

## HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

### NORTHUMBERLAND

17–22 November 2011

GUIDE: Chrissie Nicholson

GUESTS: Shaun Taylor, Sue & Alan Ripley, Peter Stitch, Mary Parker, Norman & Morag Rea

**DAY 1** Chrissie picks up some guests from the station in Newcastle and drives them through to Warkworth, Shaun spots a Barn Owl on a post and Chrissie glimpses a Tawny Owl flying over the top of the van. Peter has arrived early and has been for a walk down to the river in the sunshine, he starts his list with Kingfisher, Heron and Goldeneye, not a bad start at all. It is dark early, so we get settled into our rooms and ready for our evening meal. Everyone is ready for a meal after a long day travelling. Chrissie runs through the activities of the holiday ahead and everyone is excited to explore a new area, we then head off to bed.

**DAY 2** Our first day and we are greeted with a dry start, above the castle the flag is flying in the breeze. We watch Blackbirds feeding in the trees outside the hotel, this tree still has a lot of berries, so there is a feast for the birds. After breakfast and with the van packed up for the day, we set off for the famous Holy Island. Driving along the main road up to the Island, a few Buzzards are spotted on fence posts and tops of trees.

After rechecking the tide times before crossing the causeway, the tide is receding and we stop along the causeway to scan the mud flats, Mute Swans, Curlew and Redshank are feeding well. Further along we spot our first of many Pale-bellied Brent Geese feeding quite close to the road, along with Bar-tailed Godwits.

Arriving in the car park, we tog up and set off, Chrissie has been looking on the websites to see what is around and we are off to search for an 'Eastern Black Redstart'. Quite a few birders are already on the island, and when we arrive to the area where it has been seen there are people looking over the edge of the cliff, so we head towards them. Someone waves for us to stop as the bird is coming our way!!!

Chrissie walks along to see what they had seen and is told it is nearby, right into the cliff edge, so as Chrissie walks away a man whistles and waves to go forward. With the excitement rising to see this wee bird, we all walk along the cliff and as we glance down on the rocky shore we see this magnificent wee bird, with its bright orange chest and tail edges, wow. We all get great views before it flies further up the shore. Everyone else runs passed to follow it, we chat about this sighting and then walk up for a brief view again and then leave the site, with photographers and twitchers a plenty. This is the fifth sighting in Great Britain and is classed as a 'Mega Rare'!!!!

It is time to start looking for all the other species Holy Island is famous for, waders, divers and ducks. As we walk through the village, House Sparrows are feeding on bird feeders and one lonely Redpoll is spotted by Shaun in a tree on the road edge, a great bird. Reaching the shore we scan the mud flats and waterways to find more Bar-tailed Godwits, Curlew, Redshank and Golden Plovers on the shore edge. Eiders are swimming off shore, along with Red-breasted Mergansers and Pale-bellied Brent Geese.

In the harbour area, Grey Seals swim and some are hauled out on the sand banks. We are not complaining but with the sunshine the water has a glare, which makes it hard to scan, undeterred Chrissie finds a Great Crested Grebe, Red-throated Divers and more Eider. Rock Pipits fly around the shore line as we walk on. Around in the bay we have really close views of Brent Geese, and running along the mud we spot Grey Plovers in winter plumage.

Over in a field a wee pond is edged by Teal in great numbers, only one Wigeon and Curlew are along the island. Then we see a wader which gives us a good identification lesson as it is a new one for most of the guests. Finally when it flies off the final identification is made and we watch a Spotted Redshank flying away, calling. After this excitement we head for lunch at the van.

After lunch we head along the track to the dunes, on the way with berry filled trees, there are numerous Blackbirds, male and females, Redwing, Goldfinch and Greenfinch and in the fields are Starlings and Fieldfares feeding. Before the sand dunes a bird flies up onto a post and one into the back of the tree where we walk. The first bird is a female Stonechat and then a male joins it. The bird on the back of the tree flies off but not

before it is identified as a female Reed Bunting. On the edge of a cut field eight Roe Deer are sitting resting right out in the open, obviously there are no predators on the island. They eventually start grazing as we pass on by. Grey Partridge are heard calling also on the field edge but are harder to see.

