

Swallowtail Weekend

7th - 10th June 2024
Led by Patrick Barkham & Kat Dahl



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Our intrepid band of Swallowtail seekers assembled at the Sutton Staithe Hotel on Friday afternoon after various arduous journeys from all corners of Britain, including Loch Lomond and the Lizard, Cornwall. We all met at 5pm for introductions and then a short stroll along the staithe, looking out onto the channel leading into Sutton Broad and, eventually, the River Ant.

It was a cool, grey late afternoon but we soon heard Chiffchaffs and Cetti's Warblers, and watched a Common Tern flying up the river channel. Karina spotted a Yellow-tail Moth caterpillar and Kat found an equally spectacular Vapourer Moth caterpillar. Stuart demonstrated his talent for close observation by finding a micro moth with enormous feelers, the Yellow-barred Longhorn Moth. We also enjoyed an assemblage of Sawfly larvae, like synchronised swimmers arranged around the edges of leaves of Alder.

Saturday June 8

We knew we were in for challenging weather this weekend, with air temperatures struggling to get above 15°C and a fickle mix of grey skies, sudden showers and cool winds. We set off promptly at 9.15 for the short drive to the fabulous Hickling Broad National Nature Reserve, which is the jewel in the crown for the Norfolk Wildlife Trust. We arrived before the reserve opened and were given an introduction by the visitor centre manager Rachel who revealed that there were at least eight booming male Bitterns in the reedbeds and a pair of Cranes on site. To our surprise, it was also proving a promising season for Swallowtails, despite two weeks of seemingly incessant rain. A number of freshly emerged Swallowtails had been observed the previous day.

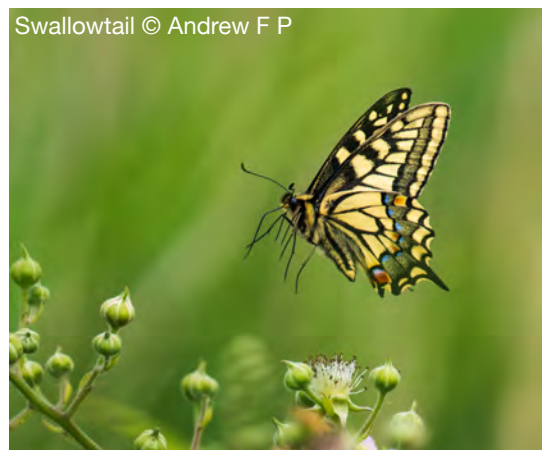


Azure Damselfly © Anne H

We set off across the reserve to meet our two electric boats for a boat trip on Hickling Broad and Liz spotted the first butterfly of the trip, a Speckled Wood. We also stopped to identify the first of many pretty Azure damselflies, which are identified by the black 'U' mark on the blue body immediately below where the wings come out. Andrew saw a Hornet cruise past and there were promising glimmers of sun between the clouds. We heard the first of many Reed Warblers, as well as Blackcap song and Kat identified a Brown Chinamark, a day-flying moth whose caterpillars are aquatic and which spends its whole lifecycle underwater until it emerges as a moth.

Along the path towards the boats, we saw a web of jet-black Peacock butterfly caterpillars and also welcomed the first of several 'woolly bears', the delightful and very hairy caterpillars of the Garden Tiger moth.

We were nearing the broad, and continuing to photograph damselflies, when we heard an extraordinary pig-like squeals coming from amidst a reedy ditch. These bizarre noises could only be made by a Water Rail. Sadly, this furtive bird did not reveal itself further. The wind was still cool but the sun was now beginning to shine. At 10.35am, our pleasurable dawdling in nature had already made us late for the boat trip when a cry went up: 'Swallowtail!' Superlative photographer Andrew had spotted the first one of the day and what a beauty it was. An immaculate, freshly-



Swallowtail © Andrew F P

emerged male was nectaring on bramble flowers, at almost exactly head height. For almost all of our group, including Kat, this was the first-ever sighting of a British Swallowtail, and it really couldn't get better than this.

Swallowtail © Paul C



We enjoyed a Swallowtail flypast – always a special moment – and then another Swallowtail joined in. The whole group were getting fantastic views but it kept getting better – a humungous (there is no other word for it!) female swooped into view and soon we were all in raptures, getting the best views and photos of simply the three most immaculate Swallowtails we'd ever seen. Two chased each other, and then another one flew past.

