



THE OBSERVER

SECOS Newsletter

Promoting and fostering the study of ornithology by observation, research and record keeping

East Yorkshire - 14-15 June 2026

'The Spoonbill, Gannet and Bittern' Tour

Seventeen members attended a two-day trip visiting four locations in East Yorkshire. This trip was last undertaken in 2024. The trip was based on a scheduled itinerary, with no unscheduled local twitches. The weather was light cloud, sunny intervals, a gentle breeze, 14-17°C, and no rain. A species list is shown on the last page.

Day 1: Sunday 14th June

Fairburn Ings RSPB - spoonbills, egrets and wetland wildlife

Overview



Fairburn Ings is situated in the Lower Aire Valley between the villages of Fairburn and Newton, east of Castleford. The name "ings" comes from Old Norse and means low-lying land that is liable to flood.

The reserve owes much of its character to the area's coal-mining past. Ground subsidence

caused by mining created pools and marshes that developed into valuable wetland habitat. Following its designation as a bird sanctuary in the 1960s, the site was managed by volunteer wardens before the RSPB took over in 1976.

Today, Fairburn Ings covers around 650 acres and supports a rich mix of open water, reedbeds, marshland, meadows, woodland and scrub. This diversity of habitats makes it one of Yorkshire's most important inland sites for birds and other wildlife.

Observations

Two spoonbills flying over the car park provided a perfect start to the day. Around the visitor centre, chaffinch, goldfinch, chiffchaff and blackbird were all in song, while a great tit visited the feeders.

From the boardwalk on the Riverbank Trail, we enjoyed views of a singing sedge warbler, heard a blackcap, and spotted a bullfinch.

At the Big Hole pool, grey heron, coot, black-headed gull and magpie were recorded. A willow warbler sang nearby and several swallows hawked insects over the water. A green woodpecker was first heard yaffling before briefly flying between trees on the far side of the pool. A few minutes later, we obtained excellent telescope views of the bird perched in a tree.

We then followed the Roy Taylor Trail, which offers panoramic views across the reserve. Reed bunting and willow warbler were both seen and heard, while a kestrel and a drifting buzzard passed overhead. At the first pool, we added mute swan, mallard, gadwall, pochard, moorhen and great crested grebe. A little grebe was heard trilling before appearing and diving repeatedly. Several house martins and sand martins fed over the water, accompanied by a single common tern. The second pool produced tufted duck and cormorant, while a red kite drifted over later along the trail. Near The Moat, two spoonbills were found in the trees alongside several little egrets and cormorants.

During lunch, four spoonbills, a little egret and a great white egret were feeding in Spoonbill Flash. The surrounding wetlands held numerous greylag geese, together with lapwing, shoveler and shelduck. Two stock doves were seen feeding on the far bank.

The final highlight of our visit came when telescopes trained on a distant group of cattle revealed four cattle egrets. One later provided particularly good views when it perched on the back of a cow.

Wykeham Forest Raptor Watchpoint - searching the skies

Overview

The Wykeham Forest Raptor Viewpoint is located approximately 2 miles north of the village of Wykeham, situated along the A170 Pickering to Scarborough road. This viewpoint offers spectacular views over the Troutsdale valley, extending to the forests of Dalby, Langdale, and Broxa. The valley is a regular flyway for passing raptors. .

Observations

On arriving at Wykeham Forest, we immediately noticed that the car park had been enlarged since our previous visit. More striking, however, was the extent of the forestry operations. The mature conifers surrounding the car park and lining much of the route to the viewpoint had been felled, leaving a rather open and barren landscape. The next generation of trees had already been planted, but it will be many years before they restore the former character of the site. Despite this, wildlife was still evident, with a yellowhammer seen briefly, a song thrush delivering its rich, fluting song, and a great spotted woodpecker flying into the remaining trees.

A short walk brought us to the raptor viewpoint. Here, a mistle thrush flew past, a willow warbler sang from a nearby perch, and a pair of siskins gave excellent views in a small tree directly in front of us. Careful scanning of the forested slopes with telescopes produced distant views of a goshawk, together with several ravens and buzzards. A great black-backed gull also passed through. Unfortunately, the hoped-for honey buzzard failed to appear.

After returning to the car park, we walked a short distance along the lane towards the former forest nurseries. Additional species included skylark, swallow, swift, kestrel and linnet.

Hotel



Bridlington Kittiwakes

We stayed overnight at the Premier Inn Bridlington Seafront, located at the north end of town, and dined at the Cookhouse & Pub restaurant.

An early-morning stroll along the seafront before breakfast was rewarded with kittiwake and herring gull, together with the often overlooked house sparrow.

