

**SOUTHERN ENGLAND:  
BIRDS & HISTORY**

**MAY 2–12, 2019**

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**By Phil Jones**

Our group met at Heathrow where we had lunch before setting off for Kent. We traveled eastwards, through Surrey, before reaching our hotel in the midafternoon. Later we enjoyed a walk around the grounds of our hotel. This gave the group a chance to get to know the commoner birds of the tour. Sightings included Great Spotted Woodpecker, Eurasian Jay, Common House-Martin, Mistle Thrush, Gray Wagtail, and European Goldfinch. Many European Rabbits were also spotted.

We awoke to a cool and windy day. Our destination was Stodmarsh National Nature Reserve, an area of extensive reedbeds. We spent time in one of the blinds watching many species including Northern Shoveler, Great Crested Grebe, Common Swift, and Eurasian Marsh-Harrier. Unusually for this time of year, we had to dodge a couple of hail showers. Great views were obtained through the scope of Common Cuckoo and Eurasian Hobby. In the afternoon we parked on the edge of Canterbury and caught a double decker bus into the center. Here we had a look around the impressive Canterbury Cathedral.

Driving to the southeast, we birded at Dungeness RSPB reserve. There were plenty of blinds here and we visited three. The site is a series of pits sited on a very large shingle spit. Birds included Egyptian Goose, Common Pochard, Tufted Duck, Little Grebe, and Common Whitethroat. A number of waders were passing through the reserve as they headed to their northern breeding grounds and included Bar-Tailed Godwit, Ruddy Turnstone, and Common Sandpiper. Later we watched a distant Northern Gannet over the sea and Black Redstarts fly-catching on the perimeter walls of a nuclear power station! The afternoon was spent at Dover Castle, where the history reached from Roman times to the Second World War.

A sortie to the Old Lodge Reserve on Ashdown Forest took us into East Sussex. This large area of sandstone heathland produced a number of specialist birds including Common Redstart, Dartford Warbler, Tree Pipit, and Common Crossbill. Later we visited Hever Castle, the home of Anne Boleyn.

Today we made a very prompt start. We were visiting Pannell Valley Nature Reserve, my place of work. Fellow bird banders had arrived early and opened some nets for us. On arrival we had amazing views of eleven species of birds in the hand including Eurasian Jay, Eurasian Magpie, Rook, Lesser Whitethroat, Sedge Warbler, and Common Chiffchaff. A look at the wader scrape added Little Ringed Plover. After a look at my local parish church in Winchelsea, we found Northern Fulmars nesting on the cliffs at Fairlight. After lunch we explored Bodiam Castle.

The weather was not good this morning so we visited Chatham Maritime Museum. Late morning and after lunch we explored the Isle of Sheppey. A very slow drive at Elmley Nature Reserve gave us really close views of many species including Northern Lapwing, Common Redshank, Western Yellow Wagtail, Eurasian Skylark, and Red-legged Partridge. Further stops on the island were quiet, mainly due to the very strong wind.

Heading westwards we visited Sevenoaks Wildlife Reserve. This reserve is a series of old sand pits, and we spent time in three blinds. Birds included Egyptian and Graylag Geese, Gadwall, and Gray Heron. The surrounding woods were full of the songs of male Blackcap and Garden warblers. In front

of one blind there was a small active heronry. Rain then set in, but our afternoon destination was all under cover. We went back in time and had a tour of the Roman villa at Lullingstone.

We again traveled in a southeasterly direction to East Sussex and Rye Harbour Local Nature Reserve. This was the reserve where I volunteer. We walked a circular walk taking in four blinds. There were some great photographic opportunities with an active Sandwich Tern colony right in front of one blind. Other birds observed included Mediterranean and Mew gulls, Common and Sandwich terns, Pied Avocet, Common Ringed Plover, Eurasian Curlew, and Dunlin. Lunch was taken on a platform overlooking reedbeds, and Eurasian Hobby and singing Cetti's Warbler were present. The afternoon was spent at Down House, the home of Charles Darwin.

