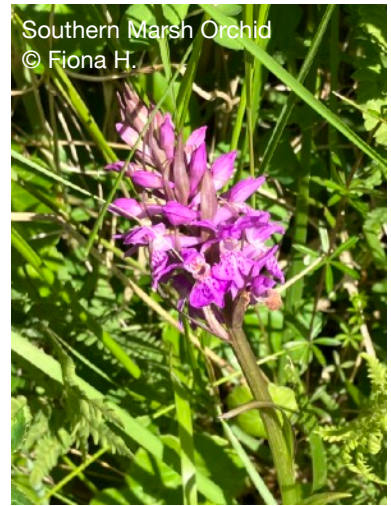
© Alice Hunter



Bloody Cranesbill © Fiona H.



Marsh Thistle © Fiona H.



Southern Marsh Orchid
© Fiona H.



Swallowtail © Rob C.



Scarce Chaser © Rob C.



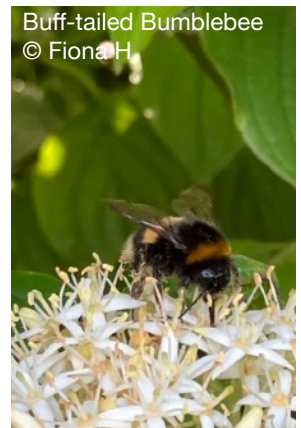
Marsh Stitchwort © Fiona H.



Tree Bumblebee © Fiona H.



Brimstone © Fiona H.



Buff-tailed Bumblebee
© Fiona H.



Common Blue © Rob C.



Four-spotted Chaser © Rob C.