



THE OBSERVER

SECOS Newsletter

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

Long Weekend - Norfolk - 25-28 April 2025

This Newsletter describes the SECOS Long Weekend trip to Norfolk from 25th to 28th April 2025. A species list is shown on the last page.

Weather

The weather was sunny, warm and rain free throughout the trip with temperatures reaching 25°C on Monday.

Day 1: Friday 25th April

24 members booked the trip to Norfolk, a favourite location that we last visited in April 2022. After an uneventful journey, we arrived at The Mountain Restaurant at The Grange Garden Centre, on Asfordby Hill, Melton Mowbray for a welcome breakfast stop. The restaurant has a French ski lodge theme.

RSPB Frampton Marsh - Farmland Reclaimed for Wildlife



Frampton Marsh is situated on the edge of The Wash, one of the UK's most significant estuaries for birdlife. The reserve provides a diverse array of habitats, including freshwater scrapes, reedbeds, grasslands, and saltmarshes.

A walk through the woodland track took us to the southeast corner of the reserve in the hope of spotting a turtle dove. None had been reported that day, but it was

worth a try. Along the way, a viewpoint gave us excellent views over pools, reedbeds, and sweeping grassland, where thousands of brent geese were grazing near a farm. A greylag goose with five goslings drew smiles, and a few gadwall were also noted. Wader sightings included avocet, oystercatcher, and 13 black-tailed godwits, while the air was filled with the songs of chiffchaff, Cetti's warbler, reed warbler and sedge warbler. A distant white shape seen through the heat haze was initially identified as a great white egret, but later revealed itself to be a spoonbill when it moved. Two brown hares added some mammalian interest.

We continued to the end of the path and searched the trees and bushes for turtle doves, but none were found. The reservoir was quiet, with just a pair of gadwall and a lone brent goose, though we did record a great white egret and a kestrel before heading back to the visitor centre, seeing a kingfisher flash by on the way.

From the comfort of the 360 Hide, we enjoyed excellent views across the freshwater scrapes, an ideal vantage point for spotting a wide variety of wetland and migratory birds. The scene was alive with activity, and we soon compiled an impressive list of species. Among these were geese, including Canada, greylag, and pink-footed, as well as both mute and a lone, injured whooper swan. The scrapes hosted a good variety of ducks, with common shelduck, wigeon, mallard, gadwall, shoveler, common pochard, tufted duck, teal, and the more elusive pintail and garganey all making appearances. Other waterbirds included great crested grebe, coot, moorhen, little egret, grey heron and cormorant. A good selection of waders was also present, with redshank, spotted redshank, ruff, oystercatcher, little ringed plover, ringed plover, common snipe, and a flyover whimbrel. Overhead and on the scrapes, we spotted several gulls - Mediterranean, lesser black-backed, black-headed and herring. Common and arctic terns were seen. A kingfisher added a splash of colour, and early signs of spring migration were evident with the presence of swifts, swallows and sand martins, the latter flying around a nearby sandbank. A reed bunting made a brief appearance.



Dersingham Bog NNR – Former Royal Estate Heathland

Dersingham Bog is part of the Sandringham Estate, near the West Norfolk villages of Dersingham and Wolferton. It comprises a patchwork of mire, heath and woodland and is one of the few remaining wilderness areas left in this part of Norfolk, which is otherwise dominated by intensive agriculture. The Bog supports nationally important numbers of breeding Nightjar, around 20 pairs.

Most of the group met at the Wolferton car park and followed the footpath down onto the heath. A cuckoo was soon heard calling – a promising start. We were treated to excellent views of a singing tree pipit, which was later joined by another. Overhead, we scanned the skies above a line of conifers and picked out marsh harrier, red kite, sparrowhawk and kestrel. Other highlights included the distinctive 'yaffling' of a green woodpecker, a singing blackcap, a small flock of linnets, and a pair of stonechats showing well. A pair of shelduck and a greylag goose flew over – not heathland birds, but likely explained by the pool on the edge of the Bog. Meanwhile, a few members arrived via the Scissors car park and picked up willow warbler, whitethroat and siskin on their walk to join the main group. Before we left, we were rewarded with excellent views of a singing cuckoo perched low in two nearby trees.

