



## Swallowtail Day Trip

7th June 2023

Led by Patrick Barkham & Nick Acheson



**Greenwings Wildlife Holidays**

Tel: 01473 254658

Web: [www.greenwings.co.uk](http://www.greenwings.co.uk)

Email: [enquiries@greenwings.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@greenwings.co.uk)

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### Wednesday 7th June 2023

#### Led by Patrick Barkham and Nick Acheson

Our intrepid band of Swallowtail seekers assembled in the car park at Roy's of Wroxham in the heart of the Broads at 9am. We were blessed with the addition of Nick Acheson, a superb all-round naturalist and acclaimed nature writer. Unfortunately we were challenged by the weather: almost six weeks of relentlessly cool north-easterly winds had created an unusually late season with few Swallowtails about. The forecast for the day was thick grey cloud almost all day and temperatures of 13°C – far too cool for a Swallowtail. There was the promise of some breaks in the cloud in late afternoon and this gave us some grounds for, if not optimism then, at least some hope!

We drove 20 minutes to Hickling National Nature Reserve, the largest of the Norfolk Broads and the flagship reserve for the Norfolk Wildlife Trust. We headed out from the visitor centre and garden in a clockwise direction. Right beside the gate, thanks to the keen eyes of a Greenwings guide on a tour the previous weekend, we enjoyed close-up views of the spectacularly camouflaged Lilac Beauty moth caterpillar on Honeysuckle.

In the woods we enjoyed Goldfinch, Long-Tailed Tit and the songflight of the Sedge Warbler. Plants included the pretty Climbing Corydalis and some nice views of an Early Bumblebee.



Lilac Beauty caterpillar © Greenwings

Leaving the shelter of the wood, we climbed onto the floodbank which gave us good views east and west across the vast reedbeds of this reserve. We spotted two Great Egrets to the west and a Common Tern flew over alongside a Gadwall, which duck-and-geese expert Nick quickly spotted. Further along the bank we paused to scan the line of dead trees in the distance where there were three Spoonbills. This species has only recently established itself as a breeding bird in Britain and there are around 43 nests at its stronghold of Holkham in North Norfolk, and now it is spreading into the region beyond. It is expected to breed at Hickling soon.

At the end of the bank, we paused to chat to a couple of reed-cutters who were collecting the reed cut from the beds to our east – a crucial part of their management to ensure they stay open and suitable for breeding Bittern, Swallowtail and Marsh Harrier. The open reedbeds and fen of the Broads wants to rapidly become woodland, and has in many places, rendering it unsuitable for these rare species. The reed-cutters were selling the reed to thatchers working on a church in the Waveney Valley.

At this point, suddenly, we heard the distant but distinct sound like someone blowing over the top of an empty milk bottle – a booming male Bittern. This was a real treat, because we hadn't heard this booming on earlier Swallowtail trips this year, and usually the booming has ceased by this time of year. Each male Bittern can hold and provide for up to five females and their nests. This once extremely rare species now has more than 150 booming males nationwide, thanks to careful reedbed management.



Drinker moth caterpillar © Greenwings

Beside the old hunting lodge, still leased to the Cadbury family (who enabled NWT to purchase Hickling back in the 1940s), we picked up the first damselfly of the day, a Blue-Tailed Damselfly. We turned north-west along another flood bank running through the centre of the reserve and here found a bit more shelter among the willows. Caroline found the first Drinker Moth caterpillar of the day – a handsome hairy insect which munches the reed and provides food for the Cuckoos which love this spot. James spotted the flash of a Hobby hunting over the reserve and Heather was the

first of the group to pick up a far-distant group of six Cranes, flying over towards Horsey windpump. "Might as well be in Poland" joked Nick, but of course it was brilliant to see these birds, and three more flew over a little closer. Nick explained their distinctive very horizontal flight pattern, unlike a Grey Heron which tucks in its neck and flies with bent wings.

Along this stretch we enjoyed fantastic views of a male Marsh Harrier hunting across the marshes. The species has recovered from near extinction in Britain in the 1970s, when only a couple of pairs remained, at one point it was rarer than the Golden Eagle but these roles have now reversed although only very recently. On the Broads, however, it is virtually the most common raptor.

Close to a small jetty in the reeds was the best spot on Hickling for Swallowtails – a patch of fen with sedge and plentiful Yellow Flag Iris which was absolutely at its peak, a lovely buffet of nectar for the butterflies, which like to fuel up here, sheltered from the north and easterly winds. We lingered here for a while and it was warm enough to spot a male Hairy Dragonfly. Then Nick saw the first butterfly of the day – a Speckled Wood. This was a cause for a little celebration!

We then saw our first of another iconic Broadland species – the impressive Norfolk Hawker Dragonfly, a hulking bronze-brown beast with a fine apple green eye, and we also took a close look at the Swallowtail caterpillar's foodplant, the delicate-looking Milk Parsley, which grows at the edges of fen and reedbed. Sadly, it was too cool and grey for the Swallowtails, and the season was running too late for there to be any eggs or caterpillars on the Milk Parsley.

Moving on, Heather spotted a Great Crested Grebe out on Hickling Broad, where also swam about a hundred Mute Swans. Nick pointed out Marsh Sow Thistle, a plant which is rarer than the Swallowtail.

One of Nick's many talents is describing birdsong in an interesting and memorable way, and when a Moorhen parped he said it sounded "like someone has trodden on them". Similarly irritable is the call of the Tufted Duck, which flew overhead.