Our final day of birding took us to Oare Marshes in north Kent, situated on the southern edge of the Thames estuary. This small reserve held many species including a large flock of Black-tailed Godwit, Common Shelduck, and Eurasian Coot. The surrounding grassland and scrub produced fine views of Stock Dove, European Turtle-Dove, Eurasian Skylark, and two male Bearded Reedlings. The afternoon was spent at Leeds Castle, where we found Barnacle Geese and Treecreeper amongst other more familiar species. The next day we began our journey home.

## **ITINERARY**

**May 2:** in transit

**May 3:** Met at the airport hotel at Heathrow and enjoyed lunch. We then drove to the eastern edge of Maidstone to our hotel. In the late afternoon we birded in the grounds of the hotel. Dinner was at 19.00.

**May 4:** We drove in a north easterly direction to Stodmarsh National Nature Reserve. After a morning here we drove the short distance to Canterbury. Parking in the edge of the city, we caught a bus in to the centre and visited Canterbury Cathedral. Dinner was at 19.00.

**May 5:** Dungeness is on the coast to the south east. We visited Dungeness RSPB reserve and also birded the sea adjacent to the nuclear power station. In the afternoon we visited Dover Castle. Dinner was again 19.00.

**May 6:** Ashdown Forest is a large area of sandy heathland to the west of our hotel. We visited the Old Lodge Reserve which is owned by the Sussex Wildlife Trust. In the afternoon we checked out the house and gardens at Hever Castle.

**May 7:** A prompt morning getaway allowed us to arrive at Pannell Valley Nature Reserve at 08.15. The local banders had arrived much earlier and had caught some birds for us to see. In the end we saw eleven species in the hand. Leaving at about 11.00 we visited the local church in Winchelsea. A short drive to the sea cliffs at Fairlight followed. Lunch was enjoyed at Pett Pools. In the afternoon we explored the picturesque Bodiam Castle.

**May 8:** Due to inclement weather we visited Chatham Maritime Museum in the morning. A short drive and we arrived at Elmley Nature Reserve. After lunch we checked out several other areas on the Isle of Sheppey including Leysdown-on-Sea and Grove Ferry.

**May 9:** The morning visit was to a Kent Wildlife Trust reserve called Sevenoaks Wildlife Reserve. This was followed by a brief visit to Bough Beech Reservoir. In the afternoon we went a long way back in time and visited the Roman villa at Lullingstone.

**May 10:** We again headed in a southeasterly direction and visited Rye Harbour Local Nature Reserve. Lunch was taken at the Bittern Watchpoint overlooking reedbeds. Later in the day we had a look around Down House, the home of Charles Darwin.

**May 11:** Heading to the northeast we went to Oare Marshes. This is another Kent Wildlife Trust reserve. We ate lunch here before heading to Leeds Castle, which is only five minutes from our hotel.

**May 12:** Travel back to Heathrow and onwards to the U.S.

## **BIRDS**

**Graylag Goose, *Anser anser*:** Seen on all days by one, including several broods.

**Brant, *Branta bernicla*:** Three on the mudflats at Oare Marshes on May 11.

**Barnacle Goose, *Branta leucopsis*:** Lots at Leeds Castle on May 11. These birds were originally introduced to the area but now breed in good numbers.

**Canada Goose, *Branta canadensis*:** A widespread introduced species seen every day including in the grounds of our hotel.

**Mute Swan, *Cygnus olor*:** Small numbers seen on all days but one.

**Egyptian Goose, *Alopochen aegyptiaca*:** A single at Dungeness May 5 and a pair with goslings at Sevenoaks May 9.

**Common Shelduck, *Tadorna tadorna*:** Seen at all the wetlands we visited. The size difference between the sexes being obvious.

**Northern Shoveler, *Spatula clypeata*:** A pair at Stodmarsh with larger numbers at Pannel Valley, Sheppey and Oare Marshes. One female at Sheppey had a small brood with her.