Leaving the group at the edge of the causeway and flats, Chrissie walks back for the van to pick everyone up. When she arrives the group are shouting something and eventually she realises they are shouting 'Merlin' but as it flies so fast it is missed by a few. After a quick cuppa and a further scan across the flats, we head off the island to a shore-side hide, as the tide is rising fast, it is an ideal place to scan before light fades. Scanning the mud, Shelducks and a Little Egret are feeding on the shore, with everyone seeing these birds, we check the fields. Peter finds a Brown Hare running along the edge of the field then right across the middle, we are all lucky this time and get great views.

We leave as the light has gone and drive back to Warkworth, parking up at the river Chrissie produces a bat detector and starts listening for bats. We only hear one Pipistrelle and no Owls, the river is totally dark and only the Mallards are visible. One of the guests cannot believe we are standing on a river bank in the dark and laughing starts so it is time to leave!! The hotel is a warm welcome and dinner is appreciated, check lists done it is bed time after a very exciting day, how can Chrissie top that.....

### DAY 3

As sun rises over the estuary it is a very welcome sight for all before our earlier breakfast. Today we are heading inland to Kielder Reservoir. It takes some getting to? Chrissie has planned the route to include two lakes, hoping for Whooper Swans and other duck species.... The first lake is not accessible as the road has been closed? So driving the detour all is fine, back on the correct route we continue only to find the next road to the next lake also closed, much to Chrissie's dismay, all good plans don't always work!! Completing the next detour and back on track without seeing either of the lakes, we come to the River Rede, we are just saying how the river looked good for Dipper when Sue shouts 'Dipper, Dipper' so Chrissie is able to get off the road and we all get out to see a pair of Dippers feeding in the water, what a start, a Grey Wagtail has also been heard, but not seen.

Travelling on we arrive at the dam wall of Kielder Water, the water is calm and the sun is shining, there is not a bird to be seen on the water at this end. Then Chrissie hears Crossbills singing nearby so everyone starts to scan the tree tops, but the light is not good as the sun shines behind the tree tops. Suddenly they are spotted and with scopes set up we have good views, as they fly overhead we count 24 birds, a fantastic sight.

Off to the facilities, as we get in the van another Crossbill is heard this time really close and is found right on top of a conifer just outside the van, we have great views as the sun is behind us and shines on the male Crossbill, amazing.

Driving along the shore of the lake, a few ducks are spotted so again parking off the road, we get out and walk down the road to get better views, we find Goldeneye pairs and a Little Grebe diving, we also hear more Crossbills and Coal and Long-tailed Tits are flitting on the edge of the forest.

Stopping at the nature reserve area, we walk along the viaduct to scan the water, again Goldeneye and Teal are feeding. Then Norman sees a bird of prey, but not all see this bird as it disappears into the tree edge. Scanning and walking further forward along the track to try and spot this bird, we do not see it but certainly everyone hears it and we are pleased to say it is a Goshawk, a shame not all see this fabulous bird.

Driving along to the castle car park for lunch, we hear more Crossbills, we tuck into lunch then get ready for a wee walk. It is a short walk to a feeding station hide, on the way the forest is alive with birds, Chaffinches, Nuthatch, Great, Blue and Coal Tits all feeding on the Beech mast. On towards the hide a Crossbill is singing its heart out but we cannot find it, the trees have thick canopies and it is really hard to see through, we do not find the bird. Continuing on to the hide all the feeders are full and so we settle in to watch what comes to feed. Nuthatches are seen really close to the window, together with all the other birds mentioned before. Then Chrissie spots a Brambling just perched on the branch ready to come into feed. WOW, what a fantastic bird, the sun shines through the trees and right onto the bird sitting on the branch, all the colours are bright and it looks great. There is only one bird, but it is enough as it is a first for Morag, we all take photographs as it is quite close.