Le Strange Arms Hotel – From 17th-Century Farmhouse to Victorian Seaside Retreat



The hotel we chose for our stay in Norfolk was the Le Strange Arms Hotel, which is situated just a stone's throw from the sea at Old Hunstanton. Originally built in the 1600s as a traditional Norfolk farmhouse, the building evolved over the centuries into a prominent seaside hotel. In the 1800s, it became part of Hunstanton's transformation into a Victorian holiday destination, championed by Henry L'Estrange Styleman Le Strange. During World War II, the hotel served as accommodation for air force personnel seeking rest and recuperation. After an excellent dinner, and a listing of the day's birds in the Oak Room, we retired for a good night's sleep.

Chrissy elected to camp at Snettisham Meadows and awoke each morning to a stunning dawn chorus!



Day 2: Saturday 26th April

RSPB Titchwell Marsh - From WWII Tank Range to Nature Reserve

We began along the Fen Trail, where a Cetti's warbler and a blackcap were in song, and a sharp-eyed member of the group spotted a water vole by the dragonfly pond. At the Fen Hide, we found small numbers of pochard, tufted duck, moorhen, coot and little grebe, while a reed warbler flew across the pool and vanished into the reeds.

Further along the trail, we passed the Turtle Dove Feeding Station, located at the end of a concrete strip — part of a war-time legacy. From 1942 to 1945, Titchwell Marsh served as an armoured vehicle gunnery range for the Royal Tank Regiment. The concrete road laid to support tank movement now forms part of the Fen Trail. A volunteer told us that turtle doves are typically seen feeding there between 1:30 and 2:30 pm, attracted by the scattered seed. On the East Trail, a lesser whitethroat was located in the scrub.

At Patsy's Pool, common water birds were present in small numbers. A marsh harrier quartered the reedbed behind the pool, and a great white egret flew in and disappeared into the reeds. In the distance, a large flock of sandwich terns wheeled high over the coast.



We retraced our steps and headed out along the West Bank Path, where we paused to enjoy prolonged views of active male and female bearded tits.



From the Island Hide, we watched many avocets feeding in the shallows. On the sandbank, two sleeping sandwich terns, 11 Mediterranean gulls, and around 200 brent geese were gathered.

From the Parrinder Hide, overlooking Freshwater Marsh, there were many gulls, cormorants, and a lone common tern. Two Egyptian geese and around 200 sandwich terns were resting on the sandbank. Ringed plover and little ringed plover were both seen, followed by a redshank, common sandpiper and whimbrel arriving in quick succession. In the distance, two spoonbill were feeding near the edge of the reedbed.

Out on the beach, the highlights were sanderling and turnstone.

We returned to the Turtle Dove Feeding Station and waited patiently. After a short time, two turtle doves appeared, walking in and out of view, giving us the satisfying sighting we had hoped for.



On our way back to the visitor centre, a sign indicated the best spot to view a tawny owl roosting in an ivy-clad tree. With a little trial and error — the height of the observer proving a critical factor — we eventually enjoyed a restricted but clear view of the bird's pale streaked breast.

Choseley Drying Barns – A Glimpse of Farmland Life

In this farmland setting, a grey partridge and three red-legged partridges were seen feeding quietly along the field margins. Overhead, a skylark sang, and a swallow flew by. The hedgerows were alive with birds, including chaffinch, common whitethroat and yellowhammer. In one field, hundreds of woodpigeons were feeding, accompanied by a lone golden plover — an unexpected bonus. Two common buzzards were seen soaring nearby and, in the middle of a ploughed field, an oystercatcher appeared to be nesting.

