

**Swallowtails & More in The Norfolk Broads**

**10th June 2025**

**Led by Patrick Barkham & Kat Dahl**



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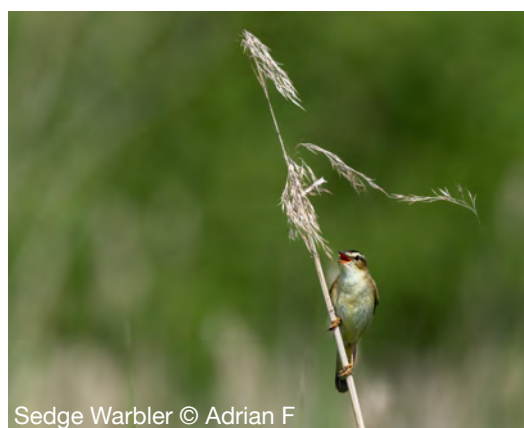
Our intrepid band of Swallowtail seekers assembled at the Roy's of Wroxham car park at 9am on Tuesday morning after various journeys from the relatively local Cambridge and Colchester to Shropshire, Bristol, Kent and beyond. It was a grey and breezy start to the day but temperatures were climbing and the sun was forecast to come out, so we were optimistic about the day ahead.

We drove south to RSPB Strumpshaw Fen on the River Yare, a renowned reserve east of Norwich where the Swallowtail had emerged extremely early this year – on April 30<sup>th</sup>. We checked in at the visitor centre and also checked the little garden where Swallowtails were known to swoop in, and Kat found the first Lepidoptera of the day: a Comma caterpillar on Wych Elm. The caterpillar was a pretty two-tone beast, trying to pretend it was a bird dropping.

We walked out of the reserve and along Tinker's Lane to check 'the Doctor's Garden'. This pretty cottage set up on a south-facing slope overlooking the Yare floodplain is actually outside the famous RSPB nature reserve and is a private home. It once belonged to Dr Martin George, an influential ecologist who persuaded the RSPB to purchase and protect Strumpshaw Fen, and was still lived in by his widow, Barbara. She generously keeps her garden unfenced and deliberately plants lots of Sweet Williams and Sweet Rocket which provide a banquet of nectar for the Swallowtails that emerge in June. Mid-morning is a good time to walk along the public footpath beside her garden because the Swallowtails fuel up on nectar before heading out over the Fen in search of mates.

Unfortunately, the wind direction meant that the alluring banquet of flowers was buffeted by a strong, cool wind. There was no sign of any sunshine either and no Swallowtails dropped in on us. We did admire a Red Kite in the sky above – a bird that isn't common in these parts – and heard a Blackcap singing from the Sallow thickets beyond the cottage. Here we found a hoverfly pretending to be a bee, *Volucella bombylans*, a clever mimic who couldn't quite fly like a bee does.

Then we crossed the railway line into the reserve proper where, on the path, we found some nice Southern Marsh Orchids and some Common Spotted Orchids and some hybrids of both. The early stages of our walk were slightly marred by the revving of two RSPB strimmers which were – we thought slightly unnecessarily – cutting the path wider than it needed to be. Anyway, we then enjoyed really lovely views of a Sedge Warbler, which not only treated us to its hectic song but kept flying up prettily out of the reedbed.



Sedge Warbler © Adrian F

Onto a little section of boardwalk, we discovered our first examples of the Milk Parsley – the British Swallowtail's only wild foodplant. The plants were still rather small but we found several lemon-yellow and orange Swallowtail eggs. Then, best of all, one very small Swallowtail caterpillar which resembles a slightly spiky bird dropping. This was a great find – we don't usually see caterpillars on this tour but the Swallowtails emerged so early at Strumpshaw this year they had enough time to begin marching through the next generation's life cycle. There were some nice fen plants on this section of the reserve including Purple Meadow Rue, Bog Myrtle (with its lemon-scented leaves) and Marsh Pea.

On the bridge over the water, Tony spotted our first Large Red Damselfly of the day, perched on a

dead twig.