Day 2: Monday 15th June

Bempton Cliffs RSPB - seabird city on the Yorkshire coast

Overview



Bempton Cliffs is situated on the Yorkshire coast between Bridlington and Filey. The reserve protects more than 5 km of towering chalk cliffs, some rising over 100 metres above the North Sea. These cliffs provide ideal nesting ledges for seabirds and host one of the UK's most important seabird colonies, with around half a million birds gathering here to breed each year. Bempton is particularly notable for its

gannets, supporting the largest mainland colony in England. A series of cliff-top viewing platforms offers outstanding views of both the seabirds and the dramatic coastline, helping to make Bempton one of Britain's premier wildlife destinations.

The concrete remains immediately adjacent to the reserve are part of the former RAF Bempton radar station, which was established during the Second World War and later became a Cold War early-warning site. Several of the surviving structures, including radar bases and bunker-related buildings, can still be seen from the cliff-top paths.

Observations

On arrival at Bempton Cliffs, the busy car parks gave an early indication of the reserve's popularity.

Along the track to the visitor centre, we paused at the feeders and quickly added tree sparrow, together with moorhen, woodpigeon, jackdaw, blue tit, dunnock, chaffinch and goldfinch.

Tree sparrows were a conspicuous feature throughout the reserve. In Cheshire they are a scarce and localised species, so for many people this was a welcome year tick.

We followed the path down towards the chalk cliffs. Conditions were ideal, with only a gentle breeze, in marked contrast to our previous visit in 2024 when the strong wind made standing, walking and scoping a challenge.



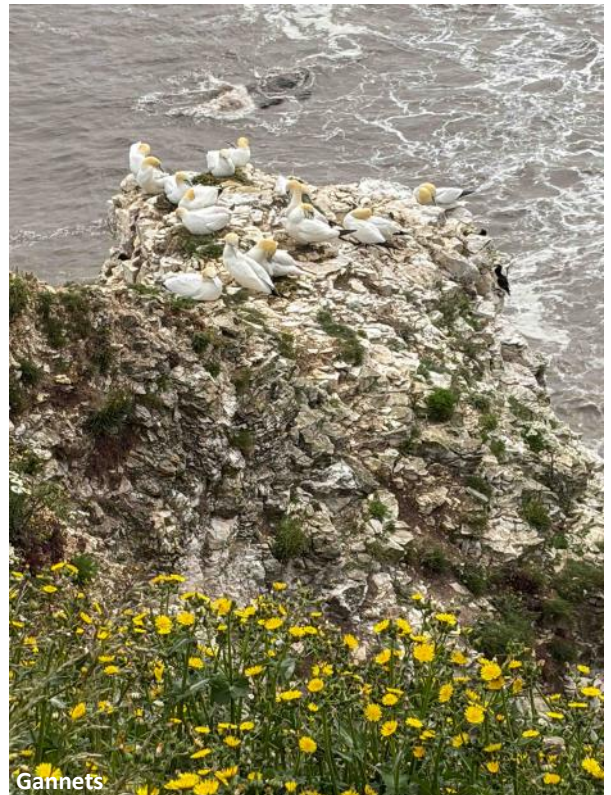
As expected, the cliffs were alive with seabirds. Large numbers of gannets, kittiwakes, guillemots and razorbills filled the ledges and airspace, while a little patience was required to locate a few puffins and fulmars among the crowds.

A notable sighting came when a barn owl was spotted entering its nest box, providing an excellent addition to the day list. A kestrel was also seen

perched on the box. Over the surrounding grassland, skylarks sang continuously, while swallows, house martins and swifts passed overhead.

One of our target species was corn bunting, which is often found around the remains of the former RAF Bempton radar station. Despite searching the area, we were unable to locate one, perhaps because a tractor was cutting the grass nearby. However, the same area produced good views of singing linnet, whitethroat, meadow pipit and reed bunting.

By now, the viewing platforms and visitor centre were packed with visitors. Iolo Williams had recently featured Bempton Cliffs on Springwatch, which may well have encouraged many people to make the trip.



Earlier in the day, a yellowhammer had been heard singing from a hedgerow, but despite a later search the bird remained unseen.

Yellowhammer and corn bunting, both characteristic species of arable farmland,

were seen and heard in the fields surrounding the reserve on both arrival and departure. The latter proved frustratingly elusive within the reserve itself.

North Cave Wetlands YWT - from quarry to wildlife haven

Overview

North Cave Wetlands is a Yorkshire Wildlife Trust reserve situated near the village of North Cave, west of Hull. The reserve occupies the site of a former sand and gravel quarry, where mineral extraction has been transformed into a mosaic of lakes, reedbeds, shingle islands, wet grassland, scrub and woodland.

Since restoration began in the early 2000s, the reserve has developed into one of Yorkshire's premier wetland sites for wildlife. A network of trails, hides and viewing screens provides excellent access to the various habitats, which attract a wide range of breeding, wintering and passage birds.

At first sight, it is difficult to understand how a former sand and gravel quarry can support such an extensive wetland, especially as there are no rivers or streams flowing through the site. The answer lies beneath the surface. Quarrying reached the local water table, allowing groundwater to fill the excavated areas naturally. In addition, the underlying clay helps prevent water from draining away too quickly. Today, a network of sluices and water-control structures allows reserve staff to regulate water levels.

