

STRUMPSHAW FEN
Norfolk

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Strumpshaw Fen looking south

Strumpshaw Fen is an RSPB reserve about 6 miles east of Norwich. It is immediately across the River Yare from Wheatfen. Some of its very good paths are hard-surfaced and there are fine views over the river and from the bird hides.

This is an important bird reserve but it is also good for Swallowtails in June and early July. There is a range of reed beds, wet meadow and woodland. A boardwalk leads around one of the Swallowtail breeding areas

TARGET SPECIES
Swallowtails (from the end of May to early July) and many other common species.

The RSPB reserve at Strumpshaw Fen has become a popular place to see Swallowtail butterflies. This is mainly the result of the RSPB making increasing areas of fenland suitable for them. That has been done by removing scrub and cutting the reeds on a three-yearly cycle. This encourages the growth of milk parsley, which is Swallowtail caterpillars' only food-plant. Milk parsley is swamped by tall reeds and rotting vegetation, and needs nurturing. Now you can see milk parsley all over the reserve.

Another reason for Strumpshaw's popularity for those wishing to see Swallowtails is the enthusiasm of a local lepidopterist, Dr Martin George, author of the authoritative work *The Land Use, Ecology and Conservation of Broadland**. Martin and his wife, Barbara,

include in their herbaceous border flowering plants which are particularly attractive to Swallowtails, and they open their garden to visitors during the flight season. The garden is only about 200 m from the RSPB reserve's Swallowtail breeding area and so attracts regular visits from the butterflies on sunny days.

I went to Strumpshaw on three days in mid-June 2009. On the first two days, I couldn't arrive until the afternoon, when the weather was showery although with sunny spells. I had hoped to see Swallowtails when the sun was out, but none appeared. People who had been present for most of the day reported only a few sightings on both days. I tried again on the following Sunday morning, when the temperature was warmer and there was practically continuous sunshine. This Sunday happened to be an RSPB open day, so there were lots of people about. From 9:30 to 11:00 nothing happened and I had returned to the car park and was about to leave to go to How Hill (see the separate entry for How Hill) when I heard on the reserve's grapevine that Swallowtails had suddenly been seen. Returning rapidly to the Swallowtail garden, there were now three fresh specimens nectaring fiercely on sweet williams in the herbaceous border. The weather had warmed slightly and the previous light breeze had dropped, so now we had perfect conditions.

Later in the morning, Swallowtails were active in a thistle-filled field nearby. As the afternoon passed, several butterflies spent long periods perching on flower stems about 1-2 m above the ground, offering excellent targets for the host of photographers who had now assembled. I noticed that butterflies nectaring in the garden appeared to be fresher and show less damage from bird strikes than those in the field. I have no explanation why, but, as a result, we found that the carefully-framed Swallowtail pictures taken in the field tended to be of worn specimens, whereas those in the garden, which were continuously on the move (when picture composition was impossible except by luck) were brighter, undamaged specimens.

The RSPB is currently removing a lot of scrub from Surlingham and Rockland Marshes, which are north and south of Wheatfen (see the separate entry for Wheatfen), on the other side of the River Yare from Strumpshaw. Also many old ditches are being repaired. The objective is to restore broad areas of open fenland to the condition that they formerly had, in the 19th century. This will further improve breeding conditions for Swallowtails as well as for bitterns, for which Strumpshaw is well-known. My only reservation about the pictorial information boards that RSPB has set up, explaining these plans, is that they make no mention of Wheatfen. As I have said elsewhere, the Ted Ellis Reserve at Wheatfen is an excellent place to see Swallowtails in their natural surroundings. When restoration at Surlingham and Rockland is completed, Wheatfen will only get better. So I think Wheatfen does at least deserve a mention by the RSPB.

As you would expect for an RSPB reserve, there are many different birds to see in season. They include bitterns, hen and marsh harriers, great-crested grebes, kingfishers, redshanks, oystercatchers, Cetti's warblers, blackcaps, chiffchaffs, water rails, wigeons, teals, lapwings and golden plovers, shovelers, gadwalls, hobbies, reed and sedge warblers, bearded and willow tits, and barn owls. For dragonfly enthusiasts, 21 species of dragonfly breed here, including the rare Norfolk hawk. For wild flower specialists, six species of orchids may be found, including marsh helleborine, while milk parsley and marsh pea flourish in the wetlands and, in the spring, there is a fine display of bluebells in the wooded areas.

* Martin George, *The Land Use, Ecology and Conservation of Broadland*, 1992, paperback 1995. Copies currently obtainable from the author at Marsh House, Strumpshaw, Norwich, NR13 4HT.



Entrance to Strumpshaw Fen RSPB reserve



View across the River Yare towards Wheatfen



Path at N end of the reserve looking NE



Strumpshaw meadow



Milk parsley growing over the boardwalk at Strumpshaw Fen



Invitation to enjoy Swallowtails in a nearby garden



Garden flowers to attract Swallowtails



Entrance to Swallowtail breeding area



Swallowtail breeding area



Dyke near the Swallowtail breeding area



Dyke with swans



Hard-surfaced trail near the RSPB visitor centre



Direction marker within the reserve



View across the Yare to Wheatfen



Strumpshaw's tower hide



Black-faced gulls seen from the tower hide



Wash from a Broad's cruiser disturbs a young coot



Brimstone (f) at Strumpshaw in June



Large White (m) at Strumpshaw in June



Small Tortoiseshell at Strumpshaw in June



Orange Tip (m) at Strumpshaw in June



Scarce chaser (f) at Strumpshaw in June



Swallowtail on garden flowers at Strumpshaw Fen



Swallowtail nectaring on sweet williams



Photographers at an RSPB open day at Strumpshaw Fen in June

LOCATION

Explorer Map 040: The Broads
Landranger (pink) Map 134: Norfolk and the Broads,
Great Yarmouth

Grid references:

Swallowtail breeding area (RSPB) TG337072

Butterfly garden TG339070

Strumpshaw Fen RSPB reserve is reached from Brundall which is just off the A47 Norwich ring road. Take the road east through Brundall village; continuing past the sign for Strumpshaw and then follow the brown RSPB signs. There is a hard-surfaced car park, with overflow parking in an adjacent field. There are trains to Brundall (1 mile) and, on Sundays, to Buckenham (1/2 mile) and a bus from Norwich stops nearby on the Brundall to Strumpshaw road (1/2 mile).

The reserve is on the south side of the Norwich to Lowestoft railway line. You have to cross the tracks at an unguarded level crossing and care is needed because trains travel fast on this stretch of line.

To find the swallowtail garden (see text above), it is not necessary to enter the reserve at its main entrance. Instead walk back towards Strumpshaw village about 100 m and turn left along a sign-posted public footpath. This footpath passes the garden, and then leads into the reserve (take care: the railway line has to be crossed at another unmanned level-crossing, with styles to be climbed on both side of the track). For non-RSPB members, there is a charge for admission to the reserve except on some open days.