And then, the first Swallowtail of the day! Flying in at head height along the path towards us, Daphne was the first to spot it. The sun was now breaking through the cloud more regularly, although the wind was strong, so the omens were good for more.



Small Tortoiseshell © Alice M

We now began to spot Small Tortoiseshells, which increased in number as we circled Strumpshaw in an anti-clockwise direction. Most were close to the nettle banks on the western edge of the reserve. Closer inspection of the numerous large Dogwood shrubs revealed more tortoiseshells, nectaring on the flowers even though they were nearly over. During the next 90 minutes of slow nature-strolling, we clocked up 58 Strumpshaw Small Tortoiseshells. It was lovely to see so many of this once-ubiquitous garden butterfly which has seen its populations plummet this century (the causes still a mystery).

As the day warmed up and the sun came out more consistently, the reed and sedge beds either side of the footpath began humming with insects. We enjoyed fine views of female and male Scarce Chaser dragonflies – the females a yellowy-orange and the males a powder blue with a black-tipped tail. Kat enjoyed pointing out the “notches on the bed post” visible on the males – scuff marks where the female had gripped him during mating.

Further on, Kat found her favourite beetle, with a name as long as its horns, *Agapanthia villosoviridescens*, a handsome long-horned beetle with black-and-white striped antennae.

Swifts and Swallows brightened the sky and Anna spotted the first Brimstone of the day and the first of many Banded Demoiselles, a pretty and unusual damselfly. We enjoyed fleeting views of Common Tern, Hornets, Cormorants and a good number of Red Admirals (eight) on our circuit. As the path followed the banks of the big River Yare, Kat heard our first – distant – Cuckoo of the day.



Golden-bloomed Grey Longhorn © Adrian F

Our butterfly count steadily rose as Tony spotted a Holly Blue – a really nice sighting of a butterfly which is not numerous on this reserve at this time of year.

We spent a few moments admiring the vistas across the reedbed from the tower hide, where we saw Marsh Harriers hunting across the fen in characteristic fashion. This bird of prey is commonplace in the Broads but nationally still as rare as a Golden Eagle.

On the raised path beside the meadow we saw our first Meadow Browns, two freshly-emerged specimens on the bramble flowers, sparring with Small Tortoiseshells. Along this stretch we also enjoyed watching two female Brimstones laying eggs on a Buckthorn. We also got our first good views of the magnificent Norfolk Hawker, with its Granny Smith apple-green eyes. This fine insect has a habit of cruising up and down footpaths at eye-level as it scours the airspace for prey.

We also clocked up a Green-veined White (we're calling it!) and a Large Skipper – an early emergence in these parts and a welcome addition to our list. Along with several Speckled Woods, this put us into double figures for butterflies, which doesn't sound spectacular but is a good showing in this part of the world during what butterfly lovers called “the June gap” – a relatively butterfly-free period when spring butterflies such as Orange Tips have vanished and midsummer butterflies such as Gatekeepers have yet to emerge. Perhaps the unexpected highlight of this part of the day was spotting a Kingfisher which whizzed past us as we were butterflying.



Swallowtail © Anna G

On the route back through the woods, we stopped to admire the single Twayblade Orchid flowering behind protective netting amongst the trees. Back at the visitor centre, we found a very well-travelled Painted Lady – our friend the naturalist Matthew Oates calls them “Grey Pilgrims” – at the purple stocks and while we were admiring it, a Swallowtail dropped in for company. We got more good views and pictures, even if the setting was a little “tame”.

We drove north-east from Strumpshaw, out of the Yare Valley and across the Bure and Ant Valleys and into the most north-easterly of the Broadland river valleys – the valley of the River Thurne. We headed to Hickling Broad National Nature Reserve, the jewel in the crown for the Norfolk Wildlife Trust. This big reserve is part of a living landscape of protected habitat – a vast swath of reedbed and grazing marsh from Hickling across to the north-east Norfolk coast. It is traditionally the coolest and windiest of all the Broads but it is also the largest and the wildest.