**Gadwall, *Mareca strepera*:** A duck whose numbers are increasing and observed on six days. The largest number were at Oare Marshes on May 11.

**Eurasian Wigeon, *Mareca penelope*:** A pair at Dungeness. Difficult to know whether they might nest or are late migrants.

**Mallard, *Anas platyrhynchos*:** An abundant duck with several broods seen. Only missed on the first travel day.

**Eurasian Teal, *Anas crecca*:** Only seen at Dungeness where half a dozen were present.

**Common Pochard, *Aythya fuligula*:** Small numbers at Dungeness, Pett Pools, Isle of Sheppey and Oare Marshes. Most of the birds seen were males.

**Tufted Duck, *Aythya fuligula*:** Common and seen at most of the wetland sites.

**Red-legged Partridge, *Alectoris rufa*:** An introduced species. Seen on Isle of Sheppey in several places, usually in pairs.

**Ring-necked Pheasant, *Phasianus colchicus*:** Surprisingly difficult to find on this tour. Only good views were Isle of Sheppey on May 08 where it was widespread.

**Feral Pigeon, *Columba livia*:** Common in all urban areas.

**Stock Dove, *Columba oenas*:** A flock of thirty plus were well watched on Sheppey. A couple were also seen well in front of one of the blinds at Oare Marshes.

**Common Wood-Pigeon, *Columba palumbus*:** Abundant in all habitats and seen daily.

**Eurasian Turtle-Dove, *Streptopelia turtur*:** A species in steep decline. Excellent views of two birds at Oare Marshes, one of which was display flighting.

**Eurasian Collared-Dove, *Streptopelia decaocto*:** A common bird in all villages and towns. They were very obvious in the hotel grounds.

**Eurasian Cuckoo, *Cuculus canorus*:** Seen or heard on six days. Singing males were scoped at Stodmarsh and Oare Marshes. A very distinctive sound of spring.

**Common Swift, *Apus apus*:** This species was just arriving and seen on most days. The maximum being twenty over the reedbeds at Stodmarsh.

**Eurasian Moorhen, *Gallinula chloropus*:** A common bird seen daily but only in small numbers.

**Eurasian Coot, *Fulica atra*:** Also seen daily. Many birds were either sat on nests or were looking after very small, some would say ugly!, chicks.

**Pied Avocet, *Recurvirostra avosetta*:** Birds on nests at both Pannel Valley and Rye Harbour. Also seen on Sheppey and at Oare Marshes. There were great photographic opportunities at Rye Harbour.

**Eurasian Oystercatcher, *Haematopus ostralegus*:** Seen at all the coastal marshes with birds incubating at the Pannel Valley.

**Northern Lapwing, *Vanellus vanellus*:** Small chicks beside the van at Elmley. Birds were also seen displaying at several sites.

**Common Ringed Plover, *Charadrius hiaticula*:** A single at Dungeness with many at Rye Harbour where they breed in good numbers.

**Little Ringed Plover, *Charadrius dubius*:** Singles of this summer migrant at Dungeness and Sevenoaks. A bird sat on its nest was well seen in the Pannel Valley.

**Whimbrel, *Numenius phaeopus*:** Three flew by whilst we were eating our lunches at Pett Pools.

**Eurasian Curlew, *Numenius arquaua*:** Singles seen distantly on the mudflats at Rye Harbour and Oare Marshes.

**Bar-tailed Godwit, *Limosa lapponica*:** This is a migrant species that was passing through during our stay. A single at Dungeness had increased to a flock of 90, all roosting on one of the islands. Great close views were also obtained at Rye Harbour.

**Black-tailed Godwit, *Limosa limosa*:** A roosting flock of 150 were counted at Oare Marshes. These birds were of the race 'iclandica'.