After 15 minutes enjoying the company of these fabulous creatures, our boatman John arrived to chase us up in a nice way. We bid farewell to the Swallowtails and climbed onto our boats, Swallowtail and Damselfly. We were wearing life-jackets and John gave us the safety briefing about the perils of falling over the side of the boat and into the foreboding Broadland waters: 'If by any chance they don't inflate, stand up – it's not that deep' he said.

An electric boat is one of the best ways to experience the Broads – and go birdwatching. The two-hour boat trip took in the lookout tower which gave panoramic views of the living landscape around Hickling and Horsey – a vast protected area of reedbeds with little public access that is a haven for Marsh Harriers and Bittern. From the boat, Simon spotted the first Great Crested Grebe and we saw Avocet, Shelduck and Grey Heron, as well as fine views of the ubiquitous but nevertheless-thrilling Marsh Harriers. Two Spoonbills dashed overhead. (What do you call a baby Spoonbill? A teaspoon.) On Damselfly, Patrick's group cruised close to the reedbeds and enjoyed fantastic views of Bearded Reedlings bouncing up and down on the old reeds, picking through their seedheads for insects. Each bird made a 'ping-pow' call which sounded a bit like an old game of Space Invaders.

While Patrick's group was up the panoramic viewing tower, they saw the Swallowtail boat far below on the channel towards the River Thurne pausing for ages beside two Great Crested Grebe and photographing them avidly. When we descended from the lookout tower and slowly cruised passed the pair of birds, we saw why: each bird was carrying a gorgeous grebe chick on its back. It was an adorable sight.

Great Crested Grebe with young © Andrew F P



The rain also came in while we were on the boats but our group was impressively kitted out and survived the downpour. On our walk back to the visitor centre, we enjoyed views of Shoveler and Lapwing on the pool at Brendan's Marsh; we heard a distant cuckoo call and boatman Rob (an NWT warden) picked up the cries of a Hobby.

After a picnic lunch in the gardens beside the visitor centre at Hickling, we drove across from the Thurne river system to the Ant, to the epic Norfolk climb that is How Hill, a lovely intimate little nature reserve which is part of the large Ant Valley Site of Special Scientific Interest. It was raining when we reached Toad Hole Cottage so some of us treated ourselves to local Ronaldo's ice-cream and we had a look at the historic wherry, a traditional Broadland sailing barge, moored beside the River Ant. We timed our entrance to the meadow to coincide with a sudden burst of sunshine. Although we hadn't seen Swallowtails here in 2021 or 2022, we had last year, and this flowery and usually sheltered spot between the woods and reedbeds was good for the afternoon sun. We lingered here for a while but no butterflies materialised.

How Hill is fantastic for dragonflies and damselflies and we were soon admired more Azure and Blue-tailed Damselflies, as well as the similar Variable Damselfly. A cuckoo called and Sue found a Clouded Border moth. Just as Patrick uttered the words, 'I'm puzzled by the non-appearance of the Norfolk Hawker,' Jenny spotted our first Norfolk Hawker of the weekend, a spectacular large golden-brown dragonfly with apple-green eyes. Once only found on the Broads, it has expanded its range in recent years, like many dragonfly species benefitting from climate change.



Hairy Hawker © Anne G

Further on the sheltered paths beside dykes filled with Water Soldier and other scarce aquatic plants we found the first Large Red Damselfly of the weekend and a male Hairy Dragonfly, a smaller hawker-type insect. Inside and just outside the hide were several freshly-emerged Four-Spotted Chasers. Our amphibian list was boosted by a Common Frog on the boardwalk and a Smooth/Common Newt. On a weekend of very few butterfly species, we added another when we saw two Red Admirals in How Hill woods.

Sunday June 9

Sunday's forecast was steadily worsening with bright sunshine rapidly disappearing by 10am, and so we decided to make a prompt 9am departure from Sutton Staithe to get straight to the best place for Swallowtails at Strumpshaw Fen on the River Yare – 'the Doctor's Garden'. This pretty cottage set up on a south-facing bank 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. Early 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.

We dashed down Tinker's Lane to the cottage while the sun still shone and arrived at the garden to find that, unfortunately, the wind direction meant that the alluring banquet of flowers was buffeted by a strong, cool wind.

We stood and waited beside the most sheltered portion of the garden for half-an-hour, serenaded by a Garden Warbler. Unfortunately no Swallowtails dropped in on us. The only butterfly we saw in the garden was a solitary Red Admiral. So we continued past the cottage and up through a willow thicket and onto some set-aside farmland that had been arable until about six years ago. It was now rough grassland, and in the cool breeze we kicked up half-a-dozen roosting Meadow Browns. These butterflies often fly on dull days so it wasn't a great sign that they were still roosting.