We had a picnic lunch in the gardens beside the visitor centre and while some of us were enjoying Ronaldo's ice-cream with our local strawberries, a Swallowtail whizzed through the garden area and away again.

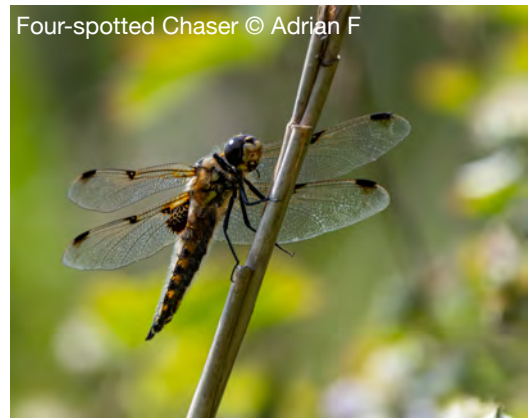
As we set out on our tour of Hickling, we heard a very strange barking noise which we concluded must be a Chinese Water Deer. We turned left out of the garden into the woods and the barking grew louder – it was right in front of us in a patch of reedbed but we couldn't see the source of the noise and it stopped as we walked past. In the woods, Daphne spotted a Great Spotted Woodpecker on the trunk of an oak.

With a warm June sun now beating down, we headed to “Swallowtail alley” – a sheltered section of the path as it leaves the woods which is surrounded on both sides by banks of brambles. This year, it has been the best place for Swallowtails at Hickling and so it proved today, with Bridget soon spotting a Swallowtail nectaring on a bramble bush a little way beyond the path into the fen. A Whitethroat called as we saw several Swallowtails dashing around and stopping, briefly, to visit different bramble flowers. Each visit was only a couple of seconds in duration, before the Swallowtail flapped onto another flower. On the bramble leaves, we also saw the fairly ordinary-looking early instar caterpillars of the spectacular Emperor Moth.

The dominant sound was the buzzing of hundreds of bees at the bramble and we watched two Swallowtails chasing each other, a Swallowtail chasing a bee and a Swallowtail briefly alighting on Kat's backpack. Small Tortoiseshells were also getting involved and one memorable chase-scene involved a Swallowtail chasing a Brimstone chasing a Small Tortoiseshell. The feisty little Tortoiseshells were more often the aggressor in these chases.

We enjoyed some fantastic views of one particularly obliging insect in extremely good condition and also found the first Four-Spotted Chasers of the day, an attractive dragonfly which likes to perch high on reed stems.

Four-spotted Chaser © Adrian F



Reluctantly tearing ourselves away from this Swallowtail heaven, we scanned over Brendan's Marsh, a lively scrape of shallow water always well-filled with ducks and egrets. Here we saw more Herons, Redshank, some nice Lapwing and a Ruff.

Heading along the flood bank, with fine views across the reedbeds on either side, the only surprise here was that we didn't spot any Bearded Reedlings. Beside Whiteslea Lodge – the

ancestral hunting lodge of the Cadbury family (who donated Hickling to NWT), we had superb views of a Norfolk Hawker on patrol. Some of us heard a Bittern call three times at this point and more of us heard the male Bittern's distinctive blowing-across-the-top-of-a-beer-bottle when it repeated the call some moments later.



Swallowtail © Alice M

Alice found a Drinker Moth caterpillar on the path and Daphne spotted a huge Drinker Moth caterpillar on the stem of a reed. We then enjoyed four Norfolk Hawkers whizzing around together on the north side of the flood bank. A Shelduck flew overhead and then Alice was the first to spot a large brown bird emerging out of the reedbeds to the north of the path – a Bittern, which proceeded to fly in its stately fashion westwards out towards the main broad. Lots of shouting ensured that Jill and Daphne got view of a bird they had been keen to make their acquaintance with.

We passed the landing stage for NWT's electric boat and then along the path back north towards the visitor centre we were intercepted by a procession of Swallowtails eager to feed at the brambles beside the path. And have their photos taken by our group.

