

Swallowtails & Much More in The Norfolk Broads

11th 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 Wednesday morning after various journeys from Sussex, London and Hampshire to as far afield as Lancashire and Northern Ireland. It was a bright, sunny start to the day with temperatures climbing and 23°C forecast. We never like to guarantee anything but if we didn't find Swallowtails today, after we found freshly emerged individuals the previous day, something would be seriously amiss with the universe!

Hickling Broad National Nature Reserve is the jewel in the crown for the Norfolk Wildlife Trust, part of a living landscape of protected areas in the Upper Thurne Valley, and less than three miles as the Crane flies from the coast. There have been at least eight booming male Bitterns this year and Cranes breeding in the vast reedbeds but both birds are elusive and it is luck whether you glance across the reedbed at the right moment to catch a glimpse. The other members of the Broadland Big Five, the Norfolk Hawker, the Bearded Reedling and the Swallowtail are a little bit more visible but only just!



Swallowtail © Alice M

We arrived at 9.45am and turned left out of the visitor centre garden and through the woods to a sheltered area of the south side of the woods where the path was bordered by hummocks of bramble on both sides. I've named this "Swallowtail alley" this year because it has been the best place for Swallowtails at Hickling and so it proved today. We quickly saw our first two Swallowtails of the day, nectaring on bramble flowers and powering up for a busy day in the sunshine. We had some fantastic sightings of two Swallowtails floating in the air as only Britain's largest butterfly can, and dropping in on different blooms to nectar – never settling for long on any one.

A Whitethroat sang in the background and Small Tortoiseshells and Red Admirals were also spotted around the brambles. On the bramble leaves, we also saw the fairly ordinary-looking early instar caterpillars of the spectacular Emperor Moth.

The dominant sound was hundreds of bees at the bramble and we watched two more Swallowtails, including one with a big chunk out of its wing. All the butterflies looked fairly fresh and recently emerged, which was surprising given that it has been a very early season for the species this year, with the first adults showing up at Hickling on May 1 – a good two weeks' early. It shows how staggered the emergence is of Swallowtails.

As we also clocked up some very fresh and newly-hatched Meadow Brown and Large Skipper, a Hobby dashed overhead, searching the skies for dragonflies. This was an unusually good sighting of an elusive raptor, so dynamic and fast-moving, like a huge murderous Swift.

Hobby © Julia V



Reluctantly tearing ourselves away from this Swallowtail heaven, we popped back to the visitor centre because Bruce, the resident moth man/volunteer for NWT whose distinguishing features are a nice Norfolk wit and spectacular butterfly shirts, was opening several moth traps. It had been a cold night and Bruce was bemoaning the haul but we got up close and personal with



Eyed Hawkmoth © Alice M

some fabulous moths including several Eyed Hawk-moths and a huge Poplar Hawk-moth, a Pale Prominent, a Small Magpie Moth, White Ermine, and the brilliantly camouflaged Buff-tip. Bruce showed us how a Buff Ermine will roll over and play dead when it is picked up. Overhead, a Red Kite soared – still quite an unusual sight in the Broads, where the dominant bird of prey is the Marsh Harrier.

We moved on to circle around Hickling nature reserve in an anti-clockwise direction. Kat found us a Double-banded Hoverfly and the group also clocked up more Large Skippers and a Small White. Our fifth Swallowtail of the day was spotted flying over a small pond by Alice, who also spotted the sixth of the day as it breezed past our heads. Kat found the first of many Drinker Moth caterpillars, a particularly large and fine specimen of the hairy caterpillar so adored by visiting Cuckoos.

Along the path beside the hides we found lots of well-developed Peacock larvae on nettles and Julia spotted the first Reed Bunting of the day. Unusually, we also saw two Buzzards soaring on the thermals which unfortunately also whisked the Cranes out of our sight for the day. We enjoyed some nice wildlife as we strolled including Red Admirals, Chiffchaff, Cetti's and Reed Warbler and the dazzling Thick-thighed Flower Beetle.

The seventh and eighth Swallowtails of the day followed where the path meets more bramble bushes at a junction with another close to the waters of Hickling Broad, and we saw good views of Marsh Harrier low over the reeds from the flood bank, which provides fine views across the reedbeds on either side. Along this western stretch we heard a Common Green Grasshopper and saw more Swallowtails, one of which Sue spotted rather rashly chasing a Norfolk Hawker, a magnificent dragonfly with apple-green eyes. (We haven't actually ever seen a Hawker devour a Swallowtail but Patrick saw the slightly larger Emperor dragonfly do just that once.)



