

Norfolk October 2012

After our very uneventful trip to Cornwall in September we knew that Norfolk was on the cards to give us a much, needed boost. We hadn't bargained on it happening so soon after though....like 3 weeks after! Nor had we ever been to Norfolk in October before but looking back at the records over the years it seemed like it was THE month to go. We both checked our work calendars and the only available weeks were 15th-19th or 22nd-26th October, our only dilemma was which week to go for? Wendy pencilled herself in for both while I weighed up the pros and cons of each week. It was a real gamble, as we knew that whichever we chose would be the wrong one now that 'Team Jinx' was well and truly back in action. We didn't have to think about it for long though as we'd just about settled on 15th-19th when another of the girls at Wendy's work took the 2nd week. So, that was that, it was then or never! Our next hurdle was to find somewhere to stay at such short notice and after drawing a million blanks we eventually found a place that looked spot on and had a 20% late booking discount.....sorted!

Watching the forecast, as our holiday grew closer was, as usual, nail biting and with rain predicted for most of it. This would be awful and coupled with the winds being mainly Westerlies we could see yet another disaster waiting to happen. The only hope we had was that the 3 days of Easterlies forecasted would materialize while we were there. A couple of days before we were due to leave, the Easterlies we'd be hoping for in Norfolk changed to strong Westerlies for every day, which was exactly what we didn't want. The weather in the I.O.M had also taken a turn for the worse with gale force winds and torrential rain causing flooding. We seem to be cursed when it comes to boat crossings....thank god for Stugeron!

Friday 12th October

Typically the wind hadn't eased off at all when we got up at 7am so it was looking like another rough crossing. Wendy had taken the day off to get everything ready and I'd arranged to work through my lunch hour again so I could finish early. Miraculously by mid afternoon the wind had died right down so that was one less thing to worry about :). I'd decided to drive straight to our HQ from the boat, as although it would be stupid o'clock when we arrived the key was in a key safe outside so we could get in without having to collect it from someone. This was great news because we'd be in need of some sleep before charging around Norfolk finding loads of amazing birds.....in our dreams :P.

We arrived at the Sea Terminal at 6.45pm and found that the car park was virtually empty, which was a complete contrast to last time. We thought we were the last to arrive until a car and a camper van rolled up but apart from them there were no more passengers. Remembering our incident with the 'bird squeaker lubricant' last time I'd armed myself with a brand new squeaker to produce as evidence, albeit slightly embarrassing. I was fully expecting to be searched again but thankfully the searching bay was all locked up for the night.....Phew! With so few passengers queuing up we hoped we'd be quick to board but there seemed to be more freight than ever! Just as we thought it had stopped another lorry would come tearing round the corner, late and in a rush to make it on time. Consequently we didn't start boarding until 7.36pm and didn't depart until 7.55pm. We hadn't seen any birds by then as it was already dark but that's October for you. We watched some TV and then grabbed a couple of hour's sleep, which would hopefully be useful for the overnight journey.

As we disembarked at 11.30pm we could just about make out some **Black-headed Gulls** flying around in the dark over the sea. Woo hoo.....off to a flying start! Wendy, as always, ran straight into the Terminal first to get a caffeine fix to help keep her awake before we set off at 12am. I'd estimated that we'd arrive at around 5.30am so it was going to be a long and boring night. This plan was soon to be revised when I found the M62 closed at junction 25 meaning I'd have to take a diversion.....Uh oh. It started off OK as I was able to keep up with the lorries and vans in front of me but after a few sets of lights I'd lost them. My Sat Nav was insisting that I should turn around, which wasn't very helpful, and then suddenly I came across the biggest set of traffic lights I've ever had the misfortune to see. There were about 7

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lanes approaching them, I couldn't see the diversion icon on any of the signs and my crazy Sat Nav was telling me to turn right even though the lane was shut.....Aarrghhhh! None of the signs said M62 either, bar the closed one, so I just aimed for the middle lane and hoped for the best. This plan didn't work at all and we ended up driving round some dodgy looking town that we'd never been to before looking for the diversion signs in the dark.....Grrrr! I got the gist we were heading north, away from the M62, so in the end I had to pull over and manually program the Sat Nav. This made Wendy a bit edgy, due to a bad experience she'd had in France, so I locked the car just in case! This route looked like we'd be sent back on ourselves as well but I decided to trust the Sat Nav and prayed that it wouldn't send me back into traffic light metropolis! After about 15mins I finally found a M62 junction and was able to rejoin the motorway, panic over! It was now full steam ahead, to our ½ way stop off point, Blyth Services.

By the time we arrived at the Services it was 2.25am, which was 25mins later than it should've been. I'd expected the diversion to cause a longer delay so I must have got some time back somehow :). We'd started to feel really tired by that point so needed to stretch our legs and have a quick break. After we'd both bailed into the W.C's Wendy naturally made a beeline for Costa Coffee. Not wanting to waste time we didn't hang about and set off again at 2.44am for the final stretch of our journey to our HQ and bed! It was a really clear and dark night so with no street lighting we could see loads of stars. As usual we hoped we'd see some Owls on the way but the best we came up with at that stage was our first mammal of the trip, a **Rabbit** munching away at the side of the road. Wendy then squealed, "Shooting star!" and I just managed to catch the tail end of it shooting through the sky...Cool. As it was so clear it was also really cold, my car was reading 4C, and as we entered Lincolnshire on the A17 the mist descended, which seems to be the case more often than not. Despite this we could vaguely see something up ahead and as the shape grew closer we could make out that it was a very weird looking man walking up the grass verge.....what the? Hmmmmm, very strange at 4am on a dark and misty Saturday morning! The next thing we saw was a **Muntjac Deer** but still there'd been no sign of any Owls, which we'd expected to see before a person really. At 4.48am we were relieved to be turning into Blakeney and saw our first **Tawny Owl** of the trip flying over the road. About 2miles away from HQ Wendy said, "Careful of that blob in the middle of the road, what is it?" It soon became apparent that it was another Tawny Owl, which flew off just in the nick of time. Very smart!

We pulled up outside '3 The Saltings, Blakeney' which would be our HQ for the week at 4.58am, unloaded the car and hauled all our stuff up the stairs into a VERY cold house.



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The place itself was lovely, we were very impressed, but having been empty for a week it felt like stepping into a walk in freezer! It took me ages to work out how the central heating worked but I managed to sort it out in the end. It was too cold to even think about going to bed so we unpacked our bags and put everything away. This worked out nicely as by the time we'd unpacked the house was warming up nicely and at 5.50am we both went to bed thinking we'd sleep for a week. How wrong we were.

Saturday 13th October

At 7.45am after just 1hr 55mins sleep we were both awake again and even though we were still ½ asleep we just had to get out. After a leisurely breakfast we had a look out of the living room window and into the brilliant looking garden. The living room was at the top of the house and as it was a nice sunny day the view was pretty spectacular. The garden was full of bushes and trees and at the bottom was a small orchard. Beyond it was a vast stretch of marsh, which continued all the way down to the sea.



We could see Blakeney Point clearly in the distance but after last time we'd vowed to never do it again unless something really special was reported there. As ever, there were tons of **Woodpigeons** flying around just about everywhere we looked. In the garden were **Starling, Robin, Blackbird, Magpie, Greenfinch, Jackdaw, Song Thrush, Blue Tit, Collared Dove, Great Tit, Dunnock, Collared Dove** and we could hear **Goldcrests** calling from somewhere in a tree. Recently it had been noticed that the UK was seeing a huge influx of Jays from the continent due a failed acorn crop and even at this early stage we'd already seen 4 x **Jays** flying over the house. Looking further out over the marsh with our bins we could see **Little Egret, Teal, Mallard, Lapwing** and a couple of **Stock Doves**. After checking out our surroundings, with somewhat bleary eyes, we packed our stuff into the car and headed out at 9.35am noticing that we didn't seem to have any neighbours. Happy days :).

I reckoned that nearby Gramborough Hill at Salhouse would be as a good a place as any to start our first day. I've always thought it looks like a great spot for finding any tired migrants after their journey over the North Sea. I'm guessing it's good because it's a small hill that's higher than the surrounding shingle ridge so birds can see it from further away, but who knows? My car was reading 9C but even so we had to raise an eyebrow when we saw some

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walkers out and about in shorts! Driving past Cley we saw **Canada Goose** and **Pheasant** out in the fields. We arrived at the Beach car park at Salthouse at 9.40am seeing **Mute Swan** on the way down the road and also a familiar face, standing by the cars chatting to some other Birders. It was Penny Clarke who's a regular on Birdforum who I've always found to be a very helpful one at that. Being in the zombified state we were in we couldn't face going over and introducing ourselves so instead chose to give her the nod from a distance and sidled away inconspicuously.

In the field by the car park were 5x **Dark bellied Brent Geese**, a large flock of **Goldfinches** and **Linnets**, **Reed Buntings** and loads of **Skylarks** singing overhead which made it feel like being at Langness in June! There was also **Redshank**, **Greylag** and **Egyptian Geese** all of which we didn't have to look far to find. As we walked over towards the hill itself we could hear the high-pitched squeaking of **Shrews** from somewhere deep in the grass. There was a **Carriion Crow** knocking about and having scanned through all the Pipits in the hope of something interesting we could only find **Meadow Pipits**. By this point Penny and her mates had already reached Gramborough Hill and were standing around, watching the area. They'd beaten us to it and we could tell by their body language that it was dead so, although we had a quick look, we didn't waste time and climbed up the hill for a scan of the sea. Looking out it appeared to be pretty lifeless apart from the ever-present **Cormorants** but our patience was rewarded with a nice **Red-throated Diver**, which was close in. All we had to do was get down to the shoreline close enough to get some decent pics. As it dived we ran for it, keeping our eyes peeled for when it resurfaced, so we could stop dead in the hope that it wouldn't clock us. This worked really well and the Diver seemed totally oblivious to our presence but it was moving away from us with every dive. We followed it down the beach until we were in a good enough position and rattled off some shots. With the sun on the bird and it being so close we both managed to get our best Red-throated Diver shots ever.



Red-throated Diver

While all this was going on we'd also noticed a single **Gannet**, **Common Gull**, **Great black-backed Gull**, **Razorbill** and **Guillemot** but we'd spotted a very dark Duck which was extremely close in but much further down the beach. Deciding that it was definitely worth checking for Common/Velvet Scoter we abandoned the Red throat, which was by now miles

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away and carried on up the beach. As we approached the Duck it was clearly a male **Common Scoter** but by then it had drifted further away from us....Aarrghhhh! All my thoughts of a brilliant Scoter shot went out the window but at least we had some good RTD shots to take the sting out of it. We got some quick distant record shots of the Scoter and I then realized that we'd walked so far down the beach that we were almost at Kelling, which was going to be our next planned stop.