Observations



Entering the reserve from Dryham Lane, we followed the footpath north through a strip of woodland, accompanied by the songs of blackcap and chaffinch.

Our first stop was East Hide, where Egyptian goose, pochard, mallard, tufted duck, lapwing and black-headed gull were recorded.

A few sand martins were

hawking overhead. Continuing to Turret Hide overlooking Island Lake, we added mute swan, coot, little grebe and little egret.

The northern section of the reserve proved particularly lively, with greenfinch, goldfinch and several reed buntings in song. At North Hide, overlooking Reedbed Lake, a great white egret was stalking the shallows, while a cuckoo called in the distance. A common tern flew through and a red kite drifted overhead.



The highlight of this part of the reserve was a bittern, spotted on the far side of the lake perched several feet above the water in the reeds. Most birdwatchers associate bitterns with furtive views at the edge of a reedbed, but they are surprisingly agile climbers. Their long toes allow them to grip reed stems securely, and they will often climb above the surrounding vegetation before taking flight.

Turning south towards Crosslands Lake, we found large numbers of greylag geese, together with a few lapwings and a grey heron. An oystercatcher flew over and a Cetti's warbler announced its presence with its characteristically explosive song.

A brief stop at Crosslands Hide overlooking Dryham Ings suggested that the area would be excellent for waders during wetter periods. On this visit, however, conditions were rather dry, with only a single lapwing present, along with greylag geese, little egret, little grebe, coot and a few other common waterbirds.



Our final destination was Dennis Wood Hide overlooking East Holm. One of the newer parts of the reserve, East Holm has been carefully designed to provide habitat for breeding wetland birds. Its numerous shingle islands, spits and banks create ideal nesting and feeding areas. The name "Holm", derived from the Old Norse "holmr", meaning a small island, is particularly fitting.

The area was alive with noisy black-headed gulls, many accompanied by recently fledged young. A few avocets fed in the shallow water, while common terns patrolled overhead and two little ringed plovers were feeding along the margins. Other species recorded included great crested grebe, shelduck, oystercatcher, lesser black-backed gull, coot and greylag goose.

North Cave Wetlands provided a fitting finale, adding several memorable sightings and demonstrating how former quarry workings can be transformed into outstanding wildlife habitat.

Conclusion

This proved to be another successful East Yorkshire trip, with a varied selection of sites, excellent weather and plenty of memorable birds. Highlights included spoonbills and cattle egrets at Fairburn Ings, a distant goshawk at Wykeham Forest, a barn owl and the spectacular seabird colonies of Bempton Cliffs, and a reed-climbing bittern at North Cave Wetlands. In total, 87 species were recorded during the trip (see species list on the last page).

Equally important was the enjoyable company throughout the weekend. Thank you to everyone who joined the trip and helped make it such a memorable occasion. We look forward to returning to East Yorkshire again in the future.

Credits – Narrative & Images

Fairburn Ings Visitor Centre: Bernard Bradley *	Gannets: Mike Tonks
Bridlington Kittiwakes: Nigel Henderson	Viewing Platform: Pauline E *
Bempton Cliffs Entrance: JThomas *	View from East Hide: Pauline E *
Seabird City: Peter Roberts	Bittern x 2: Nigel Henderson
Narrative: Mike Tonks	
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Species List



87 species were seen/heard during the trip.

Green text indicates 10 new species that have been added to the 2026 SECOS Field Trips Total, which is now at 164 species.

Canada Goose	Little Ringed Plover	Buzzard	Blackcap
Greylag Goose	Lapwing	Barn Owl	Whitethroat
Mute Swan	Common Tern	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Wren
Egyptian Goose	Kittiwake	Green Woodpecker	Starling
Shelduck	Black-headed Gull	Kestrel	Song Thrush
Shoveler	Herring Gull	Jay	Mistle Thrush
Gadwall	Great Black-backed Gull	Magpie	Blackbird
Mallard	Lesser Black-backed Gull	Jackdaw	Robin
Pochard	Puffin	Rook	Tree Sparrow
Tufted Duck	Razorbill	Carrion Crow	House Sparrow
Pheasant	Common Guillemot	Raven	Dunnock
Swift	Fulmar	Blue Tit	Meadow Pipit
Cuckoo	Gannet	Great Tit	Chaffinch
Feral Pigeon	Cormorant	Skylark	Bullfinch
Stock Dove	Spoonbill	Sand Martin	Greenfinch
Woodpigeon	Bittern	Swallow	Linnet
Moorhen	Little Egret	House Martin	Goldfinch
Coot	Great White Egret	Cetti's Warbler	Siskin
Little Grebe	Cattle Egret	Willow Warbler	Corn Bunting
Great Crested Grebe	Grey Heron	Chiffchaff	Yellowhammer
Oystercatcher	Goshawk	Sedge Warbler	Reed Bunting
Avocet	Red Kite	Reed Warbler	