Swallowtail © Dee C

Some of us heard the brief and very distant boom of a Bittern but unfortunately the males have stopped calling by this point in the season, and no more booming was apparent.

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, and Kat found her target species, and one she thinks should be a contender for the Broadland Big Five: the very rare Fen Mason Wasp. This dainty little wasp with pretty stripes on its body was found nectaring on Buttercup. Kat gave a sterling defence of wasps in general, pointing out that the common species only becomes a problem for humans at the end of the summer when it is feeding on rotten fruit – “homeless, jobless and drunk”.

As we turned east and followed the flood bank back towards Brendan's Marsh, some of the group caught glimpses of Bearded Reedlings as they flew rapidly over the tops of the reeds. At this time of year, they don't stop and pose at the tops of reeds as we would wish.

Kat identified a Fenland Pearl, a micro-moth first found in 1957, and we saw Shelduck overhead and Lapwing mobbing a Marsh Harrier, with one or two Harriers dropping dramatically onto the watery scrape at Brendan's Marsh to attack some young chicks. (We didn't see the potentially gory denouement to this wild story.)

Back at Swallowtail Alley, we clocked up our fifteenth distinct sighting of the morning, and retired,

very happily, to enjoy some sandwiches and Norfolk strawberries at the Hickling visitor centre.

With the day heating up but a warm wind, we decided to spend the afternoon at How Hill, a lovely intimate little nature reserve which is part of the large Ant Valley Site of Special Scientific Interest. It is a network of dykes and paths surrounded by fen and woodland below the spectacular arts and crafts house of How Hill, and the private nature reserve is run by an educational charity that brings schools here for environmental education.



Four-spotted Chaser © Julia V

We arrived at How Hill at 2.30pm and walked slowly through the nice meadow where there was Marsh Thistle and Meadow Thistle flowering – which is often attractive to Swallowtails. But perhaps the meadow was too breezy today. We saw the superb Wasp Beetle, a Red Admiral, and Dee found the first Four-Spotted Chaser of the day, enjoying the warmth alongside an array of smaller Azure and Variable Damselflies. Willow Warblers called peacefully on this most peaceful of reserves, where we were virtually the only people on a hot day, with plenty of hecticness at other nature reserves and Broadland locations.

Alice found an ancient Peacock butterfly, a survivor from last summer and the first adult we've seen on the trips this year. We also admired an increasingly rare Seven-Spotted Ladybird, Froghoppers and a female Black-Tailed Skimmer. We also found a large Brown-Lipped Snail which unlike the dragonflies was at least not moving anywhere fast.

On a peaceful pathway in the midst of the reserve, surrounded by trees, was a quiet dyke and a patch of sheltered brambles. As we ambled past, Alice spotted two more Swallowtails – a big and extremely immaculate female and a smaller, older male. Another Swallowtail came in and joined them, again nectaring incessantly on bramble. We had more fine views and excellent photo opportunities with no-one else around – amazingly! – and then the annoying old male Swallowtail chased the female Swallowtail until she decided she'd had enough and flew up, up and away, over the top of a distant Ash.

Kat found a Vestal Cuckoo Bumblebee and we clocked up the first Red-Eyed Damselfly of the trip by the hide, where Patrick demonstrated his favourite stunt – a stick in the mud, which could be pulled upwards until it was more than three metres high, demonstrating the depth of the peat here on the beautifully spongy ground.

Kat also found us the first Small China-mark moth, whose caterpillars are fully aquatic. We enjoyed more Small Tortoiseshells in the late afternoon sunshine, and Speckled Woods as well, before we popped down to the edge of the River Ant, and walked along the footpath to another patch of bramble to find our 20th Swallowtail of the day. As we admired it, Stephen spotted two Hobbies, high on a thermal over our heads. This was a fine end to an epic day of butterflying!



© Dee C

We had a lovely day out with glorious weather. Thanks to everyone in the group – Alice and Becky (who have enjoyed this day out before!) and Dee, Helen and Stephen, Sue, Julia and David and Davina. It was a lovely friendly group, and a nice mix of butterfly fanatics and those who were newer to nature. Everyone shared their sightings and experiences, and we had some great conversations. It was, genuinely, a pleasure to spend a day with you all. Thank you.