As the guests stay at the Castle, Chrissie goes for the van and collects everyone for the Forest drive. The light is good for our drive through the forest, we stop at a wildlife hide, but never actually get into the hide as it is easier to view the valley from the road. More Crossbills are seen feeding in the tops of the trees and scanning the fence posts, Shaun spots a very distant raptor sitting, it is a Goshawk. We think we can get closer if we drive along the road, but to our dismay, the road runs through the forest and not along the fence line so we could not see it from the road. The drive, however, is amazing passing through the well managed forest, with all different ages of forest, and with clear fell being replanted but some left looking bit messy. In the clearings the moorland is visible and we scan for more raptors but none appear. The sun is setting as we continue on and out the other end onto the main road.

The rest of the drive is good as we pass through part of the Northumberland National Park with villages dotted around. We arrive back at the hotel in the dark and get ready for our dinner after a great day out, completing checklists after our meal.

#### DAY 4

Another sunrise appears over the estuary, how lucky we are with the weather. Chrissie checks the bird sightings as we are heading down to Teeside today, there is a special bird at Hartlepool, so driving through the Tyne Tunnel we head straight there. The further south we drive the mistier it becomes, Chrissie is laughing and thinking, oh no! What will we see today through the mist? Always undeterred by weather, we continued on.

The guests are quite bemused at the fact we drive through Hartlepool and onto the promenade, parking up Chrissie announces what bird we are looking for, a 'Grey Phalarope'. Not long after getting the scopes out and everyone is ready, someone stops in his car and asks if we are looking for the Phalarope, which we say 'yes' and he tells us exactly where it is seen! Great stuff, off we walk along the pier and meet some folk coming down towards us and then Morag says 'its' here', just over the pier wall is this little grey and white bird spinning in among the rubbish floating in the sea, fantastic, it is amazing to watch. The folk come down and tell us they had been there since 8am and we turn up and see it straight away, much to their disgust with freezing mist and hands, they see and walk off. We watch this wee bird still spinning and feeding in the waves, then within a few minutes off it flies around to where we have parked the van.

But we are certainly not disappointed as photographic evidence is recorded and we are very happy people.

We walk back along the promenade to be greeted with numerous Turnstones, Purple Sandpipers and a Mediterranean Gull in among the Black-headed Herring and Greater Black-backed Gulls, again which do not stay long either. Driving to another car park for facilities and walking along to an outlet, we find roosting Sanderling, Ringed Plovers, Redshank and Knot a tremendous sight as normally Sanderling are busy dodging waves, and it is good to see them roosting instead. Another Mediterranean Gull is actually sitting on a lamp post so with Black-headed Gulls on the shore it gives us a great comparison between the two, great.

As lunch time is approaching fast, we drive to the RSPB reserve at Saltholme, park up and eat. Sue has arranged for Alan to have a motorised scooter to enable him to get around the whole reserve with us, and as he is shown how the controls work, we walk into the centre. The warden comes rushing in to tell us there is a Ruff showing well at the first hide, so all ready off we go. Again just a brief view of the Ruff before it flies away, phew!

The second hide proves more productive with Pochard, Wigeon, Teal, Heron, Curlew, Canada and Barnacle Geese. It is quite a busy wee place, as we turn the corner we stop and look at four European White-fronted Geese feeding in the field. Whilst there Shaun shouts 'Fox', everyone finds the Fox eventually, as we are all looking further away and it is right in front of us before the fence in the longish grass, hunting and succeeding. After watching it pouncing a couple of times it comes up with a small mammal, and with two gulps it is gone. The Fox is undeterred by our presence, it just keeps walking and sniffing the ground. As we get closer it comes out onto the path and along the edge, scent marking as it goes, we follow until it is out of sight, another fantastic sighting, much unexpected!