Common Scoter

There'd been a Pectoral Sandpiper on the pool at Kelling water meadow for about 2 weeks so, rather than walk back to the car and drive there, we thought it would make more sense to walk the extra distance which would get us there quicker anyway. Walking up the beach on the shingle was a scary reminder of the possibility of having to do the Blakeney Point walk again and although it's doable it's certainly not pleasant.



Looking towards Kelling

At least this walk was only a short hop from the car in relation and it wasn't long before we were heading along the footpath towards the fields. When we turned the corner and the pool came into view we could see some Birders and Photographers were already there, looking intently at something.



Kelling Water Meadows

We crossed our fingers that it was our target bird and that it was also close enough to get pics of, but was that asking too much? We stood next to a clearing in the brambles and peered through the gap. I started scanning the back of the pool while Wendy scanned the far right

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but within a few seconds I noticed something, out of the corner of my eye, much closer than where either of us had been looking.....**Pectoral Sandpiper!** OK, the bird was there but it was still a bit far away for pics but it was nice to see regardless especially as it was only our second Pec Sand. Luckily it was making its way slowly towards us so we stuck it out hoping it would come near enough, which it did to a really close range, giving us our best ever views :). With no option than to shoot into the light we couldn't get anything decent for all our efforts, which was a real shame especially considering how close it was.....Boooooo!



Pectoral Sandpiper

On the other side of the pool were some **Pied Wagtails** and over the water we saw a **Migrant Hawker** and a single juvenile **Swallow**, which surely should've been thinking of leaving? A **Kestrel** flew over nearby but there was nothing else about, never mind a Ring Ouzel or 2, so knowing that we couldn't better any of the shots we already had we headed back to the car. After climbing back up onto the shingle ridge we looked back at the view over the water meadows.

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Kelling

On the way back I got a text alert of a Whinchat at Gramborough Hill so we'd have to stop for second look, as it definitely wasn't there first time around.

Back at Gramborough Hill we found several **Stonechats**, which hadn't been there earlier so we hung around to see if there was anything else. Sure enough there was a **Whinchat** with them, although it was pretty active and not staying put for long. It flew round the back of the hill before we'd had a chance to even get a record shot so we followed it, hoping it hadn't gone further afield already. Thankfully it was still there and sitting nicely on top of some dried up seed heads so our cameras were going mental!



Whinchat

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We tried to edge our way closer to get some better shots but it flew and this time it was off....Oooops! We quickly scuttled away before anyone could point the finger but Wendy soon forgot about the incident when she saw the coffee van parked up when we arrived back at the car park at 12.20pm.

Obviously her first move was to get a Cappuccino from the van but she was also desperate to find the nearest W.C! After she'd returned, grinning semiconsciously, with her coffee I drove over to Cley Visitor Centre, which killed 2 birds with 1 stone as she could also check the reports board while she was in there.....shame there was nothing on it! By then we were starving, so we grabbed our lunch from the back seat and ate it in the car, adding **Shelduck** to our growing list. Hoping that this energy intake would kick off our second wind we sat back and realized that it hadn't worked, we were knackered regardless! We needed something to pick us up and quick but the only thing I could think of was a report from the day before of a Yellow-browed Warbler at Walsey Hills, which conveniently was only about 2mins away. At 12.50pm we left and 3mins later we parked up in the layby at Walsey Hills.

There were a few cars there already and only one space left right on the end, which was practically in the bushes, so I grabbed it quickly. It was obviously busier than normal, which we hoped was because the YBW was still there, and as we walked along the footpath we saw a group of Birders standing a bit further down. We had a quick look at the feeders, which were dead apart from a **Coal Tit** but we could hear a Tit flock so our next task would be to find them so we could trawl through the birds. There were **Chaffinches** in the trees and we found the flock of **Long-tailed Tits**, which had a **Treecreeper** and Goldcrests amongst them. Right at the back I spotted a nice female **Brambling**, which is always a good find but there was no sign of the YBW. We stuck with it but couldn't even pick up on a call so, as it hadn't been reported that day we presumed that it had already moved off. It made us appreciate how lucky we'd been to get to see the YBW on its 2nd day in Laxey just 2 weeks ago. It too could so easily have cleared off before we'd been able to get there and the fact that we'd also managed some cracking shots of it was unbelievable! A Migrant Hawker was buzzing about but there was nothing else so we resigned ourselves to the fact that the bird had gone but were quietly confident that we'd get another chance somewhere else during the week.

Back at the car at 1.28pm we needed a break and Wendy definitely needed more caffeine so I drove back to Cley Visitor Centre and we hit the café. To keep me going I ordered a sausage roll so while I ate that and Wendy slurped on her cappuccino we contemplated where to go next. We hadn't planned to but we decided to stay at Cley, as the hides are quite near so there wouldn't be much walking involved. Not only that but we'd be able to sit down and veg when we got to them....sorted :).

First off was Bishops Hide but when we opened the door we found that a small group of Birders, who were sitting along the left hand side, had blocked most of the large bench, in the center, with their bags and tripods.....Grrrrr! We squeezed ourselves into a small gap on the right hand side and scanned the pools. We could see all the usual birds that we'd expect like **Pintail, Ruff, Dunlin, Wigeon, Shoveler, Black-tailed Godwit, Coot, Moorhen**, there were just 3x **Avocets** left and approx 30x **Redwing** flew overhead. We heard **Water Rail, Bearded Tit** and **Cetti's Warbler** from somewhere deep in the reeds and then came a bit of action. Wendy spotted a huge **Peregrine** blasting over, which flushed all the birds nearby and created a wave effect over the other pools, as it flew further away.....Cool :). As usual it didn't catch anything but it certainly gave a few waders a run for their money and for one gripping moment it nearly had one! Its presence had flushed up a flock of **Golden Plover** so we went through them as best we could looking for an American but with no joy. We just knew that there had to be one somewhere out there in Norfolk it was just a case of finding it. There were some Dragonflies knocking about too and I was sure that one of them was a **Ruddy Darter**. The people who were hogging the benches had started to annoy us with their constant verbal diarrhoea and when the door opened and a huge group of RSPB members, on

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an organized outing, piled in we took it as our cue to leave. Maybe we were just too tired but the people next to us were equally as bad and as we got up to leave Wendy checked them out. Apparently, the woman's hair was so greasy it would've made a chip pan look positively gleaming and the man she was with was wearing some kind of trench coat with a strange and unnecessary cape thing attached to the collar! Yet again we'd found ourselves sandwiched between the dudes, weirdo's and great unwashed of the Birding fraternity.....Brilliant! :/.

Dragging ourselves along the boardwalk towards the other hides we started to get the distinct impression that we'd yet again picked a bad week and that there was nothing happening. Surely after our Cornwall trip had been such a disaster we deserved better luck this time...or maybe we didn't? From the hide on the right we found a **Greenshank** and a single **Marsh Harrier** floating over the reed beds, which again caused unease amongst the other birds. There were a couple of small waders on the far side, which were so distant they were impossible to ID. With the RSPB party being around the hides were all absolutely chocka and after quickly checking the other 2 out and finding nothing else we'd had enough and stumbled our way back to the car.

By the time we slumped ourselves into the seats it was 3.18pm and we'd lost the energy and will to carry on. We needed to chill out and recover from the day before but first we needed to pop into Spa at Blakeney for some bits and bobs, as we hadn't been shopping yet. On the way we saw **Lesser Black-backed Gull** and were back at our much warmer than when we'd first arrived HQ by 3.30pm. We had a look out of the living room window again and saw a **Buzzard** drifting past and could hear **Curlews** in the distance. There were loads of Blackbirds in the garden and scanning around I found a **Fieldfare** and 2x Redwing eating berries in the bushes. This was definitely a sign that some kind of movement was happening so I reckoned Friary Hills would be our first port of call in the morning. After a very early and quick tea Wendy retreated to the bathroom for a long relaxing bath while I started to go through our pics. We both agreed that the house was one of the best we'd stayed in to date and felt very much at home. At around 9.30pm it started lashing down with rain which, had the wind had been in a favourable direction, would've been very good news indeed.....but it wasn't. We were both feeling the full effects of the past 2 days and were so zonked that it felt like our brains were being sucked out of our heads, so at 9.45pm we surrendered and went to bed.....hardcore or what? Hahahahaha!

Sunday 14th October

After a good night's sleep we were up and about at 7.24am and when we opened the curtains we could see that it had rained over night and was still overcast and extremely windy. If the wind had changed direction it would've been perfect! We weren't in a huge hurry to get out so took our time having breakfast and getting ready so we didn't leave until 9am.

We parked up at Friary Hills just down the road 3mins later and, as far as the eye could see, the path was caked in Blackbirds and Finches. They were everywhere so it made us remember the 2x Ring Ouzels and 2x Red-rumped Swallows we'd seen last time we'd been there in May. This felt promising so we trotted off down the footpath with our eyes and ears on alert for anything that moved or squeaked.



Friary Hills

Apart from the gazillion Blackbirds and copious amounts of Redwing, to our disappointment, there was nothing else lurking in the nooks and crannies :(We thought we may as well go to the end to check the Ring Ouzel fields and on the way I spotted a nice male **Siskin** feeding on the ground right next to us. We stopped and got some shots, which should've been better but could've been worse.



Siskin

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We say there was nothing there but I suppose loads of Thrushes and Finches was pretty good, and an obvious sign that something was happening. While I was busy trying to get pics of the Siskin, which was happily stuffing its face behind some grass, Wendy had spotted something much more entertaining. Up on the hill silhouetted against the sky was a very rare sight indeed. There were 2 middle aged women doing Tai Chi or something as if they were on a stage.....whether they were expecting to attract an audience or not is anyone's guess! Wendy quickly and semi discretely got some quick pics for a bit of fun but they actually represent the scene quite well :D.



Tai chi!

It had started to feel colder and was becoming a bit showery so it seemed like a good time to hit the Deli for a caffeine fix for Wendy. As I sat waiting I was secretly hoping that she'd come back with something yummy to eat and my luck was in. As she sat down she opened a brown paper bag and tore something in half....pan au chocolat! I was expecting the usual warm, crispy one fresh out of the oven but I strongly suspected that this time we were eating yesterdays left overs but it did the job....om nom nom :).

Our next plan was to try Cley Beach as it's THE place to be for seawatching and we pulled up at the beach car park at 10.54am. The hut was full of locals as usual so we retreated to our regular spot, which is behind a small boat on the shingle. It's normally sheltered from the wind there but on this occasion there was no escaping it.....it was freezing. The sea was dead, there was nothing out there at all, not even an Auk or Diver, but a small flock of **Turnstone** flew up the beach and out of sight. We'd just about given up when I spotted a **Little Gull** in the distance, which was the highlight of our efforts but there was no point hanging around. We stood up, hoping we didn't have dodgy looking wet patches on our bums from sitting on the shingle, and left for our next stop.