Then we crossed the railway line into the reserve proper where, in the shelter, we saw all three of the small blue damselflies – (the not so) Common Blue, Variable and Azure. On the path, we found some nice Southern Marsh Orchids and some Common Spotted Orchids and some that looked as though they could be hybrids of the two. Onto a little section of boardwalk, we found our first examples of the Milk Parsley that is the Swallowtail's foodplant. The plants were very small and late to grow this year, and it was no surprise to find no eggs nor caterpillars on the leaves, despite a thorough search. There were some nice fen plants on this section of the reserve including Purple Meadow

Variable Damselfly © Anne H





Common Lizard © Anne H

Rue, Bog Myrtle (with its lemon-scented leaves) and Marsh Pea. We also found a Common Lizard on the boardwalk and it was a testimony to the low temperatures that it hardly moved.

In the cool, the sunshine was persisting alongside the cloud for longer into the morning than forecast, which gave us hope. Further on the path, dragonfly expert Anne found Large Red damselflies mating and then Patrick spied a Swallowtail on the path ahead.

Miraculously, it was nectaring on a solitary White Clover flower on the grass. Some of the group were fortunate enough to see it before it rose up and sped off. Patrick spied another Swallowtail (or possibly the same one) speeding across the fen in the distance, and Andrew, who doubled back to stake out the Doctor's Garden also had a fleeting glimpse of one but that, sadly, was it for Swallowtail action on this cool day.

We continued the walk around Strumpshaw Fen, enjoying lots of Reed Warblers singing and the occasional Sedge Warbler. Further on, we found a Brimstone, and no-one was more excited than Paul, for whom it was a first – the species not being found in Scotland. It was a delight to see him so enthusiastic about what is, after all, a really special butterfly.

We had good views of a Scarce Chaser and lots of Banded Demoiselles, both male and female, before we glimpsed a Large White butterfly from the hide. Here we enjoyed some fabulous views of Marsh Harriers, enjoying what was an increasingly windy day, and using the wind to slow their progress over the reeds in search of Water Vole and other prey.



Marsh Harrier © Andrew F P

After a picnic lunch at Strumpshaw, we set off for the climax of the weekend, a private tour of RSPB Sutton Fen, a reserve so fragile and special it is not open to the general public. Sutton Fen is said to be the finest example of unspoilt lowland fen in Western Europe and it also currently happens to be the best place in Britain for the Swallowtail, with the highest counts here. It is also an atmospheric place, with no signs of human habitation anywhere around – just fen, woods and water, and huge, moody skies.

Unfortunately, the weather was now too cool, grey and windy for the butterfly but there was plenty more to enjoy here, as our guide, the knowledgeable RSPB warden Ben explained. On the drive over, we saw a Stoat from the bus, and our mammal list was quickly added to when we caught a glimpse of a Chinese Water Deer from the old farmyard at Sutton Fen, and as we neared the Fen itself enjoyed fine views of six Red Deer and a Muntjac.

By the pond, Stuart caught a frog and we saw excellent views of Norfolk Hawkers along with other new dragonfly species for the weekend – the Black-tailed Skimmer (a yellow-and-black female) and a Common Darter. Ben found the exuvia of an Emperor dragonfly. As we stood by the pond, Kat heard the distinctive plop of a disappearing Water Vole.

After the wettest winter on record, Sutton Fen was difficult to access, with a really boggy, treacherous route out onto what was once Sutton Broad. Margaret, an incredibly fit 90, must be the first nonagenarian to make it onto the Broad.

Ben explained that the 'hover', the bouncing fen we walked on was an open broad – Sutton Broad – in aerial photos from 1922 and was still mostly open water much more recently. Broadlands are desperate to become wet woodland and quickly do so, but here the process was arrested by

traditional reed and sedge harvesting. The RSPB was continuing to cut the fen in experimental plots to discover the management that best suited the Fen Orchid (and a few other red data book rare plants).

We had a slow, careful walk through the boggy, disconcertingly wobbly fen, to seek out the Fen Orchid. This small area used to be home to 90% of the UK's population of Fen Orchids but now thankfully there are more of the orchids scattered across other sites to give it a bit more resilience. And there are between 6,000 and 9,000 Fen Orchid flowers at Sutton each year, and this number is rising with the RSPB's careful rotational cutting on the fen. This year is late and these dainty ultra-rare orchids were not numerous – Ben struggled to find a couple of point out to us. We also saw Marsh Fern, Marsh Cinquefoil, Bladderwort and Lesser Water Parsnip, as well as Milk Parsley, on this pristine example of biodiverse fen.