Redshank at Thornham



Thornham Harbour NWT – From Smuggling Harbour to Wildlife Haven

Dating back to medieval times, Thornham Harbour was a bustling port involved in fishing, commerce and smuggling. The harbour's notoriety peaked in the 18th century, with skirmishes between smugglers and customs officials. Notably, on New Year's Eve of 1782, a confrontation occurred between local smugglers and Dragoon Guards. Today, Thornham Harbour is celebrated for its saltmarshes, mudflats, and grazing marshes and is a prime location for birdwatching.

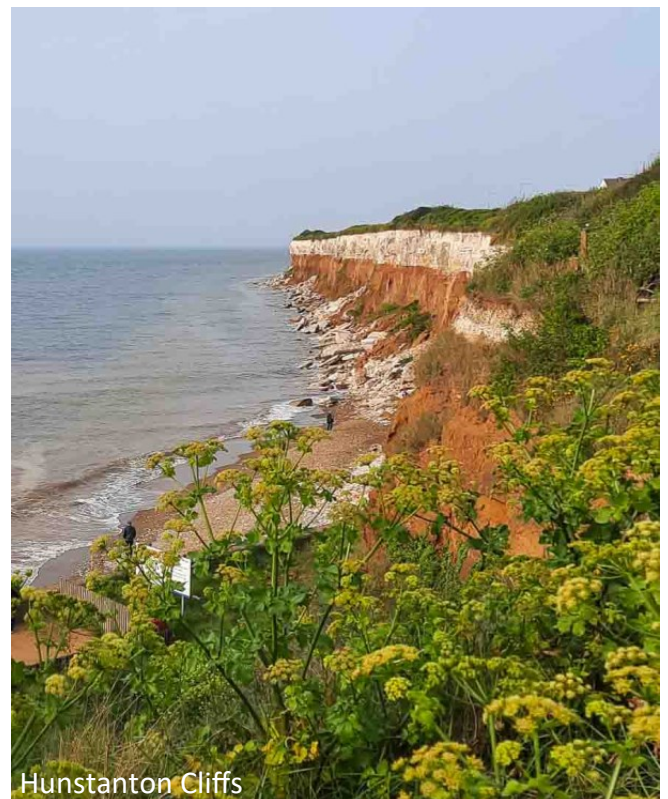
The channels and pools around Thornham Harbour hosted a good variety of species, including brent goose, shelduck, teal, coot, redshank, little egret and black-headed gull. Out on the saltmarsh, oystercatcher, great white egret, bar-tailed godwit and a few grey plovers were spotted. In a field to the west of the harbour, a large group of whimbrel

was busily feeding. After some lively debate and careful recounting, we agreed on a final total of 54 birds. At a nearby pool, also to the west, one observer was fortunate enough to glimpse a jack snipe.

Hunstanton Cliffs – Distinctive Geology

Hunstanton Cliffs expose a striking sequence of rock layers formed between about 113 and 94 million years ago, during the mid-Cretaceous period, when much of the area was covered by a warm, shallow sea. The cliffs are made up of three distinct layers: the Carstone Formation at the base, a rusty-brown sandstone deposited in river and estuarine environments; above this lies the Red Chalk, a thin but distinctive band rich in iron oxide that gives it its reddish hue; and at the top, the White Chalk of the Hunstanton Chalk Formation, composed mainly of the microscopic remains of marine plankton, which settled on the sea floor and gradually compacted into soft, white limestone.

We positioned ourselves at 'The Lookout', a viewing platform beside the Salad Bowl Café on Cliff Parade, which offers excellent views of the cliffs and shoreline. Two fulmars were seen gliding effortlessly along the cliff face before landing on a narrow ledge. With the tide fully in, the beach was empty of birds but, out on the sea, a great crested grebe was spotted. On the nearby bowling green, several starlings were busily foraging.