Before we'd come away there'd been a YBW at Warham Greens for several days so we thought we'd give it a go, if there'd already been 1 surely it could get another? This time we weren't going to walk from the car park or drive down the lethal, sump destroying track because I'd found another track called Garden Drove, which looked far more car friendly. I don't really know why I'd never used it before but I'll know for next time, as it was indeed much easier. We parked up at 11.52am and started walking slowly down the footpath, which cut through the fields and had a hawthorn hedge on either side. I know it was car friendly and all that but we weren't expecting to see a 4x4, making light work of it, heading straight for us and ended up standing practically in the hedge to let it past!



Garden Drove - Warham Greens

It looked brilliant for any migrant Warbler and it wasn't long before we'd located the Long-tailed Tit flock, which had some Goldcrests in with them. Unfortunately there was nothing else but just to rub salt in the wounds we were pretty sure that we'd heard the call of a YBW as we were walking down. At the bottom of the track is a small group of trees where you can view the flat marsh area, which is where I lost my favourite cap of all time!



Warham Greens

We carried on down to check them out and came across a small grey moth, which we followed until it eventually landed on the branch of a tree. Although it was pretty boring it's wings were sort of like tissue paper and it was definitely new to us so I took a record shot to ID later.

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After trawling through the wrong book and ending up resorting to ispot it turned to be a November Moth.



November Moth

While we were doing this, another Birder joined us and asked if we'd seen anything. Obviously our answer was a simple, "Nope" but he stopped for a chat anyway. After he'd gone and I thought the coast was clear I wandered into the trees to water the grass. While I dealt with the task in hand I thought I'd multitask and do some 'pishing' as well.....which incidentally isn't the same thing! It's making a, "Psh" sound with your mouth, which is meant to alert any birds, hiding in bushes and bring them out into view. As I pished I turned my head to check out some other bushes and saw the bloke we'd just been talking to standing on the other side. I watched in horror as he turned his head and looked me straight in the eye.....Aaarrrgghhhhhh! Why is it that everyone else in the world can get away with it except me? My bad luck was obviously ongoing so after quickly composing myself I scuttled back out slightly red-faced. We were back at the car by 12.23pm having failed to see our 2nd YBW of the trip. I don't consider them as dips though, as the birds hadn't been reported on the days we went to look, nor were we remotely confident that they'd still be there, so it wasn't too bad.

My next plan was to go to Holme as there'd been another YBW reported earlier that morning, Rose-coloured Starling and Spotted Redshank the day before as well as Ring Ouzel and Red-necked Grebe nearby. Holme is a bit out of the way and better first thing in the morning but as we had no set plans I thought we might as well have a go. As we drove past Holkham we saw a flock of **Pink-footed Geese** flying overhead. We took a detour via Titchwell for a WC break and it was packed, even the overflow car park was full!

We arrived at Holme dunes at 1.10pm and had a scan of the trees by the car park where the YBW had been earlier. This was our 3rd attempt to see one but try as we might there was no

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sign of it so we got back in the car and ate our lunch while continuing to look. At 1.25pm we took a wander over to the Dunes, which is renowned for being a good spot for migrants.



Holme Dunes

We looked just about everywhere possible but the area was lifeless. Eventually, on the way back, we found a huge flock of Starlings and frantically looked through them all before they landed again but we couldn't find a RCS in amongst them. Wendy then spotted the biggest **Fox Moth** Caterpillars we've ever seen, munching their way through the brambles, so set about getting some pics. You can't tell how huge they actually were in the pics though but honestly, they were monsters!



Fox Moth Caterpillar

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We tried the Pines next hoping to find or maybe hear a Firecrest but it was starting to hit home big time that there was nothing about and nor was there going to be for the rest of the week. We trudged our way through the fantastic looking habitat picturing all the great birds, which the area has had over the years. We had no such luck though and Wendy's motivation levels were dropping off a cliff rapidly. This didn't help matters but I couldn't blame her really so not wanting to give up I suggested we took a wander over to have a look out to sea. This was the only suggestion I could come up with as the very strong winds were obviously keeping anything that was about completely hunkered down. By leaving the trees and going out onto the dunes we seemed to have accidentally found the seawatching spot used by the locals! Skillz.



Seawatching spot

As usual the sea was dead but we did manage to spot a **Great-crested Grebe** flying low over the water and some **Bar-tailed Godwits** flying up the beach down at the shoreline. There were hundreds of Brent Geese too but we could see a huge black rain cloud 'squall' rolling in over the sea. We didn't fancy getting caught in the middle of it much but we stuck it out to see if it would push any birds in. As you can probably guess, it didn't so we ended up hot footing it back to the Visitor Centre just in time to dodge the downpour....Phew! Weirdly the locals didn't seem to budge even with the squall approaching, maybe they haven't got the seawatching skills of us Manx Birders :D.



Downpour from the Visitor Center

We'd managed to stay dry but not surprisingly the others hadn't been so lucky and one by one, bedraggled Birders and families appeared to take cover with us. It looked as though it was never going to stop and by then we were in desperate need of a drink so decided to make a run for it back to the car. It must've only taken 10secs but in that short space of time we were absolutely soaked! It carried on chucking it down for about 5mins longer and then stopped giving way to blue skies again so we picked up our plan and walked over to the hides.

It was so windy that by the time we'd reached the 1st hide we were relieved to see that our clothes were practically dry. Apart from 5x Little Grebes, a sight that would be much appreciated in the I.O.M, there was very little on the pool so we carried on to the 2nd hide hoping for some better luck :/. Spotted Redshank is a bird that's always nice to see when we visit Norfolk so we were crossing our fingers that the 2 from the previous day were still there. When we looked out from the hide our hearts sank.....they'd already gone! There was literally nothing out there, which came as no surprise to us.



2nd Hide view

We didn't want to waste any more time so left pretty sharpish but not long after setting off it started to throw it down again so we raced back to the 1st hide for shelter. Thoroughly soaked again we sat shivering for a few minutes until the shower passed over and it was safe to leave. We were back at the car and driving off by 3.52pm so I whacked the heater on at full blast to help dry us out and warm us up.

After a thoroughly uneventful day our only other plan was to head for Morrison's to stock up on food and stuff for the week as we'd only brought a couple of bits with us to tide us over. On the way we saw our 1st **Brown Hare** of the trip and inland at Docking were 100's of Pink-footed Geese grazing in a field. We arrived at Morrison's at 4.38pm and found that it was closed! Just like when we were in Cornwall we'd gone on a Sunday when it shuts early.....you'd think we'd have learnt our lesson! I got some petrol anyway and we would just have to make do with what we had back at the house for tea. It would've been nice to get the shopping out of the way though, while the weather was bad and we had nothing better to do.

We were home by 4.55pm and after a pretty uninspiring tea I set about going through our photos from the day while Wendy chilled out in the bath. It wasn't long before I was totally distracted by an Austrian guy called Felix Baumgardner who was attempting to break a record and be the first man to go faster than the speed of sound....Nutter! He was about to jump out of a space capsule from a balloon at a height of 127,000ft, something, which has never been done before as all the previous lunatics had died trying. When Wendy emerged from the bathroom I told her about it so we both sat on the edge of our seats glued to my ipad. We didn't know if we were just about to watch a man die or break a record but it was very addictive viewing. He actually did the jump and landed safely which was a relief.....Phew! Wendy went off to dry her hair only to find that her old but trusty holiday hairdryer was about to give up the ghost so that was another thing to add to the shopping list for tomorrow.....Urrghhhh! Not only that but we'd only been given a bath towel and a hand towel each and Wendy had found it impossible to put all her wet hair in the tiny hand towel so she needed to buy a decent sized one from somewhere too. By 10.30am we were totally pooped and decided that it was, well and truly bed time.

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Monday 15th October

After another good nights sleep we were up at 7.10am to find that the wind had totally dropped and that it was a nice sunny day :). After the bad weather the night before I thought Salthouse would be a good place to start again so after we'd got ourselves ready we set out at 8.46am. We arrived and parked up at 9am and started our walk over to Gramborough Hill but unlike last time we'd been there, there was no sign of any influx of birds and it was very quiet. We shook our heads in disbelief but trudged on regardless, which turned out to be a good move as I heard a call that I recognized but hardly ever hear. We looked up to see 2x **Lapland Buntings** flying over so our perseverance had paid off for once :). It would've been brilliant if they'd landed somewhere so we could've followed them but they weren't stopping and were off. Apart from 2x Little Gulls out to sea we saw nothing else so headed back to the car.

I've always wanted a decent Bearded Tit photo and at that time of year they're very likely to be out in the open making getting a pic possible. There'd recently been loads of great shots on BirdGuides so I reckoned that Cley East Bank should be our next stop. We arrived at 9.57am so it was still quite early and we could see a couple of Photographers standing about, waiting. As we walked down the path we could hear the, "Ping ping ping" of the **Bearded Tits** close by so it was looking hopeful. As we were scanning I noticed a white blob right in front of 1 of the Photographers and couldn't believe what I was seeing. He had a male Bearded Tit about 15ft away from him out in the open on the near side of the ditch! We stopped before we'd reached him, so as not scare off his bird, but luckily for us Wendy spotted some more fly in near us. Although they were deep down in the reeds we could tell they were close to where we were standing, it was just a case of waiting for them to show. We'd been watching small groups of them flying further away but they were miles off and staying that way. For a few seconds we finally got what we wanted when Wendy spotted one out in the open so we raised our cameras to make the most of a golden opportunity. It wasn't as close as we'd have liked though but we fired off some shots, which were all very disappointing considering the situation. The light was bad and the image I had in my head was certainly not the one I was looking at on my camera screen :(.



Bearded Tit

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The birds then decided to fly away from us and join the others further away so that was the end of that.....Booooooooooooo!

Seeing as we were there, although it was very cold, we carried on down to the pools at the end hearing the blast of a Cetti's Warbler on the way. The largest pool was practically empty apart from all the common Waders and Gulls and the small pool on the opposite side was the same. It did however have a Little Egret feeding in it so we chanced our arm at getting close enough for some shots. It was very obliging and we slowly edged our way near enough to get a few pics and Wendy managed to get a nice one of it fishing.



Little Egret

By then our fingers and toes were growing painfully numb so Wendy couldn't wait to get a coffee to warm herself up. We climbed back up the side of the bank and walked quickly back to the car for about 10.52am and headed straight for Cley Visitor Centre. By the time Wendy had been in for her coffee fix and we were thinking about where to go next it had started to rain.....Brilliant! That scuppered most of my ideas but I thought a safe bet would be Wells Woods, as it's sheltered and hopefully some birds would have had the same idea as us. Not that this theory has ever worked for us in the past but I'd had a report of yet another YBW from there, which was worth a shot, so we left at 11.13am.