Two passing visitors alerted us to an extraordinary larvae waddling menacingly across the path. Black and sinister, with a vicious, beetle-like jaws, we guessed this was the larvae of a large diving beetle. Adrian's ID app identified it as a Great Silver Water Beetle. Your guides were slightly sceptical but Adrian's app was correct! It was indeed this fine invertebrate.

Further along the path, we nearly stepped on another Swallowtail, which was laid out on a bare patch of path, in the shade. It appeared to be very freshly emerged and unable to fly. We took lots of photos but then effected a Swallowtail Rescue, picking it up and carefully moving it into the sunshine. Patrick had never before seen such a fresh specimen and it must have been barely an hour old. It perked up sitting in the sunshine, permitted us to take more fantastic close-up photographs, and then took what was probably its first flight to a bramble flower and imbibed deeply of the amber nectar.



© Helen W

It had been a golden afternoon and Bridget summed it up rather well: "The only sounds here were not strimmers but bees or the wind in the reeds. Hickling beats the RSPB [Strumpshaw] hands down. The other benefit of this place – they have sunshine here."

We had a lovely day out. Thanks to everyone in the group – Alice, Daphne, Jill, Helen, Adrian, Tony and Toni, Anna, Bridget, Mike and Leigh. It was a lovely, friendly, outgoing group and a nice mix of butterfly lovers and newcomers to nature who made everyone feel welcome and filled the day with good conversation and fabulous natural experiences. It was a pleasure to spend a day with you all. Thank you.

#### TOTAL BUTTERFLIES:

11 species, 125 individual butterflies

Swallowtails: 16 butterflies.

Strumpshaw: 2 adults plus 3 eggs and 1 caterpillar

Hickling: 14 individuals/distinct sightings, in five locations across the site.

Small Tortoiseshell: A record 58 seen at Strumpshaw. Approximately 20 at Hickling

Red Admiral: 8 at Strumpshaw; another 4 at Hickling  
 Brimstone: 5 at Strumpshaw; 3 at Hickling  
 Speckled Wood: 5 at both sites combined  
 Meadow Brown: 2 at Strumpshaw  
 Green-Veined White: Strumpshaw  
 Holly Blue: Strumpshaw  
 Large Skipper: Strumpshaw  
 Painted Lady: Strumpshaw  
 Comma (larvae)

## Species Lists

### Butterflies & moths

Swallowtail imago, eggs & larva	<i>Papilio machaon britannicus</i>
Large Skipper	<i>Ochlodes sylvanus</i>
Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>
Holly Blue	<i>Celastrina argiolus</i>
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>
Small Tortoiseshell	<i>Aglais urticae</i>
Comma larva	<i>Polygonia c-album</i>
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>
Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>
Common White Wave	<i>Cabera pusaria</i>
Drinker larvae	<i>Euthrix potatoria</i>
Emperor Moth larvae	<i>Saturnia pavonia</i>
Straw Dot	<i>Rivula sericealis</i>
Willow Ermine larvae	<i>Yponomeuta rorrella</i>

### Dragonflies & Damselflies

Norfolk Hawker	<i>Aeshna isosceles</i>
Hairy Dragonfly	<i>Brachytron pratense</i>
Banded Demoiselle	<i>Calopteryx splendens</i>
Azure Damselfly	<i>Coenagrion puella</i>
Variable Damselfly	<i>Coenagrion pulchellum</i>
Blue-tailed Damselfly	<i>Ischnura elegans</i>
Scarce Chaser	<i>Libellula fulva</i>
Four-spotted Chaser	<i>Libellula quadrimaculata</i>
Large Red Damselfly	<i>Pyrrhosoma nymphula</i>

### Other notable insects

Golden-bloomed Grey Longhorn Beetle	<i>Agapanthia villosoviridescens</i>
Dock Bug	<i>Coreus marginatus</i>
Tiger Hoverfly	<i>Helophilus pendulus</i>
Great Silver Water Beetle larva	<i>Hydrophilus piceus</i>
Red-headed Cardinal Beetle	<i>Pyrochroa serraticornis</i>

European Hornet  
Bumblebee Hoverfly  
Great Pied Hoverfly  
Yellow-tailed Hoverfly