**Ruddy Turnstone, *Arenaria interpres*:** One at Dungeness. There were more roosting along the tide line on Sheppey.

**Red Knot, *Claidris canutus*:** One bird, feeding with Dunlin, was seen at Rye Harbour. It was in summer plumage.

**Dunlin, *Calidris alpina*:** Several at Dungeness and a few roosting with the Turnstone on Sheppey. The biggest flock was 150 summer plumaged birds at Rye Harbour.

**Common Sandpiper, *Actitis hypoleucos*:** Single migrants seen at both Dungeness and Sevenoaks.

**Common Redshank, *Tringa totanus*:** Common at Rye Harbour. Also seen at Dungeness, Pannel Valley and Sheppey. On Sheppey a couple of youngsters were spotted in the long grass.

**Black-headed Gull, *Larus ridibundus*:** Common at all coastal sites with small breeding colonies at both Rye Harbour and Pannel Valley.

**Mediterranean Gull, *Larus melanocephalus*:** A few were seen flying over the grounds of our Maidstone hotel. A colony of about thirty pairs were spotted at Rye Harbour. Also small numbers at Pannel Valley, Sheppey and Oare Marshes.

**Mew Gull, *Larus canus*:** A few from the blinds at Dungeness. Several immatures also found at Pannel Valley and Oare Marshes.

**Herring Gull, *Larus argentus*:** Seen on all days particularly over built up areas. Also seen daily over the hotel.

**Lesser Black-backed Gull, *Larus fuscus*:** The majority of the birds at this time of year are migrants. They were spotted breeding in Canterbury and also seen at Dungeness and Oare Marshes.

**Great Black-backed Gull, *Larus marinus*:** Seen in small numbers at all the wetland sites visited.

**Little Tern, *Sternula albifrons*:** Two seen and heard distantly at Rye Harbour where they usually breed in small numbers.

**Common Tern, *Sterna hirundo*:** Found at Dungeness, Rye Harbour and Pannel Valley. They breed at all three reserves.

**Sandwich Tern, *Thalasseus sandvicensis*:** Now split from your Cabot's Tern. Great views at Rye Harbour where the breeding colony was just in front of the blind. Several had previously flown along the coast on Sheppey.

**Northern Fulmar, *Fulmarus glacialis*:** A couple of nesting pairs were scoped on the cliffs at Fairlight.

**Northern Gannet, *Morus bassanus*:** A singly seen distantly over the sea at Dungeness.

**Great Cormorant, *Phalacrocorax carbo*:** Seen at all wetland sites with colonies watched at Dungeness and Rye Harbour.

**Gray Heron, *Ardea cinerea*:** Seen at all the wetland sites. There was a small heronry in front of one of the blinds at Sevenoaks.

**Little Egret, *Egretta garzetta*:** Small numbers at all the wetland sites. It certainly looks identical to your Snowy Egrets.

**Cattle Egret, *Bubulcus ibis*:** Still a rare bird in the UK so a view of four birds was a good find. These were feeding with cattle at Dungeness.

**Eurasian Marsh-Harrier, *Circus aeruginosus*:** A widespread species observed at all the coastal wetland sites. Excellent views of males were obtained at Stodmarsh.

**Eurasian Sparrowhawk, *Accipiter nisus*:** Singles seen at Stodmarsh, Pannel Valley and Sevenoaks.

**Red Kite, *Milvus milvus*:** One seen over the motorway on journey from Heathrow to our hotel.

**Common Buzzard, *Buteo buteo*:** Seen on all days often thermalling high over the reserves.

**Barn Owl, *Tyto alba*:** Fabulous views of an adult collecting prey for its young in a nearby nestbox at Pannel Valley.

**Common Kingfisher, *Alcedo atthis*:** One seen very briefly at Sevenoaks.

**Great Spotted Woodpecker, *Dendrocopos major*:** A regular bird of the hotel ground at Maidstone.

**Eurasian Green Woodpecker, *Picus viridis*:** A single at Ashdown Forest was not very co-operative with two brief views.