As we pulled into the Wells Woods car park looking for a space Wendy noticed a Jay feeding on the ground by a rubbish bin. Obviously it was another opportunity not to be missed and with the massive Jay influx being so unusual if we didn't get at least one shot we'd both be severely annoyed! I slowly drove the car nearer, which flushed another from the hedge next to us, and positioned ourselves to get a pic. We turned around to grab our cameras from the back seat and the little **** flew off.....Noooooooooooooooooooo! We waited a while but it never came back and although the rain had stopped earlier it had just started again. With depression setting in before we'd even started things weren't looking good but hopefully we'd get a 2nd chance at a Jay shot as the area was caked in them.

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We'd been impressed with 5 at Holme yesterday but there were 9x Little Grebes on the pond by the entrance, which we heard before we saw. They were too far off for any pics so we headed straight for the path that leads to The Dell, which after the last trip in May I now have gps marked in my phone! On the way we heard a Chiffchaff and then something that made our ears prick up. Was it what we thought, surely not? We'd failed so far to pin one down so this time we weren't budging until we had this one in our bins! While we looked we heard **Redpoll** flying over and found a particularly busy tree, which was full of Tits, Crests and Finches. On closer inspection there was also 6x Brambling, which we both did a good job of messing up every shot of. Although this was the best I came up with it was nice to see so many Brambling together.



Brambling

Then, we heard that call again and I nailed it down to the tree on the other side of the path. More Birders had joined us by then and there were Goldcrests everywhere to throw us all off the scent, but after trawling through them all our eyes were pinned on one bird. Wendy was the first to get a clear view of its face, which clinched it, **Yellow-browed Warbler!** :). Although we couldn't get any pics we'd at least finally caught up with one of these elusive little birds.....PHEW! The others hadn't been so fortunate, having not seen the YBW and missing out on the Brambling too. I guess we'd actually hit some good luck for once especially as the others had only been 5yds away from the Brambling tree and I was pointing up at the YBW when it showed!

After I'd put the news out we carried on to find The Dell, which, with the help of the gps mark I located straight off for the first time ever....Skillz! The first thing we heard was the cracking of twigs high up in the branches so we knew that we had a Grey Squirrel above our heads. There were loads of squirrel-chewed pinecones scattered all over the ground, which meant that these greedy little creatures definitely weren't going hungry. As usual all we could hear

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were the calls of Goldcrests but in The Dell you can more or less forget about seeing any of them unless they come down low to feed, which they never seem to. We then heard the call of a YBW again and whether or not it was the same bird as earlier is anyone's guess. Next we heard the pecking of a Great Spotted Woodpecker and spotted it scaling a nearby tree trunk checking all the nooks and crannies in the bark as it went. After about 15mins of looking up, trying to spot even just one Goldcrest our necks were starting to feel the strain so we gave up.

On the way out of The Dell is a bench and just next to it was another Jay so we used a mound as cover to approach the bird.



Wells Woods

We'd managed to get quite close to it and were just about to raise our cameras when some people came walking down the path, flushing the bird. They were shortly followed by a runner, then more people so the Jay didn't come back meaning that we'd just missed our 2nd Jay opportunity....Grrrrrr! We were back at the car by 1.25pm and of course Wendy headed straight to the Café for a coffee and we quickly ate our well-earned lunch before setting off to our next stop.

We arrived at nearby Titchwell at 1.45pm where there'd been reports of Spotted Redshank on Volunteer's Marsh and Brambling at the feeders by the Visitor Centre the day before. We went over to have a look at the feeders first and typically there was no sign of any Brambling so we carried on. A staff member walked passed us on his walkie-talkie telling someone back at the Visitor Centre that he'd just seen a Merlin flying over the Freshmarsh. 10secs later, on the Meadow Trail, Wendy pointed upwards and said, "Look!" just as a **Merlin** came belting up the track, obviously on a mission, and straight over us :). Jammy or what? Since our last visit they'd created a new trail called the East Trail so we thought we'd check it out first. It was a fair way to walk over to the new pools and our backs had started to give us a bit of jip so we were glad to reach the viewing screen. It all looked a bit boring and new, no plants or trees had established yet and neither had the birds. Scanning around we saw **Pochard**, **Gadwall** and **Tufted Duck** but then something else caught our eye.....a female **Red-crested Pochard**. This was a lifer for Wendy and although it wasn't exactly a very exciting one it was the first of the trip so far. We were starting to seriously doubt that we'd even get one during the entire

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week so we couldn't grumble :). The excitement of a lifer lasted all of 5secs and it was back to reality again.



Titchwell

We walked over to the end of the Trail for the sake of completeness but Wendy's back was really starting to protest and somewhere along the line she'd lost the painkillers she'd packed. The problem was that we hadn't planned to go to Morrison's until we were heading home and the lack of shops on our travels meant she'd have to wait. After seeing the new trail and how it had potential to be good in the future we retraced our steps and set off on our usual trek to the Island Hide.

When we finally got there Wendy was obviously in quite a lot of pain so we sat down and looked out over the marsh. It was very windy which was making it feel pretty chilly so I could tell she didn't want to be there. To top it all off there wasn't very much about apart from the usual stuff but it was nice to see around 1000 x Golden Plover coming in to roost for a while before lifting off and moving on. I thought this was our best chance to dig out an American Golden Plover but yet again we drew a blank. We had a quick look on Volunteer's Marsh for the Spotted Redshank but we think someone had got it wrong as the other Birders were pointing out and referring to a Redshank! Next off was the beach, which we had a really good scan of but only found some **Knot** and **Sanderling** to add to our list. By then it was getting quite late and Wendy was itching to leave to get some painkillers so we headed back to the car park. Wendy very tentatively sat down and had a last ditch root around for some tablets but found nothing, so at 4.45pm we left for the Supermarket seeing **Grey Partridge** flying across the road somewhere on the way.

I'd planned to go via Barn Owl corner and as we approached we could see that it was busy and there were people with tripods and cameras everywhere. We took this as a good sign as we'd not seen any Owls there for ages and were worried that they'd left the area entirely or worse still, suffered from the past 2 bad winters. It was tricky to find somewhere to park and there were cars parked on both side of the road making it single file traffic.....bet the locals love that! We had a quick look but there didn't seem to be anything, until Wendy spotted a white shape perched next to some weird round building on the far side of the fields. It was distant but it was still a **Barn Owl**, which was a huge relief and always lovely to see.

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We finally made it to Morrison's, which thankfully was open, and did our shopping. Wendy bought some pills but couldn't find a towel or hairdryer anywhere.....Uh oh! As we queued up at the checkout she had a brainwave and sent me off up one of the aisles to have a look for a hairdryer. Not having any need for hairdryers myself it was amazing that I found and picked her one that was both cheap and feature packed! It would do the job and hopefully see her through a good few more holidays. By the time we left it was 6.20pm and dark so after Wendy had downed her painkillers we headed for home.

Back at HQ at 6.40pm we were starving so after putting the shopping away it was time for tea. Wendy went off for a long hot soak in the bath to help her back and emerged feeling much better. The idiot had also found the painkillers she'd packed, in the pocket of one of the wash bags, so was kicking herself that she'd spent the day in pain for nothing....Doh! As we were late getting in we managed to stay up for a bit longer but after another long day we packed up and went to bed at 10.45pm.

Tuesday 16th October

It was blowing a gale when we got up at 7.15am and we could see that it had again rained over night so it was on with the base layers and snow boots in anticipation of the cold. We left at 8.57am by which point my IBS had kicked off.....Great! I think it must've been the new cereal I'd bought the night before and had for breakfast so I vowed never to eat it again. What with Wendy's back the day before and now me being in pain we'd started to feel totally cursed. We thought that Cley Beach would be a good place to start again, as it was windy, so we headed straight there.

I parked up at 9.04am and as usual the hut was full of locals and we resumed our position over by the boat. It was freezing cold and a total waste of time, as there were absolutely no birds out there apart from a few Gulls! Even the locals weren't hanging about and one by one they packed up and left. We quickly gave up too and took a wander over the shingle to the North Hide. The pools at the hide have never impressed us in the past but reports of decent birds still keep coming in so it's definitely worth checking out. The sun is always in your face making the birds look like black silhouettes and they're miles away too, which makes picking out anything interesting virtually impossible. Although we've had Temminck's Stint there in the past the views we had can only be described as utterly crap. We didn't waste much time there, as we wanted to get to Friary Hills as early as possible. Back at the car at 9.51am it was interesting to watch 100's of Wigeon flying in off the sea and we saw another solitary Red-throated Diver.

We arrived at Friary Hills at 10.09am and as we set off down the path I had text alert of Ring Ouzel and Lesser Whitethroat in the brambles below Hermanus Restaurant at Winterton Dunes.....Urrghhhhhh! Winterton was 1hr away on the NE Norfolk coast and I thought it might actually be sheltered from the strong Westerlies. We'd worked out by now there was going to be very little for us to see this holiday so I felt that anything was worth going for. Out of sheer desperation there was only one thing for it, turn around and hot foot it straight to Winterton, but not before someone had been to Cley Deli for a Cappuccino! On the way we were wondering if we'd see any Firecrests during the week and we both agreed that our best chance of finding one would be at Holkham Pines. We were a good distance away from all our local patches so imagine our total frustration when I received a report of Firecrest at Holkham Pines! This news was just typical of our luck and so freakily coincidental it wasn't funny anymore.....Unbelievable! There was no point turning back as we were too far away so we carried on to Winterton in the hope that a Ring Ouzel would lessen the blow.

I parked up in the car park at Winterton Dunes at 11.55am and Wendy ran over to the café to buy a ticket for a couple hours parking. The wind was so strong that she could hardly walk on the way back and the sand was blowing straight into her face.....good start! We battled our way up the road and turned into the Dunes where it was, to our great relief, very sheltered

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and pleasantly warm. A couple of Birders stopped to ask if we'd seen anything, which we hadn't having just arrived, and told us about the Ring Ouzel and Lesser Whitethroat. It turned out that they'd seen them.....like 2hrs ago and not since! Knowing this slightly important bit of new information changed everything and our hearts sank. Having driven all that way we scoured the bushes and brambles anyway all the way over to the restaurant and although there were loads of small skulking birds in them there was nothing out of the ordinary.



Winterton Dunes

There was a Tit flock, Chiffchaffs, Goldcrests and loads of **House Sparrows** but obviously no sign of the Lesser Whitethroat or Ring Ouzel. We were too late, the little ***** had gone already.....Grrrrrrrrr! If we'd known how long ago they'd been seen it would've put a different slant on our plans. We walked back along the dunes, which was hard going for Wendy in her snow boots so she'd gone into Karl Pilkington mode again. Feeling totally dejected and clutching at straws we had a look out to sea where there was a group of Common Scoters just about visible as they bobbed on the waves.



I think I went a bit mental as I got slightly over enthusiastic about them and went wandering off down the beach like I'd never seen a Common Scoter before, looking back now I was obviously delirious.

