Swallowtails & Much More
10th June 2026

Led by Patrick Barkham & Kat Dahl



Greenwings Wildlife Holidays

Tel: 01473 254658
Web: www.greenwings.co.uk
Email: enquiries@greenwings.co.uk
Linktree: https://linktr.ee/greenwingstours

Swallowtails and Much More

June 10th 2026

Led by Patrick Barkham and Kat Dahl

Our intrepid band of Swallowtail seekers gathered shortly before 9am in the capacious car park of Roy's, which may not quite be the world's largest village store but has taken over the whole village of Hoveton/Wroxham (two villages divided by the River Bure). It was lovely to have some returning guests and some new ones, with many having made long journeys to come and find Britain's most spectacular butterfly.

The weather forecast was not promising and led several guests to cancel their planned trips here for the day, and guides Patrick and Kat were – in a nice way – determined to prove them wrong! We were buoyed by our recent experiences of finding Swallowtails in decidedly cold, windy and even sunless conditions in the midst of what was now becoming a prolonged 10-day spell of unsettled weather. Besides, whatever the weather, it was always a special day out in some internationally important nature sites in England's largest freshwater wetland.

What was against us was a forecast that suggested the sun would disappear by 9am to be followed by grey cloud and rain showers, but we held out hopes for the afternoon, with the promise of sunshine between showers until 4pm when rain really would descend. So, with sunshine still in the sky, we drove as swiftly as possible on the 20-minute journey over to Hickling Broad National Nature Reserve, the jewel in the crown of the Broads and a Norfolk Wildlife Trust reserve.

As we neared the reserve, we spotted a Muntjac on the lane in front of us, and when we pulled over for another vehicle, up the track to our left was a Chinese Water Deer. It was nice to have such a good view of one of the Broads' more elusive residents.

The reserve was not yet open, but we took the track around the back to emerge beside the spinney and Swallowtail Alley, a pathway between flowering brambles which has become a hotspot for Swallowtails in recent years, particularly when it is sheltered from north and easterly winds. Unfortunately, the wind was a south-westerly, but it had dropped since yesterday, and there was a warmth to the hazy sunshine – it was actually better conditions than the previous day when we had spotted Swallowtails here. It was early – 9.30am – but the weather was definitely good enough, and we spent an hour in careful patrols of the bramble flowers here, admiring a great humming of bee-life from the many different bumblebee species feeding up for the morning, as the Swallowtail also likes to do.


Painted Lady © Greenwings

Kat showed us some Yellow-barred Longhorn moths lekking beside the track, and we then enjoyed hearing the calls of Cetti's Warbler and Reed Bunting and, unusually, a Bullfinch in the woods. We patrolled the bramble flowers and our hopes were raised by some butterflies on the move. A good sign. We saw nineteen Painted Ladies and four Red Admirals. There had been a huge migration of Painted Ladies into the south and east of England two weeks earlier, so 2026 was shaping up to be a fine Painted Lady summer.

We also enjoyed a close-up view of a Yellow Shell moth and some nice Four-spotted Chasers, with some Norfolk Hawkers – with their distinctive Granny Smith apple green eyes – patrolling the upper airspace. We also spotted an Emperor dragonfly, the largest of our native species and the only one which appears to pose a real threat to the Swallowtail (Patrick has seen an Emperor taking a Swallowtail in mid-air).

Of course, there is one thing more deadly than a 15 million-year-old predator, and that's the bird that's evolved to grab all dragonflies: the Hobby. We savoured some stunning views of a Hobby

hunting dragonflies above the reedbeds just beyond the wood. Patrick hadn't ever enjoyed such good views before, and we later saw it perched on a dead tree as well. Another lovely encounter was simply to hear the clear call of a Cuckoo – once so common, and now a rare treat.

After an hour, the cloud and first spots of rain arrived so we headed back through the spinney to check in at the Visitor Centre, for a well-timed shelter from the first of the day's rain showers. Here we met Bruce, a Norfolk Wildlife Trust volunteer and resident moth expert, who was just opening his moth trap. We got to admire up-close views of a spectacular Privet Hawkmoth, Britain's biggest native moth, alongside the gorgeous camouflaged Buff-tip, the Buff Ermine, Peppered moth, Small Magpie moth, White Ermine and Burnished Brass moth. A good haul.