We returned into the main portion of the fen beside some invasive Rhododendron (thankfully not imperilling the fen). Ben revealed that on another year there had been 35 Swallowtails spotted on the bush – a staggering amount we could only dream about in these conditions.

Then we waded through some impressively flooded pathways – almost going over our wellies (and definitely going over Patrick's walking boots; typically, the guide was the only person who had forgotten to be properly equipped) – which was another sign that this part of the Broads was still saturated after the record winter floods.

Unfortunately it wasn't getting any warmer and the cloud was thickening as we walked back through the Fen. We found some young Peacock caterpillars on a typically healthy patch of Broadland nettles. Usually they are in their final instar by this point in June but the fact that they were still so small showed the usual lateness of the season.

On the walk back through this special reserve, we enjoyed Cuckoos calling in stereo and fine views of a Hobby dashing through the trees hunting dragonflies. Andrew was ecstatic when Kat pointed out a pile of dragonfly wings that was far too neat to have been a Hobby's lunch so we think it was probably the leftovers from a Hornet's meal. Back through the meadow, we walked among hundreds, if not thousands, of Southern Marsh Orchids, a beautiful sight.

Sutton Fen is a unique place. The group enjoyed its incredibly remote feel, without any houses, fields or machines in sight or sound, and we felt privileged to be able to experience it.

It was another surprisingly tiring day but I think everyone felt relaxed and enlivened by a day in the fresh air, and fresh wind! That evening, we drove to Wroxham and had dinner at Thaiway, an authentic, family-owned Thai restaurant which served up a lovely meal. There were butterfly book prizes for Andrew (first Swallowtail), Paul (most joyous first sighting of a Brimstone ever) and Margaret (first nonagenarian to traverse treacherous Sutton Broad) and good conversation.

Torrential rain on Sunday night and Monday morning ruled out a final moth trap and showed we had been challenged by the weather this weekend. Even so, the group made the most of their experiences with some of the Broads most charismatic and interesting species, large and small, in some of the best and most beautiful nature reserves in Britain. Everyone in the group got on so well and it was a pleasure to spend a weekend with the group. Thank you.

Species Lists

Butterflies

Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon britannicus</i>
Peacock (larvae)	<i>Aglais io</i>
Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>

Moths

Garden Tiger (larvae)	<i>Arctia caja</i>
Silver Hook	<i>Deltote uncula</i>
Yellow-tail (larva)	<i>Euproctis similis</i>
Clouded Border	<i>Lomaspilis marginata</i>
Vapourer (larvae)	<i>Orgyia antiqua</i>
Straw Dot	<i>Rival sericealis</i>
Blood-vein	<i>Timandra comae</i>
Water Veneer	<i>Acentria ephemerella</i>
Yellow Oak Tortrix	<i>Aleimma loefligiana</i>
Small China-mark	<i>Cataclysta lemnata</i>
Brown China-mark	<i>Elophila nympheata</i>
Yellow-barred Longhorn	<i>Nemophora degeerella</i>

Dragonflies & Damselflies

Banded Demoiselle	<i>Calopteryx splendens</i>
Azure Damselfly	<i>Coenagrion puella</i>
Variable Damselfly	<i>Coenagrion pulchella</i>
Common Blue Damselfly	<i>Enallagma cyathigerum</i>
Blue-tailed Damselfly	<i>Ischnura elegans</i>
Large Red Damselfly	<i>Pyrrhosoma nymphula</i>
Norfolk Hawker	<i>Aeschna isosceles</i>
Hairy Hawker	<i>Brachytron pratense</i>
Broad-bodied Chaser	<i>Libellula depressa</i>
Scarce Chaser	<i>Libellula fulva</i>
Four-spotted Chaser	<i>Libellula quadrimaculata</i>
Black-tailed Skimmer	<i>Orthetrum cancellatum</i>
Common Darter	<i>Sympetrum striolatum</i>

Other notable invertebrates

Golden-bloomed Grey Longhorn Beetle	<i>Agapanthia villosoviridescens</i>
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7-spot Ladybird	<i>Coccinella septempunctata</i>
Black-bellied Diving Beetle	<i>Dysticus semisulcatus</i>
Harlequin Ladybird	<i>Harmonia axyridis</i>
Malachite Beetle	<i>Malachius bipunctatus</i>
Thick-thighed Beetle	<i>Oedemera nobilis</i>
Red-headed Cardinal Beetle	<i>Pyrochroa serraticornis</i>

Common Scorpionfly	<i>Panorpa communis</i>
Banded General	<i>Startiomys potamida</i>
Bumblebee Plumehorn	<i>Volucella bombylans</i>