**Eurasian Kestrel, *Falco tinnunculus*:** Spotted several times from the vehicle as they hunted beside the main roads. Also seen at Pannel Valley and Oare Marshes. The only small bird of prey that hovers.

**Eurasian Hobby, *Falco subbuteo*:** Regularly seen at the wetland sites catching dragonflies above the reedbeds. Great scope views at Stodmarsh.



**Eurasian Jay, *Garrulus glandarius*:** A few views of birds seen flying across the roads. One seen quite well at the hotel and one caught by the banders at Pannel Valley.

**Eurasian Magpie, *Pica pica*:** An abundant species, seen daily. One caught by the Pannel Valley banders.

**Eurasian Jackdaw, *Corvus monedula*:** Seen everywhere we went.

**Rook, *Corvus frugilegus*:** An abundant bird seen daily. One was trapped by the banders whilst we visited Pannel Valley.

**Carrion Crow, *Corvus corone*:** Birds observed daily in all habitats.

**Bearded Tit, *Panurus biarmicus*:** Great views of two males in the reeds at Oare Marshes.

**Eurasian Skylark, *Alauda arvensis*:** A beautiful songster. Seen well at Rye Harbour and Oare Marshes as they sang high above our heads. A parent feeding a recently fledged youngster at Sheppey was a great sight.

**Bank Swallow, *Riparia riparia*:** A few over Stodmarsh and Oare Marshes were probably late arriving migrants.

**Barn Swallow, *Hirundo rustica*:** Seen on most days at the wetland sites.

**Common House-Martin, *Delichon urbicum*:** There were a couple of pairs around the hotel with one old nest in evidence. Small numbers spotted at Sevenoaks, Rye Harbour and Oare Marshes.

**Coal Tit, *Parus ater*:** Usually found in or near conifers. Seen a couple of times in the hotel grounds and also on Ashdown Forest.

**Eurasian Blue Tit, *Cyanistes caeruleus*:** A common species found in most habitats including the hotel grounds. Adults watched taking food to chicks in several bird boxes.

**Great Tit, *Parus major*:** Seen on all days bar one. Again adults were observed taking food to chicks in several bird boxes particularly at Sevenoaks.

**Long-tailed Tit, *Aegithalos caudatus*:** Pairs seen on five days with best views at Stodmarsh.

**Eurasian Nuthatch, *Sitta europea*:** One bird seen on two days in the hotel grounds.

**Eurasian Treecreeper, *Certhia familiaris*:** Seen twice in the hotel grounds and then seen well at Leeds Castle.

**Eurasian Wren, *Troglodytes troglodytes*:** Now split from your Winter Wren. Not that easy to see but views were eventually obtained on six days.

**Goldcrest, *Regulus regulus*:** Another conifer specialist. Seen at Ashdown Forest, Sevenoaks and the hotel grounds.



**Cetti's Warbler, *Cettia cetti*:** An incredible skulker whose song was regularly heard at the edge of the various reedbeds. One seen in the hand at Pannel Valley.

**Willow Warbler, *Phylloscopus trochilus*:** A bird that is declining in the south of England. Seen well singing from the top of trees on Ashdown Forest.

**Common Chiffchaff, *Phylloscopus collybita*:** A sound that we soon learnt as regularly heard. Only seen Stodmarsh and Pannel Valley.

**Sedge Warbler, *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*:** Seen in the hand at Pannel Valley. We watched birds at Pannel Valley and Oare Marshes as they song flighted.

**Eurasian Reed Warbler, *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*:** Seen and heard regularly at all the sites with reedbeds.

**Eurasian Blackcap, *Sylvia atricapilla*:** A common migrant, often heard singing. Seen at all sites except Sheppey. A male caught by the banders at Pannel Valley.