Day 3: Sunday 27th April

Cley Marshes NWT – A Pioneer of UK Nature Conservation

Established in 1926, Cley Marshes is the oldest reserve managed by the Norfolk Wildlife Trust and one of the earliest protected nature reserves in the UK. This 176-hectare site, located near the village of Cley next the Sea, was acquired to be held "in perpetuity as a bird breeding sanctuary," setting a precedent for conservation efforts across the country. The reserve encompasses a diverse range of habitats, including reedbeds, freshwater pools, grazing marshes, and a shingle beach.

We began our visit at the visitor centre, where we purchased permits before heading across the road towards the hides. Along the way, we heard willow and Cetti's warblers, and had excellent views of a singing sedge warbler. A water vole made a brief appearance, scampering along the boardwalk.

From Avocet Hide, we looked out over Whitwell and Simmond's Scrapes, where avocets and redshank were feeding. Swallows darted in and out of the hide, adding to the lively scene.



Avocets at Cley

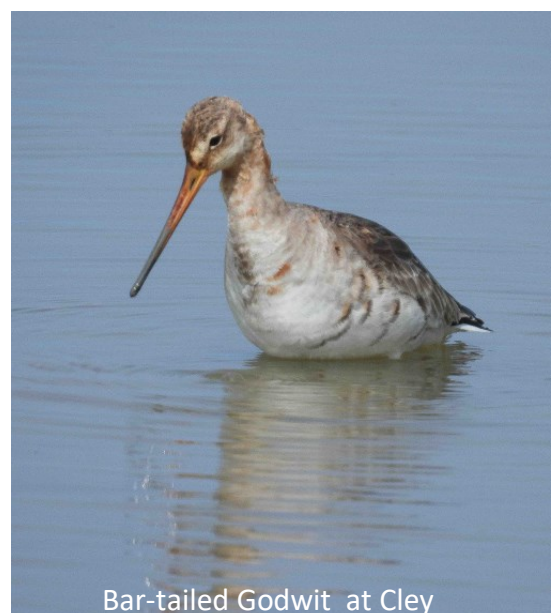


Swallows in hide at Cley

Approaching Teal Hide, a cattle egret was spotted among cows in a nearby field. On Pat's Pool, the water level was low, exposing muddy areas for waders. Ruff, little ringed plover, avocet, redshank and oystercatcher were all seen. Other highlights included pink-footed goose, Egyptian goose and Mediterranean gull. Three marsh harriers quartered the reedbed, and a yellow wagtail flitted over the sandbank.

We returned to the visitor centre for lunch - some opting for the balcony overlooking the reedbed, others choosing the café. A distant cuckoo was heard, while two marsh harriers drifted over and a great white egret dropped into cover. A second cattle egret was also picked out in a field.

In the afternoon, we considered driving to the East Bank car park, but with reports it was full, we took the 10-minute walk along the footpath. Along the East Bank, we saw great white egret, avocet, shoveler and redshank. At Richardson's Lookout, overlooking Arnold's Marsh, we picked out ringed plover, dunlin, bar-tailed godwit, and 17 cormorants.



Bar-tailed Godwit at Cley

Holkham NNR – Lady Anne’s Drive & Pinewoods

Holkham National Nature Reserve (NNR), situated between Burnham Overy Staithe and Blakeney, is England’s largest national nature reserve, covering approximately 3,900 hectares. Managed collaboratively by Natural England and the Holkham Estate, the reserve encompasses a diverse range of habitats, including grazing marshes, woodlands, salt marshes, sand dunes, and foreshore.

As we arrived, the fields flanking Lady Anne’s Drive offered a distant view of a spoonbill in flight, while avocet, shelduck, oystercatcher, and Canada, Egyptian, and greylag geese showed well at closer range. A common gull was also noted.

We continued through the pinewoods, where willow warbler, blackcap and chiffchaff were in song. At the woodland pool, gadwall, pochard and tufted duck were present, with reed and sedge warblers providing a soundtrack.

