

Vistas usually hidden by reedbed suddenly become apparent and you can get much closer to otherwise shy water birds. It's also a beautifully tranquil means by which to see an oft-overlooked part of Britain's most celebrated birding county.

Generally known as 'The Broads', this pancake-flat region between Norwich and Norfolk's east coast, and reaching down into northern Suffolk, is a haunting, sometimes eerie, wilderness of lake and river, reedbed and marsh, huge skies and distant horizons, cut only by windmills and the gaff-rigged sails of far-off yachts. Three rivers – the Yare, Waveney and Bure and their various tributaries – meander across these flatlands, converging on Breydon Water before flowing into the sea at the old port and seaside resort of Great Yarmouth. We were going to follow the River Yare downstream from Brundall to Breydon Water and then the River Waveney to our final destination at Burgh St Peter.

Wetland haven

In the floodplain of the River Yare, in the heart of Broadland, the beautiful Strumpshaw Fen is a haven for all kinds of wetland wildlife, and is the flagship reserve among a string of RSPB sites in the area. All Broadland habitats are here, primarily acres of reedbed and open water, but also wet meadowland with numerous small pools, ditches and boggy patches, bordered by wet woodland and scrub.

The reserve has year-round appeal for the species that winter on the pools, and those that breed in the reedbed, including specialities such as Bittern, Marsh Harrier, Bearded Tit and Cetti's Warbler.

An added attraction in the summer is the Swallowtail Butterfly, on the wing in June and sometimes in August. Spring and summer are especially exciting, but the sweeping Broadland skies and scenery are always unforgettable in this highly distinctive corner of Britain.

Just across the River Yare and upstream



The windmill at Berney Arms

ED HUTCHINGS

of the larger reserve of Strumpshaw Fen, Surlingham Church Marsh (also RSPB) is typical of the Broads and has much in common with its neighbour. Typical Broadland birds (including Kingfisher) reside in a mixture of reed and sedge fen, open water, ditches, Alder and willow carr.

One can explore it from the circular nature trail in a couple of hours and this is therefore a good place to visit if you're in the area but only have a short amount of spare time. The reserve is excellent for passage waders and there's a good chance of hearing Grasshopper Warbler in summer. As for actually seeing them, well, that's an entirely different matter.

Further downstream, the traditionally

managed grazing marsh of Buckenham Marshes (again RSPB) attracts many ducks, geese and waders in autumn and winter. The reserve, along with the adjacent Cantley Marshes, is best known for being the wintering ground for England's only regular flock of taiga Bean Geese.

The geese tend to arrive in November, but, to be sure of seeing them, a visit from December through to January is best. They are often joined by White-fronted Geese, to boot. In spring and summer, the marshes are home to breeding Oystercatcher, Avocet, Lapwing, Snipe, Curlew and Redshank. It's a great spot for Water Pipit in winter, too.

Since there is no mooring available at the first three RSPB reserves, one is best off



Bittern

TOBY HOULTON/ALAMY



Cetti's Warbler

BUIJEN-BEELD/ALAMY



Kingfisher

CALUM DICKSON/ALAMY