**Garden Warbler, *Sylvia borin*:** A number in song at Sevenoaks with one eventually seen,

**Lesser Whitethroat, *Sylvia curruca*:** One seen in the hand at Pannel Valley.

**Greater Whitethroat, *Sylvia communis*:** Seen and heard at most sites often singing from the top of brambles. This is another species that does a song flight.

**Dartford Warbler, *Sylvia undata*:** Excellent views of a pair in gorse on Ashdown Forest.

**European Robin, *Erithacus rubecula*:** Seen everyday in a variety of habitats. At Sevenoaks an adult was observed feeding a recently fledged youngster.

**Common Redstart, *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*:** Several seen on Ashdown Forest. A singing male was heard well.

**Black Redstart, *Phoenicurus ochruros*:** Four seen well at Dungeness including a handsome male. This is a bird that always uses industrial sites to nest including the nearby nuclear power station.

**European Stonechat, *Saxicola rubicola*:** A pair at Dungeness followed by a pair feeding young on Ashdown Forest. Their nests are usually found in gorse.

**Northern Wheatear, *Oenanthe oenanthe*:** Four were seen at Rye Harbour including a displaying male.

**Mistle Thrush, *Turdus viscivorus*:** Seen on almost every day as common in the hotel grounds.

**Song Thrush, *Turdus philomelos*:** Seen daily in the hotel grounds with one male appearing to never leave his song post.

**Eurasian Blackbird, *Turdus merula*:** An abundant resident seen in all habitats. Quite a few were actively feeding youngsters.

**European Starling, *Sturnus vulgaris*:** An abundant (although sharply declining) species seen everywhere.

**Dunnock, *Prunella modularis*:** Seen on most days. A quiet, unobtrusive species, easily overlooked.

**Gray Wagtail, *Motacilla cinerea*:** A lovely male in the hotel grounds. Also birds feeding young at both Bodiam and Leeds Castles.

**Western Yellow Wagtail, *Motacilla flava*:** Several on Sheppey including some brightly plumaged males. A few were also found at Oare Marshes.

**White Wagtail, *Motacilla alba*:** Common at the hotel but also seen on virtually all the other days. The birds found in the south are of the sub species '*Motacilla yarrellii*', usually called Pied Wagtail.

**Meadow Pipit, *Anthus pratensis*:** Singles seen at Dungeness and Rye Harbour.

**Tree Pipit, *Anthus trivialis*:** Several singing birds were observed on Ashdown Forest. They usually sing from trees as opposed to the Meadow Pipit that song flights.

**Common Chaffinch, *Fringilla coelebs*:** A common bird seen at all sites. Both sexes seen well.

**Eurasian Greenfinch, *Chloris chloris*:** Seen in the grounds of the hotel and also seen well at Oare Marshes.

**Eurasian Linnet, *Linaria cannabina*:** Usually found in pairs, this bird was present at all the coastal marshes.

**Red Crossbill, *Loxia curvirostra*:** A female was spotted briefly on Ashdown Forest. A male then perched at the top of a conifer and gave great scope views.

**European Goldfinch, *Carduelis carduelis*:** An abundant bird that was always present in the hotel grounds. Seen everywhere the group visited. Many males were in song.

**Reed Bunting, *Emberiza schoeniclus*:** Most of the sightings were on males as they sang from bushes. Recorded at Stodmarsh, Dungeness, Pannel Valley and Rye Harbour.

**House Sparrow, *Passer domesticus*:** Seen on most days, usually in towns and villages.

## **MAMMALS**

**European Rabbit, *Oryctolagus cuniculus*:** An abundant mammal seen daily. Very common in the grounds of the hotel.

**Grey Squirrel, *Sciurus carolinensis*:** A few were spotted mostly in the grounds of the hotel.

**Red Fox, *Vulpes vulpes*:** Singles seen in daylight on two occasions. The one at Dover Castle was spotted in the middle of the afternoon with many people present.

## **OTHER FAUNA**

**Marsh Frog, *Pelophylax ridibundus*:** This introduced species was heard at Oare Mashes calling from the roadside ditches.