The last hide is very busy with birdlife, there are fabulous views of very close Pintails, and Shoveler, Dunlin and Golden Plover are further away but the Black-tailed Godwits are the furthest, but still all good views. We have to leave the hide as we are meeting the warden and volunteers for the Starling roost, the weather has not improved from this morning despite what we have seen throughout the day, the mist is still around, but off we go anyway, ever hopeful. Walking along through the reserve out of the mist a Marsh Harrier appears and flies over where the Starlings are

to roost. We find our seats and sit down and wait, whilst we wait we are handed out rolls and soup, on a night like this it is very welcome. A few starlings appear but not enough to make a spectacular murmuration! Before it gets too dark the warden announces that we must give up and go back while there is some light to guide us. We get free entry for another walk, but as we are going home it is a bit disappointing but we know what it's like as wildlife watchers, nothing is guaranteed!!

The further north we get the mist disappears, it has been sunny in Northumberland, we can only laugh and then look back on what we saw, even in the mist, another amazing day.

## DAY 5

No sunrise today, it is damp and cool. With another earlier breakfast to make the most of the day light, we head to 'Warkworth Gut', which is a gully where the estuary flows with the tide and new pools have been dug, one side is the sand dunes and sea and the other caravan park and parking. Wandering along the pools there are Redshank, Heron and Snipe. The bushes are perched for Stonechat, Dunnock and Wren. Walking across the bridge to the caravan park we stop and scan the mud, again plenty of Redshank and Snipe are visible, then a squealing call comes from the reeds, a Water Rail is calling, but we cannot see it. Climbing up the hill we stop and scan again, Chrissie hears a new call and picks up a Spotted Redshank flying and then landing right in muddy pools, everyone gets great views as it feeds and gets chased by other Redshanks, another good start to the day, it isn't even 9.30am.

Grey Partridge have also been on the marshy area and fly off over the hill and now as we walk along the road we see them in the field, with an odd Curlew. Driving off we are on our way to Hauxley Nature reserve. We drive in and everyone gets out, there has been another rare bird about, a couple are asking the warden, so Chrissie goes to listen in, it is at Cresswell now, so piling back in the van we get in a convoy with other folk who do not know where to go, Chrissie leads the way to Cresswell.

The hide already has a few folk in and gets full quickly with us and then the other folk who have followed us. We are not too late and there, out in front of the reeds is a 'Greater Yellowlegs' a North American wader and the first sighting for Northumberland, WOW! Again another lifer! It is a fascinating bird with long legs racing from one side to the other in record speed it actually looks quite comical to watch. We all get great

views. A Water Rail has also been seen but only Shaun sees it from our group, much to Mary's dismay, as this was a bird she wanted to see. We would come back later, as we had a few reserves to cover yet. But another successful twitch!!!!

Also at Cresswell, we watch a large flock of Golden Plover, Lapwing, Dunlin and Redshank out of the front of the hide; Snipe are sitting on the edge of the reeds. Wigeon are feeding on the far bank and Teal on the edge of the lake, Cormorants are drying their wings and Oystercatchers roost beside them. Barnacle Geese are on the pool extension and Canada Geese feed on the shore on the left of the hide.

Driving off we head to Druridge Bay Country Park for facilities and a scan of the lake there. On the way we spot two swans in a field, on closer inspection we are very pleased, as they are Bewick Swans, another unexpected bird for the North East? Not disappointed the Scaup are still here at our end of the lake together with Goldeneye and Gadwall, Tufted Ducks also appear on other parts of the lake.

The next stop is East Chevington nature reserve, a Short-eared Owl is to be our surprise bird here, sitting on a post before flying a short distance down the field to another, sitting turning its head and listening, great views. On the lake here we have another large flock of Lapwing with Snipe, Redshank, Dunlin all in the shallows, further out are Greylag Geese. Then a flock of about 60 European White-fronted Geese fly in for a drink and rest, it is great to see such a large number, last year there were four!! We search for a Green-winged Teal on the other lake but as the light is bad it is not easy to pick out, so do not see that one!

Lunch time by the van, and looking out over the reed bed nothing of any significance appears, although we have already had an excellent morning.

Most of the afternoon is spent at Hauxley where we do not just drive in then out again!! We stay and walk around all the hides to see if we could add any more species to our list. The first one we spot flying is a Kingfisher but it did not hang around and flies to another part of the lake never to be seen again. This reserve holds Oystercatchers, Mute Swans, Curlew, Bar-tailed Godwit and many ducks. The wee feeding station had Tree Sparrows, great little birds to see, together with most of the Tit family and Pheasants.