Moving on to take an anti-clockwise circuit around the reserve, we saw a Meadow Brown in the grass – an unusually early emergence for Norfolk (or at least, the new-normal early emergence with climate change) and then a very unusual sighting: a little Bank Vole scurrying across the path. This was an enjoyable encounter!

We paused at the Cadbury Hide to admire two Swallows coming and going from their nest of chicks, which was inside the eaves of the hide (with visitors instructed to leave the folding wooden shutters open at all times). Moving on, we spotted some Peacock butterfly caterpillars, which should emerge in July in big numbers. We then paused by the brambles close to Secker's Hide because word reached us that Swallowtails had been glimpsed here this morning. With the rain paused, there was enough warmth at 14˚C and the occasional glimpse of sun to raise our hopes. While we waited, we enjoyed a fine long view of a Bittern flying over, which is one of the Broads' Big Five (Swallowtail, Crane, Bittern, Norfolk Hawker, Marsh Harrier) but an elusive bird, so this was fortunate and enjoyable. The Bittern was probably provisioning a nest, because the booming has halted for the season now.


Golden-bloomed Grey Longhorn © Greenwings

Kat then found one of her Small Five: the Golden-bloomed Grey Longhorn beetle (*Agapanthia villosoviridescens*), and we had some nice views of a Common Tern and a singing Sedge Warbler. We studied some Milk Parsley close to the boat jetty. Although it is the Swallowtail's foodplant, this plant was fairly small still, and did not have any eggs on its distinctive leaves. It was too early in the season for the caterpillars who grow up with this fast-growing but neurotic plant, which is rare and the reason the Swallowtail is so rare.


Fen Mason Wasp © Kat Dahl

Now a quite serious rain shower came in, but we still managed to find another of Kat's Small Five, the ultra-rare Fen Mason Wasp, tucked into the yellow centre of an Oxeye daisy on the footpath. This dainty little wasp is a pretty species and was considered extinct until it was rediscovered on the Broads in 1986.

After the rain, we timed our arrival at the next good patches of bramble and favoured haunts of the Swallowtail perfectly, coinciding with ten minutes of strong sunshine. Instantly the temperature lifted by several degrees and we saw nice views of a Small Tortoiseshell. Kat went ahead to check another promising sheltered sunny corner where we recently saw the Swallowtail, but despite covering both bases, our target still eluded us.

We admired some Painted Ladies, and enjoyed some fine views of Marsh Harriers hunting over the reedbeds, with one male particularly persistent in its quartering of the terrain. Down to the scrape, we spotted Lapwing 'peewitting' over the water where Shoveller and Gadwall swam. We also caught a glimpse of a Great White Egret flying over the reeds, with the water home to plentiful Little Egret.

Back to Swallowtail Alley, with some hazy sunshine and good-enough warmth, we saw a Red Admiral but noticeably fewer Painted Ladies this time. We patrolled up and down, but no Swallowtails appeared. Patrick and Kat were pretty surprised and frustrated, particularly when a very nice family passed who had just seen a Swallowtail cross their path. We think the changing atmospheric pressure was deterring the Swallowtails from emerging from their sheltering places within the reedbeds, but it may well be that the recent prolonged spell of unsettled weather has wiped out a significant number of individuals. This is a big, mobile butterfly that lives at low density across the landscape and doesn't have habitual behaviour or frequent particular favourite spots, and our conclusion at Hickling on this day was that very few were in flight. Plenty of other visitors also failed to see them today, and good luck – for once – was not on our side.

We had a well-timed sandwich lunch at the visitor centre and then swiftly moved on to How Hill, a short drive through the Broads from the Upper Thurne River catchment to the catchment of the River Ant. How Hill is a hidden gem of a nature reserve, and all the better in unsettled weather because it offers shelter, with alder carr woodland having grown up around many of its dykes, fens and meadows. Patrick and Kat had also had good Swallowtail sightings here in recent days, so we were optimising our chances by heading here.

After a quick stop at the delightful marshman's cottage known as Toad Hole Cottage, where we paid our entry fees and some guests bought the very nice local ice-cream, we found a nice Painted Lady caterpillar on a large spear thistle – hopefully the first of many for this species this year! We headed into the meadow at a good moment, when it was warm, and there was hazy sunshine. As we waited in the meadow, we enjoyed some typically good dragonfly and damselfly sightings, with this reserve being superlative for these animals. Kat picked up a sleepy Four-Spotted Chaser, and we saw Azure, Variable and Blue-tailed damselflies. Norfolk Hawkers patrolled above us, and there was the flash of another Emperor dragonfly. We enjoyed the call of a Green Woodpecker and saw more Common Terns pass along the nearby River Ant. John spotted a very happy small Common Frog, enjoying the damp grass.