The elevated view from Washington Hide was quiet by comparison, with tufted duck, little grebe, mute swan, pheasant, chiffchaff and wren recorded. This part of the reserve tends to come alive in autumn and winter when large numbers of geese arrive.

Dennis and Anthea, having taken an accidental detour around the back of Holkham Hall, were rewarded with a bonus sighting – a barn owl on the ground by the side of a minor road. A fortunate error!

Thornham Harbour NWT – A Return Visit



On our way back to the hotel, we made a brief stop at Thornham Harbour in the hope of seeing a jack snipe. A golden plover was noted early on, and as we followed the sea wall around the flooded area, several common snipe were found. With some patience, we had partial views of a jack snipe. Eventually, it emerged

from cover to feed – its distinctive bobbing motion and sewing-machine-like bill action confirming its identity.

Meanwhile, Colin, who had stayed in Mike’s car, rang to warn that the tide was rising rapidly and the vehicle was at risk of being cut off. Thankfully, Colin moved it in time and saved the day!

Day 4: Monday 28th April

Roydon Common NWT – A Rare Window into Norfolk's Heathland Past



Roydon Common is one of the finest surviving examples of lowland heath and mire in Britain. Managed by the Norfolk Wildlife Trust, this 195-hectare reserve encompasses a diverse array of habitats, including lowland heath, acid bog, wet carr woodland, and grassland. During the summer months, there are breeding populations of nightjar and woodlark, while winter brings sightings of hen harrier and merlin.

We began our visit at the Lynn Road car park, situated at the northwest corner of the reserve. Almost immediately, we were treated to a stonechat perched on a gorse bush and a yellowhammer singing from a distant tree - an encouraging start. As we made our way through a narrow woodland strip, the air was filled with birdsong. Garden warblers, blackcaps and chiffchaffs were all in fine voice, providing a welcome opportunity to test our skills at identifying birds by sound. Emerging onto the open heath, we scanned the sloping area ahead in the hope of spotting a ring ouzel. While the elusive thrush didn't show, we did see two red-legged partridge feeding quietly, a circling buzzard, and a red kite sailing overhead. Other sightings included an Egyptian goose, more stonechats, and a whimbrel silhouetted on the skyline. Though previous visits have yielded good views of ring ouzel, this time we were unlucky.

Lynford Arboretum – A Tranquil Woodland Retreat in Thetford Forest

Nestled within Thetford Forest, Lynford Arboretum offers a serene escape into nature. Once part of the Lynford Hall estate, the arboretum boasts a diverse collection of over 200 tree species from around the globe.

We stopped for a picnic lunch. The site was popular that day, with a bit of a wait at the takeaway café and the single unisex toilet! While enjoying our lunch, we noted a good mix of woodland birds, including jackdaw, jay, blackbird, dunnoek, chiffchaff, blue tit and nuthatch. A swallow flew overhead, adding to the spring atmosphere.

Weeting Heath NWT – A Breckland Haven for Rare Wildlife

Nestled near the village of Weeting on the Norfolk-Suffolk border, Weeting Heath is a 135-hectare nature reserve managed by the Norfolk Wildlife Trust. As part of the Breckland Special Area of Conservation and Special Protection Area, it stands as one of the finest remaining examples of Breckland grass heath in the UK. The reserve's unique landscape of open, stony ground with short vegetation provides an ideal breeding habitat for the rare and elusive stone curlew.



No visible means of support!

Weeting Heath was once the only reliable place in the UK to see stone curlew. Although the bird still needs careful protection, successful conservation means it can now be seen at several other sites in Norfolk and beyond. As a result, Weeting Heath no longer holds the unique appeal it once did, and visitor numbers have declined, leading to a shift in focus from running the visitor centre to expanding wildlife conservation efforts across the Brecks. As a result, the visitor centre has closed and access to the reserve is now free.