*Vespa crabro*  
*Volucella bombylans*  
*Volucella pellucens*  
*Xylota sylvarum*

## **Birds**

Mute Swan & cygnets  
Canada Goose  
Greylag Goose & goslings  
Shelduck  
Mallard & ducklings  
Cormorant  
Bittern  
Grey Heron  
Little Egret  
Red Kite  
Western Marsh Harrier  
Coot & chicks  
Northern Lapwing  
Common Redshank  
Ruff  
Black-headed Gull  
Common Tern  
Wood Pigeon  
Common Cuckoo  
Common Swift  
Common Kingfisher  
Great Spotted Woodpecker  
Barn Swallow  
Wren  
Blackbird  
Robin  
Blackcap  
Common Whitethroat  
Garden Warbler  
Cetti's Warbler  
Reed Warbler  
Sedge Warbler  
Common Chiffchaff  
Willow Warbler  
Goldfinch  
Reed Bunting

*Cygnus olor*  
*Branta canadensis*  
*Anser anser*  
*Tadorna tadorna*  
*Anas platyrhynchos*  
*Phalacrocorax carbo*  
*Botaurus stellaris*  
*Ardea cinerea*  
*Egretta garzetta*  
*Milvus milvus*  
*Circus aeruginosus*  
*Fulica atra*  
*Vanellus vanellus*  
*Tringa totanus*  
*Calidris pugnax*  
*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*  
*Sterna hirundo*  
*Columba palumbus*  
*Cuculus canorus*  
*Apus apus*  
*Alcedo atthis*  
*Dendrocopos major*  
*Hirundo rustica*  
*Troglodytes troglodytes*  
*Turdus merula*  
*Erithacus rubecula*  
*Sylvia atricapilla*  
*Sylvia communis*  
*Sylvia borin*  
*Cettia cetti*  
*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*  
*Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*  
*Phylloscopus collybita*  
*Phylloscopus trochilus*  
*Carduelis carduelis*  
*Emberiza schoeniclus*

## **Amphibians**

Common Frog

*Rana temporaria*

## Mammals

Chinese Water Deer  
Muntjac

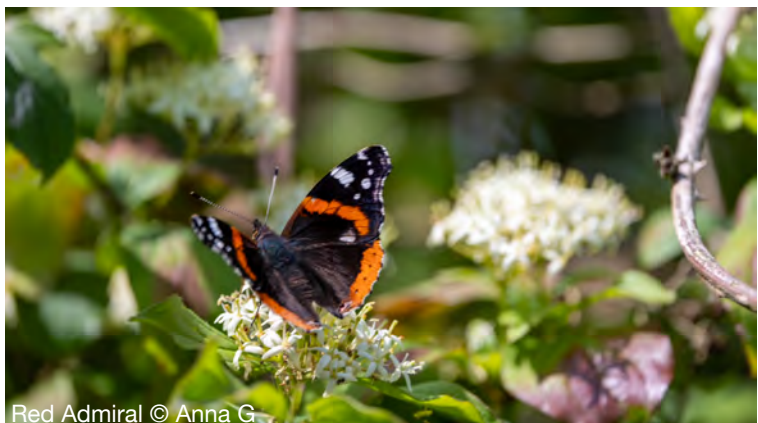
*Hydropotes inermis*  
*Muntiacus reevesi*

## Notable Plants

Common Poppy  
Common Reed  
Common Spotted Orchid  
Common Valerian  
Dog Rose  
Hemlock  
Marsh Cinquefoil  
Marsh Fern  
Marsh Pea  
Marsh Thistle  
Milk Parsley  
Ragged Robin  
Southern Marsh Orchid  
Yellow Flag Iris

*Papaver rhoeas*  
*Phragmites australis*  
*Dactylorhiza fuchsii*  
*Valeriana officinalis*  
*Rosa canina*  
*Conium maculatum*  
*Potentilla palustris*  
*Thelypteris palustris*  
*Lathyrus palustris*  
*Cirsium palustre*  
*Peucedanum palustre*  
*Silene flos-cuculi*  
*Dactylorhiza praetermissa*  
*Iris pseudacorus*