Birch Sawfly	<i>Nematus septentionalis</i>
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Black-and-Red-Froghopper	<i>Cercopis vulnerata</i>
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Brown-lipped Snail	<i>Cepaea nemoralis</i>
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Birds

Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>
Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptica</i>
Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>
Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>
Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>
Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>
Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>
Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>
Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>
Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopus major</i>

Hobby
Rook
Carrion Crow
Marsh Tit
Bearded Reedling
Barn Swallow
House Martin
Cetti's Warbler
Willow Warbler
Chiffchaff
Sedge Warbler
Reed Warbler
Blackcap
Garden Warbler
Whitethroat
Goldcrest
Wren
Blackbird
Robin
Chaffinch
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Reed Bunting

Falco subbuteo
Corvus frugilegus
Corvus corone
Poecile palustris
Panurus biarmicus
Hirundo rustica
Delichon urbicum
Cettia cetti
Phylloscopus trochilus
Phylloscopus collybita
Acrocephalus schoenobaenus
Acrocephalus scirpaceus
Sylvia atricapilla
Sylvia borin
Sylvia communis
Regulus regulus
Troglodytes troglodytes
Turdus merula
Erithacus rubecula
Fringilla coelebs
Chloris chloris
Carduelis carduelis
Emberiza schoeniclus

Animals

Water Vole
Red Deer
Chinese Water Deer
Smooth Newt
Muntjac
Stoat
Common Frog
Common Lizard

Arvicola amphibius
Cervus elaphus
Hydropotes inermis
Lissotriton vulgaris
Muntiacus reevesi
Mustela erminea
Rana temporaria
Zootoca vivipara

Notable Plants

Scarlet Pimpernel
Lesser Water-parsnip
Cuckoo Flower
Climbing Corydalis
Marsh Thistle
Saw-sedge
Marsh Cinquefoil
Common Spotted Orchid
Southern Marsh Orchid
Marsh Pennywort
Yellow Flag Iris
Grass Vetchling
Marsh Pea

Anagallis arvensis
Berula erecta
Cardamine pratensis
Ceratocarpus claviculata
Cirsium palustre
Cladium mariscus
Comarum palustre
Dactylorhiza fuchsii
Dactylorhiza praetermissa
Hydrocotyle vulgaris
Iris pseudacorus
Lathyrus nissolia
Lathyrus palustris

Fen Orchid
Ragged Robin
Bog Myrtle
Royal Fern
Common Poppy
Milk Parsley
Common Reed
Marsh Skullcap
Marsh Fern

Liparis loeselii
Lychnis flos-cuculi
Myrica gale
Osmunda regalis
Papaver rhoeas
Peucedanum palustre
Phragmites australis
Scutellaria galericulata
Thelypteris palustris

Photo Gallery

Swallowtail © Andrew F P



Variable Damselfly © Anne G



Common Darter © Anne H

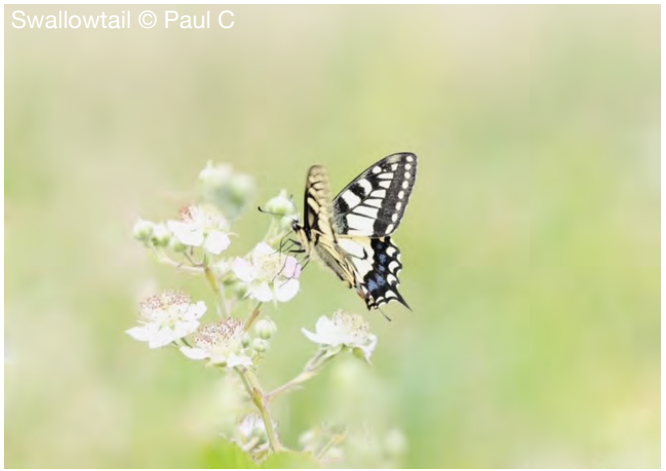


Thick-thighed Beetle © Anne H

© Anne H



Swallowtail © Paul C



Swallowtail © Anne G



Milk Parsley © Anne G

Red Deer © Andrew F P



Hairy Hawker © Anne H



© Anne G

Swallowtail © Andrew F P



Swallowtail © Anne H



Swallowtail © Paul C



Large Red Damselflies © Anne H



© Anne G



Bearded Reedling © Andrew F P



Four-spotted Chaser © Anne G



Four-spotted Chaser *f. praenubila* © Anne H



Swallowtail © Anne G

Swallowtail flight sequence © Andrew F P