Speckled Wood © Greenwings



Emperor moth caterpillars © Greenwings

On the walk back to the visitor centre, we found some tiny Peacock butterfly caterpillars (again showing how late the summer was running) and heard a Grasshopper Warbler, which is a special and unique-sounding bird. There were Bearded Tits popping up everywhere and we also had close-up views of "woolly bears", the loveable caterpillars of the Garden Tiger moth, which pleased caterpillar fan Becky. There were also Thick-thighed Flower Beetles and clusters of young caterpillars of the spectacular Emperor Moth. These were gregarious and not dissimilar to Peacock caterpillars, although they would later develop into

large green caterpillars that looked very different.

Before a sandwich lunch and strawberries in the garden at Hickling we admired the Great Pied Hoverfly, a big and distinctive black hoverfly.

After lunch, we took the 30 minute drive from the Thurne Valley south-west to Strumpshaw, the RSPB reserve which forms part of a network of protected places on the Yare Valley just east of Norwich. This is a reserve which is less wild and open than Hickling but superbly managed by the RSPB for a host of species.

We walked clockwise again around the reserve so we could time our arrival at "the doctor's garden" for late afternoon, when the sun might be shining. Nick spotted a female Scarce Chaser flying around



Female Scarce Chaser © Greenwings

a sheltered patch of bramble and then we ducked into the Fen Hide for a real treat: close views of two Cranes ducking and walking through the young reeds. Hidden from view was their chick – the first to be born at Strumpshaw for hundreds of years. This was a real highlight and something we hadn't seen on previous Swallowtail trips.

Nick continued to point out rare and interesting marshland plants, including Greater Water Parsnip, lethally toxic and very rare, the very poisonous Hemlock Water Dropwort, as well as the less rare and more innocuous Frogbit, like a miniature water lily. He also clocked up six species of Willow for us: Almond, Osier, Goat, Grey, Crack and White Willow. Gillian spotted a Scorpion Fly and a Sulphur Beetle. We also learned the difference between the White Lipped and Brown Lipped Banded Snails.

Our oldest group member, 89-year-old John, had done superbly to walk so far and for so long and he rejoined us for the final section so he could properly inspect dozens of Milk Parsley plants in the sheltered north-west corner of the reserve, close to the railway line. A plantsman, John was interested in whether it was possible to cultivate the plant and reintroduce it to other wetlands and expand the Swallowtail's population that way. Hopefully this is something that conservation groups and others will undertake in the coming years.

We then lingered beside the “doctor's garden” just outside the reserve on Tinker's Lane, in the hope of seeing a late-afternoon Swallowtail. This was actually the home of a doctor of ecology, Dr Martin George, who studied Broadland ecology, wrote the definitive book on the subject, and persuaded the RSPB to protect Strumpshaw. His widow, Barbara, still lives in the house, and generously plants Sweet William and Sweet Rocket in her open garden to supply nectar to the Swallowtails. She is very tolerant of the long lenses trained on her borders as well!

Sadly the flashes of sunshine were all too brief and the temperatures remained below 15°C and so no Swallowtails materialised. In fact, none had been seen at Strumpshaw since Saturday.

So we missed out on our number one target but I think we all had a really enjoyable day. We enjoyed hearing and seeing all the other rare and iconic Broadland species – Cranes, Bitterns, Bearded Tits, Norfolk Hawkers – as well as the lovely sounds of all the warblers, and drank deep the magic of the Norfolk Broads, “a breathing space for the cure of souls” as local naturalist Ted Ellis put it.

## Species Checklists

Speckled Wood  
Peacock caterpillar

*Pararge aegeria* (1 butterfly all day in June!)  
*Aglais io*

Lilac Beauty moth caterpillar  
Garden Tiger moth caterpillar  
Drinker moth caterpillar  
Emperor moth caterpillar

*Apeira syringaria*  
*Arctia caja*  
*Euthrix potatoria*  
*Saturnia pavonia*

Norfolk Hawker  
Hairy Dragonfly  
Azure Damselfly  
Blue-tailed Damselfly  
Scarce Chaser

*Aeshna isosceles*  
*Brachytron pratense*  
*Coenagrion puella*  
*Ischnura elegans*  
*Libellula fulva*

Common Carder Bee  
Early Bumblebee  
Sulphur Beetle  
Thick-thighed Flower Beetle  
Scorpionfly  
Great Pied Hoverfly

*Bombus pascuorum*  
*Bombus pratorum*  
*Ctenopus sulphureus*  
*Oedemera nobilis*  
*Panorpa sp.*  
*Vollucella pellucens*

## Notable plants

Bittersweet  
Climbing Corydalis  
Frogbit  
Greater Meadow Rue  
Greater Water Parsnip

*Solanum dulcamara*  
*Certocarpus claviculata*  
*Hydrocharis morsus-ranae*  
*Thalictrum aquilegifolium*  
*Sium latifolium*

Hemlock Water Dropwort  
Marsh Sow Thistle  
Milk Parsley  
Water Violet  
Yellow Flag Iris

*Oenanthe crocata*  
*Solanum palustre*  
*Peucedanum palustre*  
*Hottonia palustris*  
*Iris pseudacorus*



## Birds

Bearded Tit	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>
Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>
Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>
Grasshopper Warbler	<i>Locustella naevia</i>	Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristata</i>	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>
Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fulva</i>
Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>	Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia curruca</i>