Variable Damselfly © Greenwings

The meadow had nice nectar in the form of the purple blooms of Marsh Thistle and Meadow Thistle alongside Yellow Flag Iris, but any hint of sunshine was swiftly dispelled, and a rainstorm loomed. As we walked on into the honeysuckle-scented woodlands, this unfortunately grew into a major storm. We decided to walk as swiftly as we could to the shelter of the hide overlooking Crome's Broad. This broad, which is detached from the network of navigable channels, is very peaceful and surrounded by trees and full of water lilies. The rain looked beautiful splashing onto the water from the security of the hide, although unfortunately most of our group were now quite wet.

As the rain eased, we made a dash for it, and Patrick performed his stick-trick, pulling what looked like a short stick stuck into the mud beside Crome's Broad out of the ground. The stick went on and on, more than three metres tall, as it was pulled from the peat and 'hover' which is a web of plant roots which has rapidly grown over old broadland lakes. Kat did well to find several Brimstone caterpillars on Alder Buckthorn.

Unfortunately, the heavens opened again, and this storm meant business, quickly turning the path up the Norfolk mountain that is How Hill (all of ten metres above sea level) into a stream. We marched back to the van, rather damp. With the rain beating down, dark skies all around and the forecast suggesting that the sun would not reappear until 7pm, we decided to conclude our tour and head back to our cars.

Patrick and Kat were a little frustrated that the weather had proven worse than forecast, and they were also a little bit gutted that they hadn't managed to track down a Swallowtail, when they had seen them in worse conditions the previous day and two days before that. But perhaps it was a

good reminder for Patrick at least that the British weather is fickle and even the best-studied wild animals can continue to perplex and elude us, and that's part of the mystery. Without jeopardy, there is not much excitement!

Having said that, even with the storms, it was a beautiful day out, and it was a privilege to be in two stunning places with such an abundance of wildlife, and in the company of another lovely group of nature enthusiasts. Thank you for sharing the day with us! And we'll get a Swallowtail for you next time…

Species Lists

Butterflies

Brimstone (larvae)	*Gonepteryx rhamni*
Painted Lady (imago & larva)	*Vanessa cardui*
Red Admiral	*Vanessa atalanta*
Peacock (larvae)	*Aglais io*
Small Tortoiseshell	*Aglais urticae*
Meadow Brown	*Maniola jurtina*

Moths

Yellow Shell	*Camptogramma bilineata*
Brindled Green (larva)	*Dryobotodes eremita*
Drinker (larvae)	*Euthrix potatoria*
Yellow-barred Longhorn	*Nemophora degeerella*
Five/Six-spot Burnet (larva)	*Zygaena trifolii/filipendulae*

Dragonflies & damselflies

Norfolk Hawker	*Aeshna isosceles*
Emperor Dragonfly	*Anax imperator*
Azure Damselfly	*Coenagrion puella*
Variable Damselfly	*Coenagrion pulchellum*
Blue-tailed Damselfly	*Ischnura elegans*
Four-spotted Chaser	*Libellula quadrimaculata*

Other notable insects

Golden-bloomed Grey Longhorn Beetle	*Agapanthia villosoviridescens*
Tree Bumblebee	*Bombus hypnorum*
Red-tailed Bumblebee	*Bombus lapidarius*
White-tailed Bumblebee agg.	*Bombus lucorum* agg.
Common Carder Bumblebee	*Bombus pascuorum*
Early Bumblebee	*Bombus pratorum*
Buff-tailed Bumblebee	*Bombus terrestris*
Vestal Cuckoo Bumblebee	*Bombus vestalis*
Dock Bug	*Coreus marginatus*
Common Yellow-face Bee	*Hylaeus communis*
Willughby's Leafcutter Bee	*Megachile willughbiella*

Fen Mason Wasp	*Odynerus simillimus*
Common Scorpionfly	*Panorpa communis*
Black-and-yellow Longhorn Beetle	*Rutpela maculata*
Ferruginous Bee-grabber	*Sicus ferrugineus*
Yellow-barred Peat Hoverfly	*Sericomyia silentis*
Common Tachinid	*Tachina fera*
Bumblebee Hoverfly	*Volucella bombylans*
Great Pied Hoverfly	*Volucella pellucens*