Back at the car at 1.03pm the wind was peaking at 30mph but we were boiling as we had too many clothes on. Wendy grabbed herself another coffee from the café and we ate our lunch, regretting our move and wishing we'd just gone to Holkham Pines and probably seen Firecrest! We left at 1.19pm and I decided to go to a place I'd read about and always wanted to try but strangely, even after 7 visits to Norfolk, we never had and fortunately it was only 10mins up the coast.

We arrived at the pay and display car park at Horsey Gap at 1.31pm but there was no sign of a machine to pay at.....Hmmmmmm? I'm not complaining but it's not a good feeling leaving your car not knowing if you're going to return to find a ticket slapped on the windscreen or even worse a clamp (if they still clamp these days). We wandered off anyway and although I'd thought it'd be sheltered behind all the low bushes it was anything but!



Horsey Gap

We managed to find a Tit flock but as usual there was nothing in with them. I could see why the place had had some decent stuff in the last week though. The low cover was just behind the dunes, perfect for pulling in tired migrants that'd come in over the North Sea. We tried our best but couldn't dig anything out so were back at the car at 2.07pm and scratching our heads as to where to go next AGAIN!

We drove through Waxham, seeing more Red-Legs, and as Wendy had spotted a Tesco there earlier I stopped off so she could go in and see if they sold towels. It was only a small supermarket so she had no joy and resigned herself to having to cram all her hair into a hand towel for the rest of the week....Hahahaha. Nor did they sell my Lactofree cheese so my lunchtime sarnie days were over.....Boooooo! Hilariously, even though it was a small supermarket with a small car park I watched Wendy, on her return, walk straight past looking all confused. She'd literally looked straight at the car so I thought she was messing about but after another 5mins I realized that she'd actually managed to get amazingly lost. Just as I was about to get out to track her down she appeared at the side of the car! Hahahaha women! While she was gone I'd been trying to count up the species we'd seen so far and found that we'd need to find 7 more birds if we were to even get our list up to a feeble 100 and the way things were going it seemed doubtful. After scratching our heads over how we were going to manage it I thought it might be worth having a look for a Firecrest that had been reported at Kelling on our way home.

Back at Kelling we came across several Goldcrests calling from the bushes but none of them had that extra 'oomph' about them to make us sit up and pay extra attention. While we were there we thought we'd pay the Pec Sand another visit just incase the situation was better for a pic. When we got there the bird was actually further out in the pool making any chance of bettering our existing shots impossible so we quickly headed back to the car.

After that we were really starting to flag and nearly falling asleep so, as neither us could be bothered with cooking, we headed straight to our favourite tried and trusted pub 'The Dunn Cow'. I knew exactly what I wanted and so did Wendy but when we arrived at 4.30pm there was a board up outside advertising their new winter menu :O! We went in, sat down and looked at the menu but there was absolutely nothing on it that I fancied, my favourite Cajun

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chicken had gone.....Noooooooooooo! :(Wendy pointed out the sausage and mash, which I actually like, so I had no choice but to go for that instead. When she went up to order at the bar she cleverly requested that the weird sauce came in a separate jug just in case I didn't like it. Needless to say, I didn't like it and the proper sausages weren't really my cup of tea either. Wendy was very pleased with her Tomato Soup and homemade bread, which was just what the doctor ordered after a cold day. We left at 5.15pm and I had a lingering bad taste in my mouth for the rest of the night.....damn those quality butchers sausages!

We were back at HQ by 5.25pm and as there was still about 1hr of light left I thought I'd nip out to Cley. There'd been Yellow-legged Gulls reported at the roost the previous evening so I thought I'd chance it and try to get some pics. Wendy said she couldn't care less about some stupid Gulls, as she'd had enough, and just wanted to stay in to try and chill out. After her bath she tested out her new hairdryer, which worked a treat.

When I arrived at Cley I went straight to Dawkes hide and sat down, there were 5 other Birders in there but I could tell that very little was being seen. Luckily the Gulls were already sitting at the roost and it took no time at all to pick out 3 x Adult **Yellow-legged Gulls** and get some record shots.



Yellow legged Gull

A further scan didn't reveal much else and I was just about to go when a Peregrine blasted through flushing up all the Gulls and everything else with them. After 5mins everything settled again but the Gulls had cleared right off to a further pool. This worried me slightly as my idea had been to come and recce the Gulls, so I could persuade Wendy to go the next evening. If it went according to plan she could see a new bird, but with the Gulls now being so twitchy it might not work :/.

After I'd got back I updated the bird list on my phone and realized that I'd miscalculated our total....Doh! While we'd been desperately trying to hit 100 and thinking that our total was going to be the worst ever, in actual fact we'd already exceeded it. That cheered us up for a bit

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but the fact still remained that we were still struggling in what should've been one of the best weeks of the year. For the last 2 years the very same week had been crawling in amazing birds like Red-flanked Bluetail, Rufous-tailed Robin, Olive-backed Pipit, Red-breasted Flycatcher.....but then we weren't there!

It had turned into a lovely evening and with no light pollution around we could see the clear starry sky at its best. It was really quiet and peaceful apart from the sound of the Curlews, Lapwings and Brent Geese from out on the marsh and the Tawny Owls were calling again just down the road. At 10pm we'd had enough and went to bed to watch TV before going to sleep.

Wednesday 17th October

When we got up at 7.07am it was still dark, windy and chucking it down and the fact that Wendy had only had 1 lifer so far was depressing. I had none so it was looking as though it was going to be our most uneventful trip to date. The only chance we had to up Wendy's count was to hit the Gull roost that evening incase the Yellow-legged Gulls had decided to return.....it's a sad life! We left at 9.03am by which point the rain had thankfully stopped but it was still very windy. I really wanted to get the Gun Hill walk in at some point, which is another migrant hotspot, so that was our first plan of the day sorted.

I parked up at the layby at Burnham Overy at 9.24am and we set off down the track. The habitat is perfect but we weren't surprised to find absolutely nothing, we'd become used to it by then. There were fewer birds around than back in the Isle of Man, which was really saying something!



Gun hill walk

We reached the bank that overlooks the marsh and to cheer us up for a split second we watched a **Kingfisher** whizzing up one of the streams....Nice :). The marsh itself is bordered by sedge and there were a lot of birds moving about, hidden in its cover. Every time we pinned one down it turned out to be a Wren, Dunnock or something equally as common, which was pretty frustrating. It wasn't as if we weren't putting the effort in, we were putting everything in but getting nothing out! We carried on over to Gun Hill regardless and climbed up the dunes for a scan out to sea. I spotted some kind of Partridges flying so walked over to where I'd seen them land while Wendy stayed put ready to ID them when they flew again. We

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were 99% sure what they were but hadn't been able to clinch it as neither of us got them in our bins or saw any features. There's a small Island called Scolt Head Island on the other side of where we were standing and we finally saw some new birds heading along the beach and straight for it.



Scolt Head Island

There were **Grey Plover** and **Ringed Plover**, nothing unusual but still new birds for the trip. As I grew closer to where we'd seen the birds land I slowed down, as I knew they were nearby. All of a sudden they flushed and in true Partridge style clumsily flapped away over to the island and disappeared again into the grass. These were also birds we'd been beginning to think we wouldn't see so we were very pleased to confirm that they were indeed **Grey Partridge**. From there we called it a day as yet again there was nothing apart from a few Meadow Pipits and Skylarks moving through. This seemed to have been the case all week and although the area should've been caked in migrants the birds just weren't there to be found.

Just as we thought it couldn't get any worse I had a report of a White-rumped Sandpiper at Salthouse. We were about 20-30mins away from Salthouse, which was just typical. We couldn't have been in an area nearby, oh no! We quickly ditched off Holkham Pines as the chances of catching up with a single Firecrest from the day before were very slim and headed straight back to the car. Although we'd not found any interesting birds at Gun Hill we'd added 4 to our list and if we could add the WRS then that would be another lifer for Wendy. Back at the car at 11.45am the temperature had risen considerably to 16C so Wendy's ski pants, which had served her so well earlier, were now far too hot but she breathed a sigh of relief that she hadn't worn her snow boots too!

There's an unwritten rule that when you're in a hurry you get held up somehow and this rule applied to us as we rushed over to Salthouse. We ended up getting stuck behind a tractor so it was slow progress! The WRS had been reported with the very obliging and tame Turnstones that hang around the car park. This meant that the views would be absolutely amazing but surely being of a different nature it wouldn't be long before it got sick of the people and traffic and was flushed? When we arrived at 12.16pm there was a small gathering of Birders with scopes wandering around, which instantly gave us a bad feeling. Not surprisingly there was no sign of the bird.....Arrghhhh! I then had a text update telling me that it was seen UNTIL

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11.30am before flying off.....why hadn't that info gone out at 11.30am to save everyone a wasted journey? This was really annoying because the bird had already gone before the report came in at 11.45am. We had a quick look around and spoke to some others who hadn't seen it either and retreated back to the car, depressed, to eat our lunch. We were really stuck for where to go next but as we always like to have a look for the Dartford Warblers at Kelling and with a chance of Yellowhammer, Crossbill and possibly Adder too we decided to try our luck.....or lack of it!

We arrived at Kelling Heath car park at 1.26pm with the distinct feeling that it was all going to go horribly wrong. We set off to our usual trusty sites but we could neither hear nor see any Yellowhammers or Crossbills, which was unusual. Wendy cheered herself up by finding a some of her all time favourite fungi.....Fly Agaric, which she couldn't resist getting some pics of.



Fly Agaric

We eventually found a pair of Stonechats and kept our eyes firmly pinned on their every move. As you probably already know from past articles, if there's Dartford Warblers about they'll be shadowing the Stonechats so it's really helpful to find them first. With our fingers crossed we waited and waited and watched but there wasn't a single Dartford Warbler to be found.....Booooooooo :(They're always a nightmare bird to pin down and it can take us up to 3 visits before we're lucky enough to eventually see one. We knew that they were around in May but were frustratingly elusive, even the single roaming male, but we can only hope that they've had a successful breeding season during the awful summer we'd had. While we were standing around I had a text alert reporting an Egyptian Vulture which had flown in off the sea at Cley.....what the? Hmmmmmmmm? Something instantly told us that it had to be an escaped bird, it was just too far fetched to be real, so we took the extremely risky decision to ignore what could possibly have been a potential first for Britain! We gave up on the Dartfords in the end and clutching at straws I suggested we went looking for Adders.



