THE NEW FOREST, WILTSHIRE & DORSET
A BIRDING ABROAD BIRDS AND NATURAL HISTORY SHORT BREAK
25 - 29 June 2018

The New Forest in southwest Hampshire is an area of outstanding natural beauty which was recently afforded National Park status. It comprises a mosaic of lowland heath, bog, rough pasture and ancient woodland. Nearby the chalk downs of ancient Wessex dominate the landscape, including the vast expanse of Salisbury Plain. Coastal Dorset is fringed by the spectacular Purbeck cliffs, which shield the stunning heaths of Arne and Studland which in turn give way to the sheltered harbours and salt marshes of Poole and Christchurch. This tour was designed as a relaxing four night mid-week break, focusing on the great diversity of habitats within this region. Avian highlights of the forest include European Honey-buzzard, Northern Goshawk, Dartford Warbler and European Nightjar, whilst on Salisbury Plain the Great Bustard Project always deserves a visit with Montagu’s Harrier and Eurasian Thick-knee also in the area. The sea-cliffs of Purbeck support small sea bird colonies and all of Britain’s reptiles are found within the area as well as several scarce species of butterfly, dragonfly and damselfly species.

The group comprised Wendy Ambler and Mike Wilkinson, John and Jane Hartley, Denis and Dorothy Jackson, Lance and Pat Degnan and Steve Holliday. Nick Whitehouse and Lance Degnan were the Birding Abroad leaders.

Day 1 - Monday 25 June: The tour commenced in the late afternoon as we assembled at a country hotel in Burley set in its own lovely grounds where the garden terrace was idyllically surrounded by the forest and heath.
The weather had been hot and dry for over one month previously and the forecast showed the heat wave would continue. After checking-in and having a refreshing cup of tea, we headed a short distance to a nearby heath where we enjoyed good views of three Dartford Warblers, clearly on breeding territory. This iconic species had apparently undergone some declines over the previous winter due to the infamous ‘Beast from the East’ weather system bringing relentless cold during late February and early March.

Only a few pairs of Lesser Redpoll breed in the New Forest, usually in the damper areas with low willow, so we were lucky to see one which flew over calling. Siskin proved much more widespread and we saw them on each day of our visit. Boggy areas in the forest provide breeding habitat for waders so it was no surprise when a Common Snipe flew over to drop in. Nearby a pair of Northern Goshawks, a species which is doing remarkably well in the area, had bred and their fledged young could still be heard delivering a plaintive begging call as they waited for their next meal to be delivered by the adults. One of the young was briefly seen, flying a short distance in the canopy. A couple of Willow Warblers were still in song, but the local Wood Warblers had ceased singing just over a week beforehand and evaded us.

For butterfly lovers, we saw our first Silver-studded Blues of the trip, here on their typical heathland home with several Large Skippers also noted. A Scarce Blue-tailed damselfly was found and later confirmed via photographs by an expert - a very good sighting indeed, being a speciality here and found in only a few locations.

**Day 2 - Tuesday 26 June:** Breakfast was at 07:30, with the option for those that preferred to eat outside on the garden terrace and absorb the amazing weather from the outset. Our itinerary today involved a full day exploring the New Forest, visiting several locations including Acres Down near Lyndhurst and the various heaths near Beaulieu and Brockenhurst. Here we were able to sit and relax in the sunshine and watch for raptors and other birds passing over. More Northern Goshawks were seen, including one perched, as were Eurasian Sparrowhawks and Eurasian Hobby, but European Honey-buzzard remained elusive despite several hours spent in the field at a well known observation point.
Sought-after passerine species noted during the day included small numbers of Common Redstart, Firecrest, Marsh Tit, Woodlark, Hawfinch and Red Crossbill. It was nice also to assemble a list of more typical woodland and heath land birds including Common Buzzard, Stock Dove, Greater Spotted and Green Woodpeckers, Eurasian Jay, Long-tailed Tit, Eurasian Nuthatch, Common Stonechat, Common Whitethroat, Chiffchaff, Goldcrest, European Goldfinch and Bullfinch.

Silver-studded Blue butterflies were abundant on the heaths, whilst along one of the rides five Silver-washed Fritillary settled on a single bramble bush.
The pools and streams that run through the New Forest create one of the best areas in Britain for *odonata* and species seen by us today included Emperor, Broad-bodied Chaser, Four-spotted Chaser, Golden-ringied Dragonfly and Keeled Skimmer. Damselflies were represented by both Large Red and the much scarcer Small Red with many Azures being present also.

On a brief sortie onto one of the heaths, we were delighted to observe two Smooth Snakes, Britain’s rarest and most localised snake, whilst a group of Red Deer were also recorded during the day. A Painted Lady basked in the sunlight on a nearby woodland trail.

After our evening meal at the hotel, we took a stroll onto the adjacent heath where three European Nightjars performed nicely for us, ‘churring’ and flying past as well as settling on branches, their silhouettes against the still warm evening sky being particularly evocative.

**Day 3 - Wednesday 27 June:** Today we drove north navigating our way rather frustratingly via various diversions around Salisbury and into Wiltshire where we were met by members of the Great Bustard Group on the edge of Salisbury Plain. We transferred to their jeeps and were taken on a guided tour of the reintroduction project. David Waters, founder and director of the project had kindly agreed to meet us. We heard firsthand about the objectives of the project, the source of the birds (from Russia initially and more recently from Spain), their breeding biology and the progress being made to re-establish these magnificent birds back into Britain where they last bred in the wild in 1832. The bustards are well dispersed across the surrounding plain at this time of year, but we were shown a fine male, five females and female with a youngster. We can only wish the project good luck and hope that landowners in adjacent areas support the scheme, thereby establishing a new population and a brighter future for this globally threatened bird.