## Photo Gallery





Sedge Warbler © Adrian F



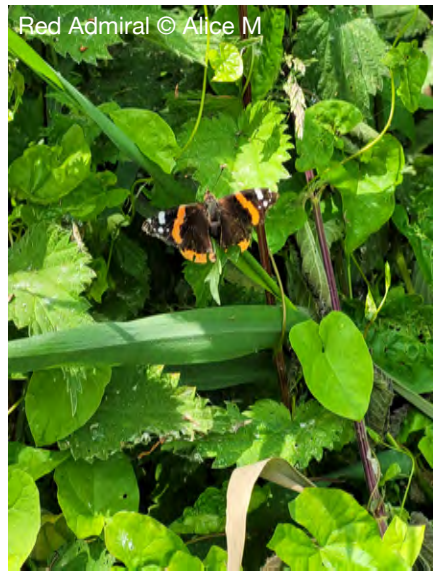
Swallowtail © Adrian F



Large Skipper © Alice M



Swallowtail © Alice M



Red Admiral © Alice M



© Anna G



Muntjac © Adrian F



Small Tortoiseshell © Anna G



Swallowtail © Helen W



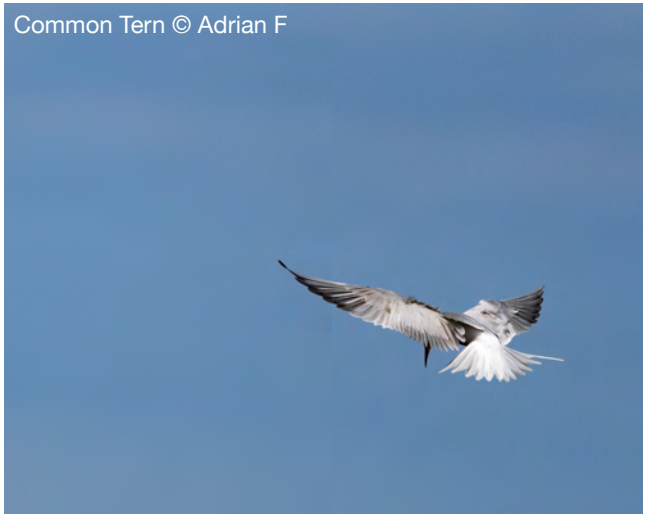
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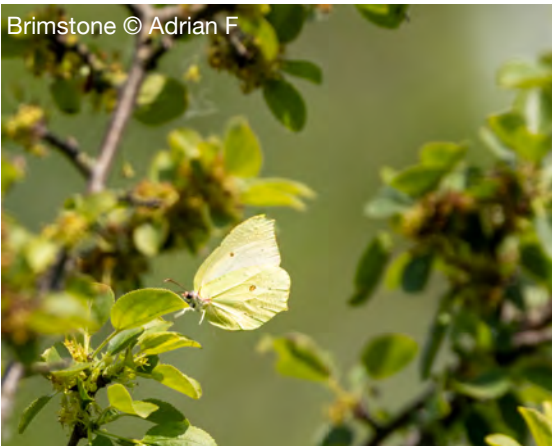
Swallowtail © Adrian F



Dock Bugs and Emperor Moth larva © Adrian F



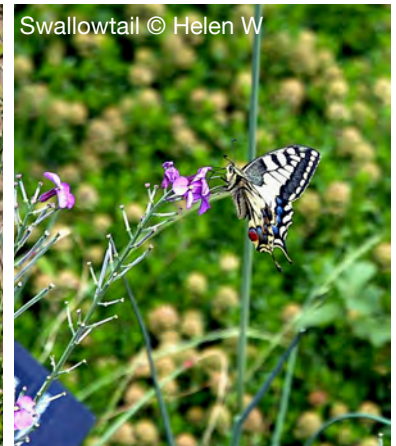
Common Tern © Adrian F



Brimstone © Adrian F



Painted Lady © Alice M



Swallowtail © Helen W



Swallowtail © Adrian F