Kelling Heath

I kept getting more and more texts about the Vulture and was half tempted to go for a look just to see it, well there was nothing else going on. Wendy had gone all Karl Pilkington again and reckoned that we were wasting our time with the Adders, as it was too late in the year for them, and dragged behind me in full on negative mode. Again I couldn't really blame her, our morale was at an all time low and it did seem a bit unlikely. We had a quick look but all the spots where we'd seen them in May were overgrown and unrecognizable, not what we'd perceive as Adder friendly at all. Finally I got the text we'd been waiting for about the Egyptian Vulture saying that it was indeed an escaped bird from Wales. It must have been on quite an adventure then, having been seen down in Cornwall a couple of weeks ago, much better than sitting in an enclosure. We'd failed to see everything we'd gone for but on a more positive note we did find a moth that was struggling in a puddle so I rescued it and it was definitely a new one for us. It was quite happy on Wendy's hand while I took some record shots on my phone to ID later before she put it in a bush where it could hopefully dry off. When we got home we found out that it was a Barred Sallow and a lifer. Thank goodness for moths, they seemed to have saved the day on our last 2 trips! :).



Barred Sallow

There was no point in us sticking around so we were back at the car by 2.41pm totally knackered, depressed and bored. With no plans and no idea of what to do next we headed for Salthouse to have another look through the Turnstones at the car park. There was no sign of the WRS again and it could literally have been anywhere by then so we headed home via the Deli at Cley. Not long after we'd left I had another text reporting the bird on North Scrape at Cley but it'd already gone when the report went out. Having had more than our fair share of wild goose chases we weren't prepared to go for it until we were certain of its location.

It's a sure sign of a bad day when we're back at HQ by 3.30pm but with nothing else to do Wendy went off for a bath and we had an early tea. Gob-smacked as we were, this actually turned out to be a pretty good move, as I had another text about the WRS from Pat's Pool at Bishop's Hide. We were going to pin this one down if it killed us!

At 5pm we headed out to Cley and got to Bishop's Hide as fast as was humanly possible, seeing 2x Cetti's Warblers diving off the footpath and into the reeds very close to us on the way. We scanned and scanned but couldn't see anything vaguely resembling what we were after. We spoke to a few other birders who said that it had walked behind one of the little mud islands about 20mins earlier but they hadn't seen it fly off. To get a better view of the island we needed to walk round to Dawkes Hide but on the way a man stopped us and said that the bird had flown off to North Hide and had just been reported from there....Urrghhhhhh! We now had to make the decision whether to continue to Dawkes or turn round and drive the 5mins to the car park and walk to North Hide. It was certainly giving us the run around and we felt that it was too late in the day to get to North Hide before the light faded so we stayed put with the slim hope that it might come back to roost.

As we scanned through the Gull roost I spotted the 2x **Yellow-Legged Gulls** and Wendy was very pleased that she'd managed to pick out her 2nd lifer for herself. There was also a **Common Snipe** feeding outside and then a guy with a scope (1 of 2 other people in the hide)

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pointed something out to us. He'd spotted a lovely Barn Owl, which was sitting right next to the window of Bishop's Hide. There was a Birder looking out from the hide but as it was out of his range he was blissfully unaware of what was sitting just a few feet away, which gave us all a bit of a laugh. The other guy was a bit of a pillock and ignored the scope man's directions to the Barn Owl and loudly proclaimed, "I'm going to a foolproof place for Barn Owl, it's on the way to Burnham and you can see them down to a few feet." I was so close to saying, "Errrrr yeah, everyone knows about that field, it's in a book for crying out loud AND it's not foolproof!" but seconds later he left. What an idiot though, not even bothering to look at a lovely Barn Owl but it was his loss I suppose. It didn't stay there for long and we watched it take to the air and spend the next few minutes quartering the fields before disappearing into the distance.....very nice :). While we were watching the Owl the guy with the scope had noticed that the local feral **Sacred Ibis** had dropped in to roost and then he asked us if we were interested in Gulls. Wendy quickly replied with, "He is, more than me." We then spent about 10mins discussing a Gull that he'd been watching for a couple of days which looked very good for a Baltic Gull. We had a look through his scope and the Gull certainly looked different. This guy definitely knew his stuff, and was big into his Gulls, but like he said its ID was always going to be up for debate by someone out there as you can't definitely ID an immature in the field.

We then started talking about some of the decent birds, which had appeared in Britain recently and got onto the massive influx of Yellow-browed Warblers. We mentioned how we'd even had one in the IOM for the first time in years and he said that he'd seen a great photo of one from the IOM. Just out of curiosity I had to ask, "Where'd you see that, it might have been mine?" He told us that he writes for Rare Bird Alert so I instantly clicked and said, "Ahhhhh you must be Mark then?" He laughed and replied with, "Ahhhhh you must be Pete?" This was the bloke who'd emailed me only a couple of weeks ago to ask if he could use my picture for RBA's weekly review! It's such a small world so we shook hands and had a bit of laugh over it. Changing the subject he went on to tell us that he'd been to see the Egyptian Vulture earlier and had even heard the jingling of its bells! It turned out that the bird even had a name, which was Manfred.....Hahahahahaha! By then it was really starting to get dark so our chance of the WRS returning had gone but we decided that not to be defeated we'd be back first thing in the morning. We walked back as far as the road with him before going our separate ways and were back at the car at 6.28pm. It's always nice to come across genuinely nice people when out birding, in recent years we seem to be coming across less and less of them. We enjoyed our refreshingly 'down to earth' chat with him and won't forget his face in a hurry so at least we know that we can say, "Hi!" if we ever bump into him again.

We were back at HQ at 6.35pm and as we'd got all our daily chores done earlier Wendy decided that she wanted to go to the pub. At the front of the house was a track, which took you straight to the Beer Garden at the back of 'The Kings Arms', another of our local pubs. She thought that with it being so close it would be a waste not to utilize its accessibility and go for a drink....that was her excuse anyway. My arm was well and truly bent so off we went into the darkness with just a tiny key ring torch for light.....lucky it was only about 50yds away.

The bar in the Kings Arms is, shall I say, very cosy. It's small and usually very busy with people eating or having a pint or 10. As with The Dunn Cow it's also dog friendly so there's always a few of them lounging around and getting loads of attention. We sat down in what looked like a relaxed corner near a couple, probably in their 60's, who had a very friendly and pampered Beagle. We admired the dog, which was acting like a naughty child and snuffling round hoovering up food from the floor. We got chatting to them (well Wendy did) and it turned out that they'd moved from London to Suffolk but had gone for a holiday in Norfolk with a view to relocating there. We swapped stories about life in the big city compared to the I.O.M/Suffolk, which was quite amusing, until another older couple sat down nearby and the heat was taken off us. We stayed for bit longer and chilled out with another drink but it had

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been another long day so we headed home. We were back by 8.20pm and managed to stay up till 10pm by which point we were just about ready to drop.

Thursday 18th October

When we got up at 6.58am it was still dark but we wanted to get out as early as possible to try and catch up with the seemingly impossible White-rumped Sandpiper. We had a quick look at the weather forecast and were surprised to see weather warnings for the I.O.M with strong wind, heavy rain and thunderstorms for the day! We were then absolutely horrified to find that Norfolk had Easterly winds forecast for the whole of the next week starting from Sunday, the day after we left.....Aaarrrggggghhhhhh! OMG of the 2 weeks to choose from we'd chosen soooooooo badly it wasn't funny! We just knew that it was all going kick off then and if we'd picked that week we'd have been tearing round racking up the lifers not scratching around for something to do. I then got a report of the WRS at Bishop's Hide so we got our skates on and left at 8.15am.

We parked up at Cley again and retraced our steps from the night before back to Bishop's Hide. There was already a good few Birders in there, which made us quietly confident, that it must be still around. It wasn't long before we'd found a Dunlin feeding along the far edge but with it was a much smaller Wader. Thankfully after all our failed attempts to find it we'd struck lucky for once and were finally looking at the **White-rumped Sandpiper**.....Phew! We watched it for a while and eventually it had a bit of a flap, revealing its white rump, so Wendy was now on lifer number 3 :). I got some very distant record shots and happy, with having pinned it down at last, we left.



White-rumped Sandpiper

We were back at the car by 9am and Wendy was in need of a coffee top up so our next port of call was the Deli. Driving past Blakeney Quay the tide was higher than we'd ever seen it, the water levels were right up to the road and the car park was totally under water.



Blakeney at high tide

I'd hate to see what happens to Blakeney when it's rough weather combined with a very high tide.....Eeek! Our next plan of the day was to actually make it to Holkham Pines for a last ditch attempt at finding a Firecrest.

We parked up on Lady Anne's Drive at 9.41am and I went off to pay at the ticket machine. Neither of us had much loose change on us but we'd just about scraped the coins together so imagine the look on my face when the machine swallowed the money then refused to give me a ticket.....Great! Fortunately it accepted credit cards so I had to go back to the car for my wallet and try to pay again. Once that was sorted we set off but were distracted by the sheer number of Goldcrests, which were calling from the trees just by the entrance gate.



Holkham

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We hung around hoping that there would be something in with them and started the very challenging task of trying to get them in our bins. After a few minutes we eventually found our Goldcrest eyes and one by one we checked them out. Each one was just another Goldcrest but then we found a **Nuthatch**, which we hadn't expected, then a Treecreeper, then some Chaffinches and a Tit flock. Unfortunately there were no Firecrests even though we'd heard a call, which sounded like one, a few times. We could've stood by the entrance all day but we're sure our necks would've totally seized up after a while! Disappointed we took a wander down the footpath to Meol's House where the bird from the day before had been reported. We were totally taken aback by the crazy amount of Goldcrests, we've never seen so many, and were gutted that there hadn't been even one Firecrest but hey ho. There was nothing over at Meol's House either apart from a Great-spotted Woodpecker, which flew past us, so we turned back. There was a good few Jays about again too and we tried to stalk them for a pic but failed miserably.

The wind had started to pick up again and it was feeling pretty cold so we walked over to the Joe Jordan Hide to sit down for a bit. It was totally dead there, which was a stark contrast to the Spoonbill and Stoat action that had kept us so occupied in May. A bloke who worked for the Holkham Estate appeared so we had a chat to him, I was especially interested in the supposed Rough-legged Buzzard that had been reported over the past week. His opinion was that it was possibly a pale Buzzard that he'd seen last year as well. This tallied with my thoughts after seeing some of the photos of the bird on various blogs. The problem was that this area definitely holds Rough-legs every winter so even if there was a pale Buzzard around there could easily be a Rough-leg too.....Arrghhhh! I was dying to see a Rough-leg after we'd missed out last November. After that we took a walk through the trees to the Dunes, where Wendy became preoccupied by the various different types of Fungi and was taking pics to ID later.