Our picnic lunch was taken in a remote area on the plain, where we were fortunate to watch a pair of Montagu’s Harriers, such stunning and elegant birds of prey, whose population is sadly down to just a handful of pairs each summer in Britain. Several Red Kites also graced the skies whilst Yellow Wagtail and Whinchat were seen in arable and grassland habitats respectively. The afternoon was spent exploring the surrounding chalk downs and rolling grasslands. First up was a pair of Eurasian Thick-knee at one of the specially created ‘cuttings’ where the vegetation is cleared to encourage the birds to nest on barer ground. Later a stroll on Martin Down was well worthwhile. This outstanding nature reserve in north-west Hampshire comprises 350 hectares of unspoiled chalk down-land where birds, flowers and insects
flourish. Corn Bunting and Yellowhammers were singing everywhere, though pride of place went to two ‘purring’ European Turtle-doves, which for many of the group became their first sighting in Britain this year!

The dappled sunlight of woodland supported ten of the scarce White Admiral, this also being for many of the group a new species, as well as six Silver-washed Fritillary, whilst the open grassland held five Dark Green Fritillary. In addition the group enjoyed lovely views of up to 40 Marbled Whites, three Brimstones, over a hundred Green-veined Whites as well as a few Common Blues. Meadow Browns, Small Heaths, Large Skippers whilst Ringlets were positively numerous.

We had covered a fair few miles and visited a number of sites, all in the heat of the blazing sunshine, so everyone was ready for a pleasant evening meal with a drink or two back at the hotel. As dusk fell and the slightly cooler evening air descended, we enjoyed another quick stroll out for the European Nightjars which resulted in at least four birds showing nicely.

Day 4 - Thursday 28 June: There was no need for an early start, so we set off after breakfast for a full day exploring heathland and coastal sites on the Isle of Purbeck, a stretch of coastal Dorset from Lulworth to Durlston Head.

We began on a local nature reserve near Wareham where we had high hopes of seeing Sand Lizard, one of Britain’s rarest reptiles. But surprisingly the little creatures didn’t want to show today, so we had to leave them for another time. Two Slow Worms and a Common Lizard at close quarters were some compensation as well as Beautiful Demoiselle and a single Downy Emerald. At a nearby small stream running through the purple heather and yellow gorse, we enjoyed close observations of six Southern Damselfly, a rare species with a very restricted range in Britain.
We moved on to Corfe Castle, where we checked for Lulworth Skipper butterflies in the grassland, finding five of these tiny rarities, but the sunshine was more hazy at this juncture and perhaps this had subdued their activity a little.
Our picnic lunch was taken at Durlston Country Park above Swanage before we enjoyed a stroll along the picturesque coastal pathway around the headland.

Bright and warm sunshine had returned relieved only by the coastal breezes. A few Rock Pipits showed nicely at the lighthouse and more Marbled White butterflies moved daintily over the vetches in the grass, where we had hoped to see Adonis Blue. But the brilliant weather of the last few weeks had meant their first generation was already past its best.

The cliffs are home to a breeding colony of auks and the ledges and sea below still held adults and fully grown young, with Common Guillemots totalling some 250 birds and Razorbills numbering 20 all sitting side by side so affording nice comparisons. Great Black-backed and European Herring Gulls drifted by on the cliff side currents of air and European Shag and Northern Gannet flew over the waves offshore as did two Mediterranean Gulls. The latter have increased significantly as a breeding bird along the south coast of England, with over 1700 pairs at one site in the Solent alone.

A short walk in the gorse and heather near Studland produced several Dark Green Fritillary and a possible Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary before we drove back along Studland’s sandy peninsula towards the entrance to Poole harbour, where we made the crossing via the chain ferry towards Bournemouth. The queue for the ferry meant we had nearly half an hour alongside the harbour which produced Eurasian Oystercatchers, a Whimbrel and both Sandwich and Common Terns. Heavy traffic from tourism is always an issue in this region and making headway is never a swift process, but once back at the hotel we enjoyed a refreshing afternoon tea on the garden terrace, with a Firecrest in song and a Hawfinch flying over just as we went for our evening meal.
Day 5 - Friday 29 June: This was our last day so after leaving the nice hotel we made for one of the open heaths between Lyndhurst and Beaulieu, where we spent the morning just ‘pottering’ on the health, once again in lovely sunshine.

It was all very civilised; the lightweight chairs were out and teas and coffees served as we scanned the skyline for raptors. Common Buzzards soared overhead and a pair of Eurasian Hobby chased dragonflies. Two Dartford Warblers sang amongst the heather, Common Stonechats were never far away and a pair of Woodlarks showed nicely. In the oak trees of the copse which gave us some shade, we saw Marsh Tits, Common Redstart and Spotted Flycatchers. A Water Rail calling seemed a little out of place but the areas of bog are quite significant. Here the pools were full of *odonata* with Small Red Damselfly showing nicely alongside many Keeled Skimmers, Four-spotted Chasers and several Golden-ringed Dragonflies. Silver-studded Blues were everywhere, the butterfly perhaps becoming the emblem of the trip.

At lunch time it was time to conclude the trip and say our farewells, before the group dispersed to various other destinations for the coming weekend. It had been an enjoyable few days of natural history spotting, with the remarkably sunny summer weather continuing throughout. Thanks go to everyone in the group for their camaraderie and for joining Birding Abroad on our first ever British tour. Our gratitude is also extended to local guides Dave Taylor and Chris Chapleo, who joined us on a couple of days and helped us with their knowledge and experience of the region.

......and finally, a few photos to remind everyone of the trip......
Well done Steve in finding the Scarce Blue-tailed Damselfly

Lance Degnan and Nick Whitehouse
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