

# Wildlife of the Suffolk Coast

By Anthony Toole

I HAD been sitting for less than a minute. The surrounding heather played a seemingly infinite set of variations on the theme of purple interrupted by contrasting yellow patches of knee-high gorse. A sudden movement, and a tiny bird disappeared into a taller clump of gorse to my left. As I scanned this with binoculars, it flew across to another bush, where it paused for perhaps a second before flitting off again to disappear into a line of gorse thickets. But that fleeting glimpse was enough to show me the red breast and long tail that identified it as a Dartford warbler, a rare bird that in Britain is found only in a few scattered heathland areas of southern England.

The scene of my brief encounter with the Dartford warbler was the National Trust's Dunwich Heath, one of a string of wildlife hotspots that together make up the Suffolk Coast and Heaths Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Indeed this thin strip of land, running for some thirty kilometres from just south of Lowestoft, England's most easterly town, is an almost unbroken succession of Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Special Protection Areas and Ramsar wetland sites. At the northern boundary of Dunwich is the Westleton Heath National Nature Reserve, while to the south lie the lagoons and reedbeds of Minsmere bird sanctuary.

These heathland areas were created when early farmers, more than a thousand years ago, cleared the trees to allow their sheep to graze. During Anglo-Saxon times, Dunwich was the capital of East Anglia, a prominence it lost when much of the town and its coastline were washed into the sea following severe 13th century storms. In recent centuries, the encroachment of agriculture has further eroded the heaths, which remain as a rare habitat reaching to the very edge of the sandy coastal cliffs that continue to disappear by the year.

The Dartford warbler is doubly unusual in that, unlike its neighbour, the nightjar, and other heathland warblers, such as the blackcap, it remains in residence here throughout the year. In harsh winters, this has led to declining numbers when the insect food supply has been seriously depleted, though the small populations

have shown resilience in bouncing back again when the weather has improved.

There was plenty of bird food here while I made my visit, for on my meanders around the sandy footpaths, I saw countless butterflies: hedge brown, small heath, small tortoiseshell, red admiral and peacock, as well as dragonflies and damselflies, while large areas of gorse were covered with spiders' webs. This bounty was also being enjoyed by the many swooping swallows and the heath's less shy residents, its skylarks and meadow pipits.

In contrast to Dunwich Heath's 87 hectares, its southern neighbour, Minsmere, extends to more than 2000 hectares. It is owned by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, and its mosaic of woodland, grassland, beach and wetland habitats make it one of the most important wildlife reserves in the country. It came to public prominence in May-June 2014, when the BBC chose it as the venue for its 10th anniversary series of Springwatch live television broadcasts.

It was a month after these broadcasts when I arrived at Minsmere, so perhaps I missed the most exciting period, in which the birds' breeding activity was at its most feverish. Nevertheless, the sand cliff beside the Visitor Centre, honeycombed with nesting tunnels, was noisy with the comings and goings of dozens of sand martins, frantically feeding up their chicks in readiness for their southerly migrations.

I followed the Coast Trail,

one of three circular walks of around 2.4 kilometres that led to various viewpoints in the reserve. A short detour brought me to the North Hide, and a first view over the West Scrape, a shallow, brackish lagoon dotted with islands, ringed by reedbeds and populated by terns, gulls and greylag geese. In the distance rose the incongruous outline of the Sizewell Nuclear Power Station, shining with what looked like a pristine cleanliness.

The track ran to the north of the scrapes, past reedbeds through which darted sedge warblers and possibly even the occasional bearded tit. On reaching the beach, it turned south, past sand dunes and the concrete cube relics of a World War II coastal defence line and on to a further series of hides.

The birds pecking in the muddy margins of the East Scrape included little ringed plovers, greenshanks, lapwings, common and curlew sandpipers, dunlins and godwits. Wading through the shallow pools were a few solitary herons and little egrets and several dozen avocets. In the deeper waters, mallards, coot, moorhens and shelducks floated serenely, while Barnacle and Canada geese rested on the islands.

The track crossed a sluice through which water flowed to regulate the levels on the scrapes, then turned back past the extensive reedbeds of the North Levels. Scarlet pimpernels spotted the dull brown rubble footpath with specks of colour. To the sides stood tall, white blooms of marsh mallow, a plant confined to small

areas of coastal wetlands in the south of England.

These reedbeds are home to the very secretive bitterns, whose camouflage makes them almost impossible to see, even when one is looking at them. Marsh harriers can often be seen searching for the small birds that are their main prey. In the afternoon heat, however, only chaser and hawk dragonflies and vivid orange, green and blue damselflies shared the air above the reeds with the swallows.

While the wetland habitats of Minsmere may be the most important in terms of bird life, the mosaic structure allows for the survival of other environments with their own particular inhabitants. To the northern and western corner are the woodlands and grasslands that are populated with small birds, such as the many varieties of tits, finches and warblers, along with larger species like woodpeckers and jays.

Here can be found mammals of all sizes, ranging from shrews through water voles, stoats, rabbits, grey squirrels and foxes to badgers and deer. There are also introduced animals like Muntjac and rare Chinese water deer. On the drier areas leading up to and into Dunwich Heath, one may find lizards, grass snakes and adders, with frogs, toads and newts in isolated damper patches. And there are the common and grey seals that frequently haul themselves onto the beaches.

Like almost all nature reserves, Dunwich Heath and Minsmere would not remain in their present conditions if left to Nature alone. A great

deal of work is done throughout the year to prevent scrub vegetation from taking control of the heathlands and scrapes. Excessive weed growth needs to be cleared from the ponds and the reedbeds thinned out periodically.

The reserves remain open throughout the year to allow visitors of all ages to enjoy the spectacles of the annual cycles of life. Spotting some of the creatures requires patience, and a bit of luck. Though many of the birds that spend the summer here will have gone south by autumn, they will have been replaced by migrants from the Arctic. Visitors to the Suffolk Coast

looking for its wildlife are very unlikely to leave disappointed, whatever time of year they come.

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Clockwise from top: Scarlet pimpernel; Barnacle and Canada Geese, East Scrape, Minsmere; West Scrape, Minsmere; Lapwing (left); Marsh mallow (right); Moorhen and chicks; Hedge brown butterfly; Small tortoiseshell butterfly; Chaser dragonfly; Gorse and heathers, Dunwich Heath.