Sulphur Tuft

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She then commented that she kept hearing something in the distance, which sounded like a Green Woodpecker but I wasn't convinced. It sounded too feeble but eventually it called again by which point it was nearer and more like what you'd expect and it was confirmed....**Green Woodpecker.**

Seeing as we'd gone that far we thought we'd go back to the car via Holkham Gap, where we'd been extremely lucky to see Shorelarks last November on our 3rd attempt. When we booked our holiday we knew that October would be too early for these birds, which we were really gutted about as they're down as one of our all time favourites. There'd been no reports of them up to that point but part of us kept hoping that maybe, just maybe they'd be there. As we walked towards the saltings we noticed that instead of being brown and dried up it was an amazing sort of bright maroon colour. This was a very different scene to the one we'd seen last year so we presumed that it would be later in the month when it would go to seed and draw in some birds, other than the ever present, Meadow Pipits. As it was such a nice afternoon there were dog walkers and families everywhere but not much bird life to speak of.....never mind Shorelarks! Well, it would've been a nice way to end our trip but we'd probably have to wait until the next week when all the great birds came in to see any reported :/. Apart from the Green Woodpecker the only other birds we came across were another 1000 Goldcrests! We did see a bright orange Butterfly/Moth though, which we thought was a bit odd, but it didn't land and flew past so quickly we couldn't even get it in our bins to ID before it vanished.



Holkham gap

When we got back to the car park we had another look for the millions of Goldcrests but it had gone very quiet, they'd moved off. Back at the car at 12.59pm we had our lunch. Wendy spotted a nice little Muntjac lying in the grass in the field opposite, which would've made a nice photo but was too far away to even bother. Again we were stuck as to what to do next, there were no reports coming in apart from the WRS at Cley, so I suggested Royden Common as there'd been a very late 10pm report of a Great Grey Shrike there the night before. It was 40mins away and we were doubtful that we'd see anything new there except possibly Yellowhammer. I decided that it would be a better plan to leave it until the next day when we were heading out of Norfolk so we'd have more of an idea as to whether or not the Shrike was sticking around. Other than that I'd run out of ideas and we were both feeling very tired and

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lacking in any kind of motivation. The only thing I could think of was to go back to Warham Greens and walk down the track again but I was really scraping the barrel and neither of us thought it would be worth it.

As I drove down what appeared to be Garden Drove it suddenly struck me that it didn't look familiar and that the track seemed to be worse than it had been last time. Hmmmmmm? I then realized that I'd gone down the wrong one.....Ooops! The only way back was to reverse all the way as it would've been impossible to drive to the bottom and turn around. It was an interesting few minutes reversing up an overgrown track that was not much more than the width of my car but fortunately the maneuver went without a hitch and we were back on course. I parked up at 1.52pm and we very reluctantly got out of the car and started walking down the footpath. It was totally dead apart from a small Tit flock so we dragged ourselves back up the hill and were back at the car by 2.31pm. We sat there in silence, we'd completely run out of steam and it was still only early. I spotted 4x Grey Partridge in the field next to us and we watched a couple of F15's fly over which was pretty cool to see. This was a very bad ending to our last full day in Norfolk but there was only one thing for it, we were going home.

We were back at HQ at 3.04pm, which was very depressing on our last day but nevertheless it was better than kicking our heels outside somewhere and seeing nothing. At least we could get our stuff sorted and start packing up before the morning. I looked out of the window into the garden and saw a Grey Squirrel carrying a huge apple in its mouth. I shouted Wendy to have a look as it had started trying to bury it, which was proving to be pretty funny to watch. The apple was so big that it couldn't cover it over so in a halfhearted attempt it had left it sitting half buried in the soil. Surely an apple isn't a good thing to try to cache, surely it would just go rotten and disappear? Whatever, it cheered us up.....for a few minutes :).

By 6.20pm we'd had tea and baths and were feeling totally deflated but we were trying to chill out and take it easy before the long day we had ahead of us so it was probably for the best. As we sat watching TV I got a text alert of Rough-legged Buzzard coming in off the sea at Blakeney and one at Holkham but it was dark outside so the reports were being put out too late.....AGAIN! The Holkham bird was probably the pale Common Buzzard so we weren't bothered about that but we wouldn't have said no to one just down the road! The Tawny Owls were out in force again and Wendy made the most of listening to them before we turned in for the night at 10.14pm.

Friday 19th October

It was a dark morning when we got up at 7am and when we opened the curtains we saw that it was chucking it down....Brilliant! This was exactly what we didn't want with so much time to kill before the 2.15am boat. After breakfast we packed up the rest of our stuff and left what had been one of our best HQ's to date at 9.23am :(.



If only we'd picked the week after as it was looking as though it could've been one of our best holidays to date too but you can't have everything. Luckily the rain had eased off so we thought we'd go for a last ditch attempt at some Beardy shots at East Bank while we kept our fingers crossed for a report of the Great Grey Shrike at Royden Common.

5mins later we were back at Cley and heading down the path where the Bearded Tits were. We could hear them but they were all miles away so there was no way we were going to get any photos! We heard the blast of a Cetti's Warbler from somewhere nearby and then I spotted a **Hen Harrier** floating above the reeds out over the marsh, quite an unusual sighting for us there. We saw no point sticking around so went to feed the ducks and Black-headed Gulls the remainder of our loaf at Salthouse. After that we thought Gramborough Hill would be worth a final check as it had rained so heavily earlier.

We parked up at 9.58am and headed over to the hill and noticed that there was an awful lot of Reed Buntings and also 100's of Goldfinches about. This was more than we'd seen all week so we had to presume that they'd just come in. We picked out a few Redpoll in with them but even stretching my imagination to its limits I couldn't string one of them into a Mealy Redpoll.....Booo! We couldn't dig anything else out of the Finches so went up the hill and had a look out to sea. There was a Diver, which had us going for a moment as it had the white patches of a Black-throat. We tried to make it into a Black-throat but unfortunately it was still just a freaky Red-throat.....Booooooooo! We were just waiting for someone to report it as a Black-throat though, it was just a matter time. Back at the car at 10.38am we were pretty cold after that and Wendy was in need of a caffeine fix so we went over to Cley Visitor Centre to warm up. I grabbed a couple of pressies while I was there as well as a book and DVD as consolation for myself. We left at 11.11am and as there were no decent birds being reported from anywhere in the UK there was nothing to go for on our way back to Heysham. There'd been nothing more on the Shrike since the first report so we ditched Royden off too. Our only options were to head straight up to Leighton Moss for another shot of trying to see an Otter or spend the day in Norfolk and hope for the best. We decided to stay in Norfolk for as long as we could as we didn't want to waste any precious daylight travelling and you never know when your luck could change :P. Holkham Pines seemed worth another go for Firecrest so off we went.

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When we arrived at 11.37am we scanned the fence posts for Buzzards. Sure enough there were two and one of them was ridiculously pale so we stared at it for ages, as we needed it to fly to confirm what it was. Eventually we gave up but just as we'd started to walk off it flew and disappeared behind a hedge.....Brilliant! When we got down to Goldcrest central by the entrance, we had a look to the right, which we'd never done before and sure enough there was the pale Buzzard. I got a record shot and again we waited.



Buzzard

I was praying that it was a Rough-leg and after what seemed like forever it took off and revealed.....a brown tail and rump. Urrghhhhhh.....I was gutted! So near and yet so far but this was obviously the bird that had been confusing everyone. We put money on a Rough-leg being reported in this area by the end of the day! We went back to the Goldcrest area and it wasn't long before we were.....being eaten alive by midgies! We hadn't bargained on this at all in October but there were clouds of them everywhere. Grrrrrrrr! After we'd looked at so many Goldcrests we were nearly cross-eyed and we couldn't bear the midgies a second longer we vacated the area and carried on down the path. We came across a couple of Jays hopping about on the ground in the woods so we waited to see if they would come out and give us the opportunity to get a photo. The one thing Wendy wanted to go home with was a half decent shot of a Jay and with so many of them around it, kind of seemed almost doable. We patiently waited as they moved their way through the trees until one flew up into the open quite close to us. We both raised our cameras but in that short space of time the little **** hopped round and turned its back on us.....Nooooooooooooo! They both then flew off and disappeared completely.....Unbelievable! We thought that our best bet would be to just pack our cameras away at that point and drive straight to the pub in Arnside, to numb the pain of yet another downer, but we stuck to our plan and left for Titchwell at 12.28pm.

On the way I got the texts we'd been waiting for, Rough-legged Buzzard at Holkham and Black-throated Diver at Salhouse.....Yawn! The only problem was that someone had taken a picture of the Black-throat and it was exactly that, NOT the bird we'd seen

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earlier.....Grrrrrrrrrr! There was also a Jack Snipe at Titchwell, which would be a lifer for Wendy so for once it looked as though we were heading in the right direction.

We got to Titchwell at 1pm and set off for a quick look from Island Hide first. There was a group of people including Photographers staring at the bushes outside the hide so we presumed that it must be a Cetti's Warbler and didn't give it a second thought. There was nothing new from there so we carried on over to the Parrinder Hide which overlooked the freshmarsh where the Jack Snipe had been seen earlier. There was a good crowd of people standing on the bank overlooking the freshmarsh and also in the Hide opposite so we had a scan from the bank. Nobody was talking and it became clear that no one was looking at anything in particular but we could see that the people just outside the Parrinder hide were all pointing and staring intently. We shot round there and found out they HAD been watching the Jack Snipe but it'd walked into a bunch of vegetation, which we could see clearly, 10mins ago. I couldn't believe that we'd been standing on the bank while those on the other side were watching it, but I wasn't too worried as I hoped it would reappear any minute. We stayed for ages but saw nothing but Common Snipe and finally gave up. It must have sneaked away somehow. Arrghhhhh how annoying! A quick look at the Brackish Marsh revealed 2x **Spotted Redshank**, which had failed to materialize on our last visit, and a Greenshank. We stopped to get some pics but they cleared off before we had anything we were especially pleased with.



Spotted Redshank

We'd overheard some Birders saying that there was a couple of Long-tailed Ducks and Red-necked Grebes out on the sea so we headed to the beach. The tide was right out so everything was miles away but Wendy very quickly found the lovely adult male **Long-tailed Duck** and shortly after I found the **Red-necked Grebes**. There was also Great-crested Grebes out there and the shoreline was caked in waders. There were Knot, Dunlin, Sanderling, Turnstone, Black-tailed Godwit, Bar-tailed Godwit, Redshank, Oystercatcher, you name it and it was there. We walked halfway down the beach to get a bit closer but we found that we couldn't see any

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of the birds from there. When we walked back up the beach they'd magically reappeared....very weird!

We went back to Parrinder Hide for a last look but there was still no sign and nobody else had seen the bird either so as it had started to rain we called it a day. On our way back we heard some people saying that there'd been a Water Rail posing for Photographers outside Island Hide and how they were all getting great shots of it. Had we not presumed it was a Cetti's in the bush we could've had some decent Water Rail shots too. Grrrrrr.....just to add to our depression! We stopped off at the Café so that Wendy could get a coffee and, as we were feeling a bit peckish we fancied some toast. Wendy reappeared with her drink and broke the news that the kitchen had closed at 3.30pm so they'd stopped serving hot food. We sat and watched the rain pouring down outside which was the last thing we wanted as we still had a couple more places to try before it got dark.