Chrissie drives around looking for Whooper Swans, but with the area they fed at last year now housing turbines, couldn't find them? So back to Cresswell for the rest of the afternoon and daylight left. Hoping for a Barn Owl nothing shows, but great views again of the Greater Yellowlegs racing across the mud banks, amazing stuff.

We drive back to the hotel and our final evening meal, packing and check lists and recalling the holiday with species, place of the trip and magic moments.

## **DAY 6**

Our final breakfast is early as we have to drive into Newcastle in part of the rush hour, but still everyone is ready. The guests who came by car have a later breakfast as they do not need to leave early. We say our farewells and wish everyone a safe journey home, and hope to see them all again on another Speyside experience. Shaun has already booked for Mull Easter and Morag and Norman are coming to the Solway Firth in late October 2012, look forward to seeing all again.

**SPECIES OF THE TRIP:** No clear winner, everyone chooses different species, Brambling, Eastern Black Redstart, Dipper, Greater Yellowlegs, Spotted Redshank, Crossbills and finally Grey Phalarope

**PLACE OF THE TRIP:** Holy Island with 2 favouring Kielder and Forest drive.

**MAGIC MOMENTS:** Again no clear choice, Grey Phalarope and the timing, Brambling in sunshine, Whole trip, Starling roosts! Tree Sparrows singing, Short-eared Owl and finally 4 lifers in 4 days....

## BIRDS

Red-throated Diver  
Little Grebe  
Great Crested Grebe  
Cormorant  
Shag  
Grey Heron  
Mute Swan  
Bewick Swan  
Pink-footed Goose  
European White-fronted Goose  
Greylag Goose  
Canada Goose  
Barnacle Goose  
Pale-bellied Brent Goose  
Shelduck  
Gadwall  
Wigeon  
Teal  
Mallard  
Pintail  
Shoveler  
Pochard  
Tufted Duck  
Scaup  
Eider  
Goldeneye  
Red-breasted Merganser  
Goshawk  
Sparrowhawk  
Common Buzzard  
Kestrel  
Merlin  
Marsh Harrier  
Grey Partridge  
Pheasant  
Water Rail  
Moorhen  
Coot  
Oystercatcher  
Ringed Plover  
Grey Plover  
Golden Plover  
Lapwing  
Sanderling  
Dunlin  
Ruff  
Snipe  
Black-tailed Godwit  
Bar-tailed Godwit  
Curlew  
Redshank  
Turnstone  
Kingfisher  
Greater Yellowlegs  
Grey Phalarope  
Black-headed Gull  
Mediterranean Gull  
Common Gull  
Herring Gull  
Great Black-backed Gull  
Woodpigeon  
Collared Dove  
Barn Owl  
Tawny Owl  
Short-eared Owl  
Great Spotted Woodpecker  
Skylark (H)  
Meadow Pipit  
Rock Pipit  
Grey Wagtail (H)  
Pied Wagtail  
Dipper  
Wren  
Dunnock  
Robin  
Stonechat  
Blackbird  
Fieldfare  
Song Thrush  
Redwing

Mistle Thrush  
Long-tailed Tit  
Coal Tit  
Blue Tit  
Great Tit  
Nuthatch  
Jay  
Magpie  
Jackdaw  
Rook  
Carrion Crow  
Starling  
House Sparrow  
Tree Sparrow  
Chaffinch  
Brambling  
Knot  
Greenfinch  
Goldfinch  
Linnet  
Redpoll  
Common Crossbill  
Bullfinch  
Reed Bunting  
Little Egret  
Eastern Black Redstart  
Spotted Redshank  
**TOTAL BIRDS: 107**

#### **MAMMALS**

Rabbit  
Brown Hare  
Badger (dead)  
Roe Deer  
Grey Seal  
Fox  
Weasel

**TOTAL SPECIES: 114**