

Great Knot at Titchwell

Chris Booth

Titchwell RSPB has become my local patch since moving to Brancaster in March 2016. It is my general routine to be on the reserve in the early morning and leave by 1000. There is something special about being on a reserve with no other people around, just the sound of the birds.

Wednesday 15th June 2016 was at first no different to any other day. I was on the reserve at 0630 and the weather was set to be sunny with a breeze. The previous day I had found a nice winter plumage adult Curlew Sandpiper with three Knot so was hoping that things would be the same if not better. Having completed my usual tour of the reserve, including a fruitless short seawatch, I sat in Parrinder Hide as there were very few waders - none of the expected Knot, a sprinkling of Bar-tailed Godwits and a couple of hundred Black-tailed Godwits. Here I perused my phone and was looking at potential vagrant waders, one of which was Great Knot. Then, convinced that it was going to be a quiet day, I decided to leave the reserve. It was here that luck or fate changed my day. As I had been on the reserve far longer than expected, it had gone 1000 and I was stopping to chat to other birders on the way back to the car park. Change of plan, Titchwell café open, so some food, a cup of tea and back onto the reserve. It was a nice day.

I was walking out toward the sea and passing the freshmarsh at around 1230 when I was stopped by someone who asked me if I could help to identify a Ruff for him. I quickly found the Ruff and we were engaged in general conversation when he asked me what the large flock of birds were over the Brancaster Golf Club. I told him that they were Knot and that they had been disturbed and could well drop in on the reserve. After a couple of minutes the birds indeed decided to drop into the reserve. They streamed over Parrinder Hide - I estimated about 2,500 birds - and circled prior to dropping down onto the freshmarsh. They settled at 150 yards range and were shuffling off towards the centre of the marsh away from the path. I started to scan from the left hand edge or rear of the flock and had gone past only about four birds when I stopped dead. In the centre of my scope was a breeding plumage Great Knot. Then the mind started playing tricks - 'don't be silly it's just a funny looking Knot, are you sure it's not a Turnstone, Black-tailed Godwit or whatever'. A quick look at my phone, first image Great Knot, check through the scope, Great Knot. Yes I was right. It had a dark head, long bill, fantastically-coloured back with black and orange patches, heavily spotted black breast and black arrowheads on the flanks. It was a striking and distinctive bird.

After a quick couple of phone pics, the birder next to me asked what it was. I explained that a bird in the flock was a very rare Great Knot. He asked if he can look through my scope, which I let him do. The flock was continually moving, however, and when I looked again, the Great Knot had gone. Panic set in before I found it again, nearer the centre of the flock. I then

tried to put the news out. Paul Eele, the Titchwell Warden, was first on the list but his mobile was not responding. I phoned the Titchwell visitor centre and fortunately Paul answered whereupon I told him the news. Arriving out of breath, he looked down my scope and then ran down the path shouting into his radio. I then got hold of Trevor Girling and RBA and the news was out.

It is very difficult to explain how this bird generated excitement, not amongst the birders who started to arrive, but amongst the general public who were on a day out to Titchwell. I was surrounded by people asking questions - Why was it here? Where should it be? Can we look at it? It was two hours before I could sit and just look at the bird without disturbance. The bird continued to entertain until late afternoon before departing to the beach in a thunderstorm.

During its stay the bird ranged from Gore Point in the west to Scolt Head in the East, and could go missing for a day at a time. I was fortunate to see this bird almost daily after its arrival and was present when it flew off from Titchwell freshmarsh on the late afternoon of 4th July, not to return.

Editor's comment

Great Knot breeds in northeast Siberia, wintering mainly in Australia but also around the coasts of Southeast Asia, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and the Arabian Peninsula. This is the second record for Norfolk, following hot on the heels of the first, at Breydon on 13th to 15th July 2014. Prior to the two recent Norfolk records there had only been three in Britain - on Shetland in September 1989, in Cleveland in October/November 1996 and in Lancashire in July/August 2004.