From the West Hide, which looks across the grass heath towards the River Little Ouse, despite the heat haze, we managed to spot a stone curlew sitting on the ground with another standing close by. Chris went to great lengths to get a good view! Two days later, we heard that two chicks had hatched. Two woodlarks arrived to forage on the short grass, a single lapwing was seen, and a sparrowhawk passed overhead. A

helpful volunteer 'guide in the hide' told us that there are over 20 pairs of stone curlew and eight pairs of woodlark on the reserve and in the surrounding area. When asked why such an open, seemingly unremarkable area attracts stone curlews, he explained that the untreated grass heath supports a rich variety of invertebrates, making it an ideal feeding ground.

RSPB Lakenheath Fen – A Wetland Wonderland on the Norfolk-Suffolk Border

Once intensively farmed carrot fields, RSPB Lakenheath Fen has been transformed into a thriving wetland reserve since 1995. Spanning over 500 hectares of reedbeds, grazing marshes and fenland, it now supports a rich diversity of wildlife, including bitterns, marsh harriers, bearded tits, kingfishers, and otters.

We set off along the main circular trail at Lakenheath Fen, where we heard cuckoo, Cetti's warbler, blackcap and reed warbler. A tree creeper was spotted, and a raven passed overhead.

Taking the Eastwood Trail, we paused at the New Fen viewpoint overlooking a reed-fringed pool. Here we saw little grebe, gadwall, tufted duck and shoveler. A bittern gave us a brief view as it dropped into the reeds, and the distinctive sound of booming bitterns could be heard across the reserve.

At Gary's Pool, a pair of garganey were feeding quietly along the far bank. Later, two pairs were seen on the River Little Ouse. Returning via the riverside trail, we added avocet, black-tailed godwit, redshank, lapwing, teal and grey heron to our list.

Other highlights included sightings or calls of water rail, kingfisher, marsh harrier and red kite. Back at the visitor centre, two cuckoos flew over. Later, four hobbies were seen.



No through road at Lakenheath

Old Hunstanton – Early Morning Highlights

Several members took early morning walks from the hotel along the coastal footpath towards the golf course, and were rewarded with some excellent sightings. Two singing lesser whitethroats showed well in the bushes, alongside common whitethroat, wheatear and stonechat. Garden warblers were in fine voice near the RNLI station and near the golf course.

On the golf course itself, we recorded two grey partridge and a flock of 20+ linnets. Tree pipit and red-legged partridge were also noted. Green woodpecker was accidentally flushed off the golf course and seen flying around the pines behind the hotel lodges. Swallow, sand martin and swift were active over the dunes, while house martins circled around the hotel.

The shoreline and sea were also productive. From the dunes and the hotel viewpoint, we observed 12 grey plover, 30+ sanderling and turnstone along the beach. Offshore, sightings included black-tailed godwit, shelduck, common and sandwich terns, red-throated diver, fulmar and gannet.



Owl species from John's window

Mammals

We're often reminded to "look up," but keeping an eye on the ground can be just as rewarding. During the trip, we spotted an impressive range of mammals - rabbit, brown hare, roe deer, fallow deer, muntjac, common seal, water vole, and a brown rat with two young in tow!

Sunset



Sunset over The Wash

Hunstanton, affectionately known as "Sunny Hunny," offers a rare spectacle on England's east coast: breathtaking sunsets over the sea. As the only west-facing resort along this coastline, Hunstanton provides unobstructed views of the sun dipping below the horizon across The Wash, painting the sky with vibrant hues of orange and pink.

Thank you

Warm thanks to everyone who joined the Norfolk weekend. We enjoyed a wonderful mix of top birding spots, great sightings, and plenty of good company. It was a trip full of shared moments and lasting memories!