Birds

Mute Swan	*Cygnus olor*
Greylag Goose	*Anser anser*
Northern Shoveler	*Spatula clypeata*
Gadwall	*Mareca strepera*
Mallard	*Anas platyrhynchos*
Common Cuckoo	*Cuculus canorus*
Coot	*Fulica atra*
Northern Lapwing	*Vanellus vanellus*
Great Cormorant	*Phalacrocorax carbo*
Common Tern	*Sterna hirundo*
Black-headed Gull	*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*
Great Bittern	*Botaurus stellaris*
Little Egret	*Egretta garzetta*
Great White Egret	*Ardea alba*
Marsh Harrier	*Circus aeruginosus*
Green Woodpecker	*Picus viridis*
Hobby	*Falco subbuteo*
Jay	*Garrulus glandarius*
Great Tit	*Parus major*
Sedge Warbler	*Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*
Reed Warbler	*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*
Barn Swallow	*Hirundo rustica*
Cetti's Warbler	*Cettia cetti*
Willow Warbler	*Phylloscopus trochilus*
Common Chiffchaff	*Phylloscopus collybita*
Common Whitethroat	*Sylvia communis*
Wren	*Troglodytes troglodytes*
Bullfinch	*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*
Greenfinch	*Chloris chloris*
Goldfinch	*Carduelis carduelis*
Reed Bunting	*Emberiza schoeniclus*

Amphibians

Common Frog	*Rana temporaria*

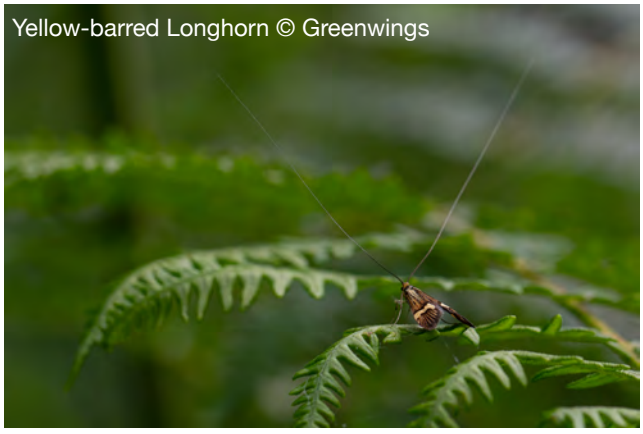
Mammals

Chinese Water Deer	*Hydropotes inermis*
Reeves' Muntjac	*Muntiacus reevesi*
Bank Vole	*Myodes glareolus*

Notable Plants

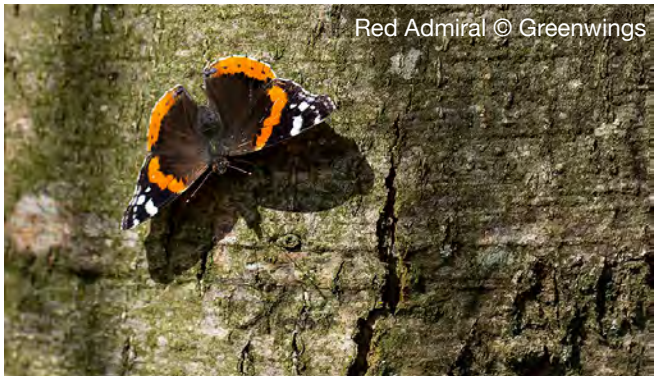
Meadow Thistle	*Cirsium dissectum*
Marsh Thistle	*Cirsium palustre*
Alder Buckthorn	*Frangula alnus*
Rough Saw-sedge	*Gahnia aspera*
Marsh Pennywort	*Hydrocotyle vulgaris*
Pineapple Weed	*Matricaria discoidea*
Royal Fern	*Osmunda regalis*
Common Poppy	*Papaver rhoeas*
Common Reed	*Phragmites australis*
Marsh Fern	*Thelypteris palustris*

Photo Gallery


Yellow-barred Longhorn © Greenwings


Drinker moth larva © Greenwings


Brimstone larva © Greenwings


Red Admiral © Greenwings


Small Tortoiseshell © Greenwings