Total Butterflies:

8 species

Swallowtails: 20 butterflies (Hickling: 15 individuals/distinct sightings across the site; How Hill: 5 individuals/distinct sightings in two locations)

Small Tortoiseshell

Red Admiral

Peacock (adult and larvae)

Speckled Wood

Meadow Brown

Large Skipper

Small White

Species Lists**Butterflies & moths**

Swallowtail

Papilio machaon britannicus

Large Skipper

Ochlodes sylvanus

Small White

Pieris rapae

Red Admiral

Vanessa atalanta

Peacock imago & larvae

Aglais io

Small Tortoiseshell

Aglais urticae

Speckled Wood

Pararge aegeria

Meadow Brown

Maniola jurtina

Fenland Pearl

Anania perlucidalis

Small China-mark

Cataclysta lemnata

Drinker Moth larvae

Euthrix potatoria

Straw Dot

Rivula sericealis

Emperor Moth larvae

Saturnia pavonia

Dragonflies & damselflies

Norfolk Hawker

Aeshna isosceles

Emperor Dragonfly

Anax imperator

Hairy Dragonfly

Brachytron pratense

Azure Damselfly

Coenagrion puella

Variable Damselfly

Coenagrion pulchellum

Red-eyed Damselfly

Erythromma najas

Blue-tailed Damselfly

Ischnura elegans

Four-spotted Chaser

Libellula quadrimaculata

Black-tailed Skimmer

Orthetrum cancellatum

Large Red Damselfly

Pyrrhosoma nymphula

Other notable insects

6 spotted Longhorn

Anoplodera sexguttata

Vestal Cuckoo Bumblebee

Bombus vestalis

Red-and-black Froghopper

Cercopis vulnerata

Two-banded Wasp Hoverfly
Wasp Beetle
7-spot Ladybird
Dock Bug
Tiger Hoverfly
Fen Mason Wasp
Swollen-thighed Beetle
Common Green Grasshopper
Common Rhogogaster
European Hornet
Great Pied Hoverfly

Chrysotoxum bicinctum
Clytus arietis
Coccinella septempunctata
Coreus marginatus
Helophilus pendulus
Odynerus simillimus
Oedemera nobilis
Omocestus viridulus
Rhogogaster viridis
Vespa crabro
Volucella pellucens

Birds

Mute Swan
Greylag Goose
Shelduck
Mallard & ducklings
Bittern
Grey Heron
Great White Egret
Little Egret
Red Kite
Western Marsh Harrier
Common Buzzard
Hobby
Common Moorhen
Northern Lapwing
Common Redshank
Ruff
Black-headed Gull
Common Tern
Wood Pigeon
Wren
Blackbird
Robin
Common Whitethroat
Cetti's Warbler
Reed Warbler
Common Chiffchaff
Willow Warbler
Bearded Reedling
Long-tailed Tit
Goldfinch

Cygnus olor
Anser anser
Tadorna tadorna
Anas platyrhynchos
Botaurus stellaris
Ardea cinerea
Ardea alba
Egretta garzetta
Milvus milvus
Circus aeruginosus
Buteo buteo
Falco Subbuteo
Gallinula chloropus
Vanellus vanellus
Tringa totanus
Calidris pugnax
Chroicocephalus ridibundus
Sterna hirundo
Columba palumbus
Troglodytes troglodytes
Turdus merula
Erithacus rubecula
Sylvia communis
Cettia cetti
Acrocephalus scirpaceus
Phylloscopus collybita
Phylloscopus trochilus
Panurus biarmicus
Aegithalos caudatus
Carduelis carduelis