Credits – Images & Narrative

RSPB Frampton Marsh: Wikimedia *

Hotel & dunes: Carol Graham

Mediterranean Gulls at Titchwell: Peter Roberts

Tawny Owl sign: Mike Tonks

Hunstanton Cliffs: Anthea Gater

Swallows in hide at Cley: Peter Roberts

Thornham Harbour: Chrissy Higgs

No visible means of support: Colin Lythgoe

Sunset over The Wash: Chrissy Higgs

Little Egret: Derek Owen

Narrative: Mike Tonks (reviewed by Ian Taylor)

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Dersingham Bog: Hugh Venables *

Chrissy's tent: Chrissy Higgs

Common Lizards: Lydia Taylor

Redshank at Thornham: Mike Tonks

Avocets at Cley: Mike Tonks

Bar-tailed Godwit at Cley: Nigel Henderson

Roydon Common: Peter Wakely *

No through road at Lakenheath: Tom Graham

Owl species from John's window: John Thompson

Group photo: Derek Owen

Members' Comments

Thanks for a fine weekend. Now for a rest. Nigel

We second the above comment! Thank you everyone, it was brilliant! Carol

Great weekend, good birds super company. Ian

Thanks everyone for a brill weekend and for helping to create such special memories. Mike T

A fab trip! Thank you all for a great weekend. Anthea

Thank you all from us both for a great weekend - still smiling after so many marsh harriers! Mike D

Thanks for great weekend, I'm sure we all enjoyed it. Derek

Thanks to you and all those involved in making the event a success. John

It's been a truly brilliant four days for me, thanks Mike and everyone for making it so special. Chrissy

Trip List *



130 species were seen/heard during the trip.

Green text indicates **48** new species that have been added to the 2025 SECOS Field Trips Total, which is now at **144** species.

Brent Goose	Oystercatcher	Spoonbill	Long-tailed Tit
Canada Goose	Avocet	Bittern	Willow Warbler
Greylag Goose	Grey Plover	Little Egret	Chiffchaff
Pink-footed Goose	Golden Plover	Great White Egret	Sedge Warbler
Mute Swan	Ringed Plover	Cattle Egret	Reed Warbler
Whooper Swan	Little Ringed Plover	Grey Heron	Blackcap
Egyptian Goose	Lapwing	Sparrowhawk	Garden Warbler
Shelduck	Whimbrel	Marsh Harrier	Lesser Whitethroat
Garganey	Curlew	Red Kite	Whitethroat
Shoveler	Bar-tailed Godwit	Buzzard	Wren
Gadwall	Black-tailed Godwit	Barn Owl	Nuthatch
Wigeon	Jack Snipe	Tawny Owl	Treecreeper
Mallard	Snipe	Kingfisher	Starling
Pintail	Common Sandpiper	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Song Thrush
Teal	Redshank	Green Woodpecker	Blackbird
Pochard	Spotted Redshank	Kestrel	Robin
Tufted Duck	Turnstone	Hobby	Stonechat
Grey Partridge	Ruff	Jay	Wheatear
Pheasant	Sanderling	Magpie	House Sparrow
Quail	Dunlin	Jackdaw	Dunnock
Red-legged Partridge	Arctic Tern	Rook	Yellow Wagtail
Swift	Common Tern	Carrion Crow	Pied Wagtail
Cuckoo	Sandwich Tern	Raven	Meadow Pipit
Stock Dove	Black-headed Gull	Coal Tit	Tree Pipit
Woodpigeon	Mediterranean Gull	Blue Tit	Chaffinch
Turtle Dove	Common Gull	Great Tit	Greenfinch
Collared Dove	Herring Gull	Bearded Tit	Linnet
Water Rail	Great Black-backed Gull	Woodlark	Goldfinch
Moorhen	Lesser Black-backed Gull	Skylark	Siskin
Coot	Red-throated Diver	Sand Martin	Yellowhammer
Little Grebe	Fulmar	Swallow	Reed Bunting
Great Crested Grebe	Gannet	House Martin	
Stone-curlew	Cormorant	Cetti's Warbler	

* This list uses BOU British List species names and list order