We were back at the car at 4.08pm and the light was already fading so we'd have to get a move on. We quickly drove past Choseley Drying Barns and scanned the bushes with the windows down so we could hear. We listened for the sound of jangling keys but it was totally silent, no Corn Buntings for us then, what a surprise! Even more shocking was that there was no Yellowhammers either and all we saw was more Red-legged and Grey Partridges :(.

By the time we arrived at Flitcham Abbey Farm at 4.39pm the light was fading fast and the rain was lashing down, not good conditions for seeing our Little Owl!



Flitcham

It's one of those places that's always been a bit hit and miss, when it's good it's good but when it's bad it's BAD! We sat down in the hide and looked out over the field, the empty, dead field! There was no way any self-respecting bird, let alone a Little Owl, was going to be out in that kind of weather. Wendy spotted a motionless Buzzard, sheltering from the rain hunched up in a tree, and a couple of Grey Partridge waddled past the hide but that was as good as it got. We ran back to car, to avoid getting soaked, and I packed away our camera gear and bins. We definitely wouldn't be needing them anymore, so that marked the end of our holiday. When I started the car up we got the heaters blasting on full as by then we were absolutely freeeeeeezeing so we left feeling more than a bit glum at 5.04pm.

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The next thing we had to look forward to was Blyth Services but at least we'd been able to spend the whole day in Norfolk and only had a relatively short drive ahead of us. Thinking back to our last day in Cornwall when we'd had to leave as early as possible and spend the entire day driving back up to Heysham took the sting out of it. We were making good progress.....until I added 7mins to the journey on the last stretch to the Services! Since I'd already done the journey tons of times I hadn't checked out the big junctions on Google street view. What a mistake that turned out to be. At the junction of the A17 to A1 I didn't recognize it at all and took some weird turn off, that sent us down a dual carriageway. Luckily I was able to whip it round at the next roundabout and get us back to the right junction but I still don't understand how I messed it up in the first place.....Dohh.

We eventually reached Blyth Services at 7.20pm, which is always a relief as it's our half way stop off point. We were both feeling pretty hungry by then but first Wendy had to make a mad dash to the W.C's while I stayed in the car. As we'd shortly be entering the 'real world' we'd both put some clean trousers in the back of the car to change into as neither us wanted to be in a pub on a Friday night covered in mud. I scrambled about in the drivers seat trying to change while people were toing and froing next to me blissfully unaware of what was going on.....Phew! When Wendy came back it was her turn before we went inside to get something to eat. Whereas I'd got changed under a coat Wendy proceeded to just get on with it in the passenger seat, in full view! Good job nobody walked past the car, women's lib and all that...Hahaha. Changed and ready to go she made a beeline for Costa, then M&S where she picked up something suitably poncey, which looked like it should've been fed to a pet rabbit! I on the other hand was happy with my usual end of holiday treat knowing fine well that my chicken nuggets were safe as houses but that some of my fries would be going for a wander :P. We took it all back to the car to eat and were ready to tackle the last leg of the journey at 8.04pm.

Apart from loads of road works the rest of the journey was uneventful and it was 10.11pm when we parked up on the Prom at Arnside. Looking over the road, our local, The Albion looked a bit busy for my liking. We didn't see or hear a single Owl as we approached Arnside either but there was always the outward journey for a second chance. We ordered our drinks at the bar and sat down at our usual table. Initially I thought I was feeling pretty good and quite perky but as soon as I sat down I went into mega slump mode. I could hardly keep my eyes open or concentrate on anything while Wendy was in hyper mode and chatting away to the Barman merrily! It didn't take too long before the day took it's toll on her too and we sat killing time in the, by then, very quiet pub. At 11.45pm we'd had enough and I just wanted to get to Heysham to chill out before boarding. Normally we're the last punters to leave but on this occasion there were still a few left finishing off their drinks. There was no sign of any Owls or Deer on the way out either which was both unusual and disappointing.

By the time we arrived at Heysham at 12.30am we were soooooo tired. Our necks and shoulders were giving us grief but then that was probably from the 2 days of looking up into the trees at Holkham. Waiting to board was cold and boring but for a change we found ourselves driving in in good time at 1.30am. After getting the key for the cabin we let ourselves in and went straight to sleep until my alarm went off just before the announcement that we'd arrived at Douglas :). We disembarked at 6am and were home by 6.08am and our good intentions of going back to bed for a change soon went out of the window. This was surely going to backfire on Wendy when she went out later to watch a band at The Creek....Hahahahaha!

By the time I'd unloaded the car and brought everything into the house we'd woken up a bit so I set about dealing with the photos while Wendy unpacked. She also had to knuckle down and finish writing the Cornwall article before starting on this one! We'd had too many downers over the last week so, to save ourselves from any more, we stayed in for the day to try and recover.

Norfolk October 2012

Our Norfolk trip had left us with a bitter taste in our mouths, it had been disappointing but in a different way to our Cornwall trip. Our expectations had been a lot higher for Norfolk especially in October and although we'd seen 123 birds to Cornwall's 110 it should've been WAY more. The wind direction was again totally wrong and as forecast it swung round to the East the day after we'd come home. Sickeningly it remained like that for the whole week too bringing in Red-flanked Bluetail, Little Bunting, Olive-backed Pipit, Pallas's Warbler, Arctic Warbler, Dusky Warbler, Arctic Redpoll, Richard's Pipit, more Ring Ouzels than you could shake a stick at, Hawfinch, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Barred Warbler, Snow Bunting, as we predicted Shorelark, Black Redstart, Waxwing, plus 100's of Brambling and Twite pouring in off the sea, the list goes on and on. They were all birds that hung around too so could've easily been seen and out of that list there would've been 9 lifers for us both. It would've been the trip of a lifetime!

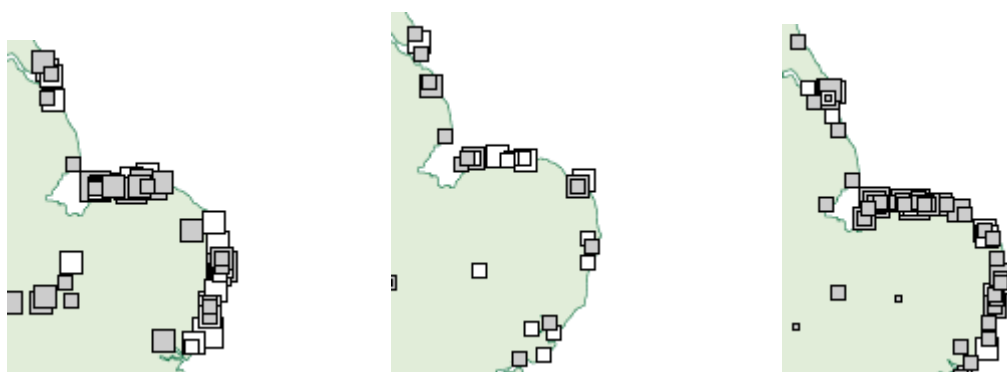
To show how unlucky we were, here are three BirdGuides maps of East Anglia. Each square is a scarce bird and the larger the square the rarer it is:-

Map 1 (left) shows the reason why we chose our week, as it was the Monday of the same week we were there but in 2011.

Map 2 (middle) shows the Monday we were there!

Map 3 (right) shows the Monday of the week after we'd left.

Although we tried to put it across in words sometimes only a picture will do :(.



It was gutting to read the BirdGuides reports especially as for one morning a few weeks earlier we'd had the option of choosing a brilliant week but had picked a total duffer instead! We'd seen more Jays and Goldcrests than ever during the week but it had been very poor for mammals, as we'd not seen any Foxes, Stoats or Water Voles and very few Deer. We'd dipped on Ring Ouzel, Jack Snipe and apparently Rough-legged Buzzard, which we were doubtful of anyway. When we were back at home I read a thread on Birdforum, which was basically backing up what we'd originally thought. The reported Rough-leg was indeed a very pale juvenile Common Buzzard....Skillz!

Wendy had come away with 3x lifers and me none, for the first time ever, but it still felt better than our September 2011 trip where we both had just 1, a Citrine Wagtail! If we'd had no work commitments and bags of cash then wild horses couldn't have dragged us home and we'd have stayed for that 2nd week. Even if it'd meant sleeping in the car for the duration we'd have been there, as we knew it was going to be good. We eventually consoled ourselves with the thought that if we'd gone the week after then we'd never have been able to match it, never mind better it, so Norfolk would never have the same appeal again. At least now we still have a pull to draw us back and can only hope that maybe one day we'll pick a belter of a week to rival the one that could so easily have been.....but we won't be placing any bets :P.

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Mute Swan	Avocet	Rock Pipit
Pink-footed Goose	Ringed Plover	Pied Wagtail
Greylag Goose	Golden Plover	Wren
Canada Goose	Grey Plover	Dunnock
Brent Goose	Lapwing	Robin
Egyptian Goose	Knot	Whinchat
Shelduck	Sanderling	Stonechat
Wigeon	White-rumped Sandpiper	Wheatear
Gadwall	Pectoral Sandpiper	Blackbird
Teal	Dunlin	Fieldfare
Mallard	Ruff	Song Thrush
Pintail	Snipe	Redwing
Shoveler	Black-tailed Godwit	Mistle Thrush
Red-crested Pochard	Bar-tailed Godwit	Cetti's Warbler
Pochard	Curlew	Blackcap
Tufted Duck	Spotted Redshank	Yellow-browed Warbler
Eider	Greenshank	Chiffchaff
Long-tailed Duck	Redshank	Goldcrest
Common Scoter	Turnstone	Bearded Tit
Red-legged Partridge	Kittiwake	Long-tailed Tit
Grey Partridge	Black-headed Gull	Blue Tit
Pheasant	Little Gull	Great Tit
Red-throated Diver	Common Gull	Coal Tit
Little Grebe	Lesser Black-backed Gull	Nuthatch
Great Crested Grebe	Herring Gull	Treecreeper
Red-necked Grebe	Yellow-legged Gull	Jay
Gannet	Great Black-backed Gull	Magpie
Cormorant	Guillemot	Jackdaw
Little Egret	Razorbill	Rook
Grey Heron	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	Carrion Crow
Marsh Harrier	Stock Dove	Starling
Hen Harrier	Woodpigeon	House Sparrow
Sparrowhawk	Collared Dove	Chaffinch
Buzzard	Barn Owl	Brambling
Kestrel	Tawny Owl	Greenfinch
Merlin	Kingfisher	Goldfinch
Peregrine	Green Woodpecker	Siskin
Water Rail	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Linnet
Moorhen	Skylark	Lesser Redpoll
Coot	Swallow	Lapland Bunting
Oystercatcher	Meadow Pipit	Reed Bunting