Reed Bunting

Emberiza schoeniclus

Mammals

Muntjac

Muntiacus reevesi

Notable Plants

Common Poppy

Papaver rhoeas

Common Reed

Phragmites australis

Dog Rose

Rosa canina

Foxglove

Digitalis purpurea

Marsh Thistle

Cirsium palustre

Meadow Thistle

Cirsium dissectum

Purging Buckthorn

Rhamnus cathartica

Rough Saw-sedge

Gahnia aspera

Water-soldier

Stratiotes aloides

Yellow Flag Iris

Iris pseudacorus

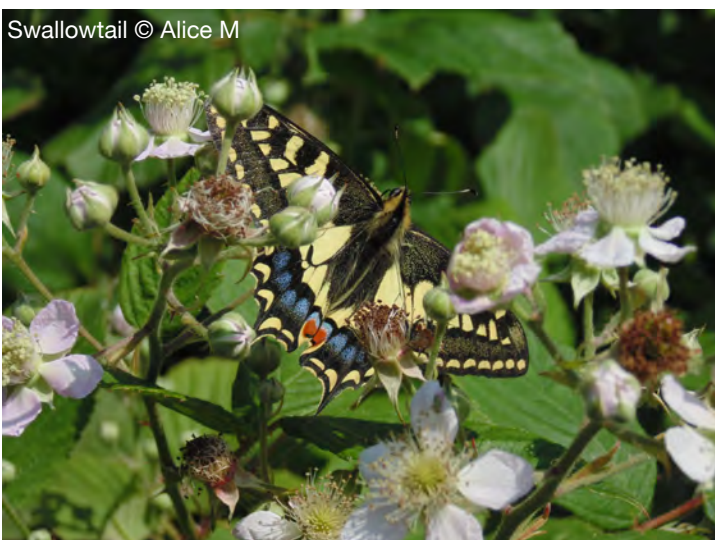
Photo Gallery



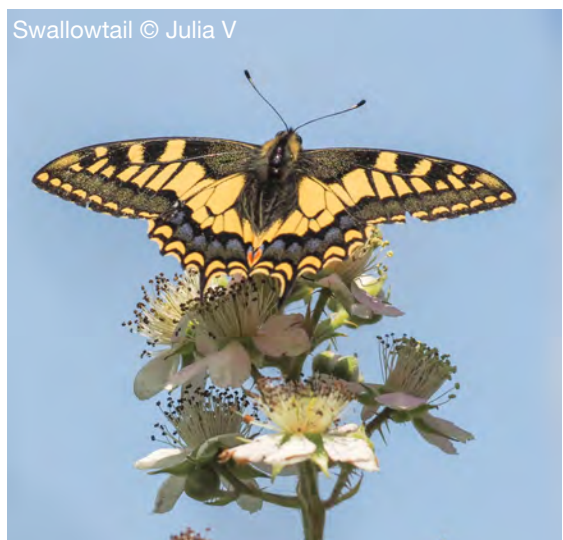
© Dee C



Azure Damselflies © Dee C



Swallowtail © Alice M



Swallowtail © Julia V



Azure Damselfly © Julia V



Peacock Larvae © Alice M



Small Tortoiseshell © Alice M



© Dee C



Ruff © Julia V



Norfolk Hawker © Julia V



© Dee C



Swallowtail © Dee C



Wasp Beetle © Dee C

Small Tortoiseshell © Dee C



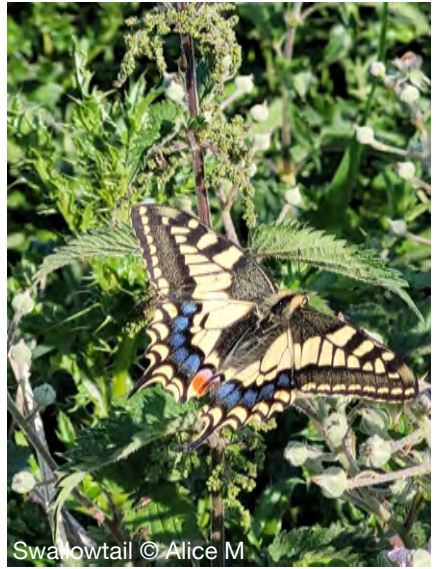
Swallowtail © Dee C



Speckled Wood © Alice M



Red-eyed Damselfly © Julia V



Swallowtail © Alice M



Four-spotted Chaser © Dee C



© Dee C



Buff Ermine © Dee C



Drinker Moth larva © Dee C



Norfolk Hawker © Alice M



© Dee C



Large Red Damselfly © Julia V



Swallowtail © Julia V



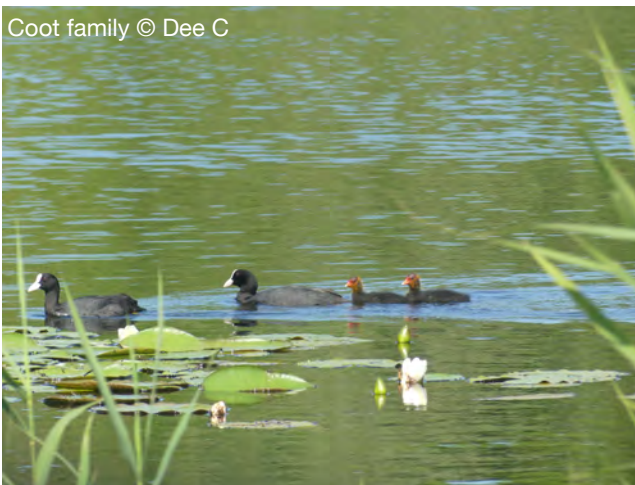
Large Skipper © Alice M



Small Tortoiseshell © Dee C



© Dee C



Coot family © Dee C



© Dee C



Foxgloves © Alice M



© Dee C



Swallowtail © Julia V



Harlequin Ladybird © Julia V



Emperor Moth larva © Julia V