

The great outdoors: Norfolk in autumn is the most magical time, says ornithologist Peter Walton, who has fledged many of the county's keenest birders. Nancy Wedge reports. Main pictures: Antony Kelly



Wildlife watching: Peter Walton is on the lookout at Kelling Heath in north Norfolk.

The nature of walks on the wild side

Gah-gah-gah." Ornithologist Peter Walton quickly identifies this deep-pitched "laughing" as the cry of a flock of lesser black-backed gulls. These large, yellow-billed seabirds haven't been spotted on one of Peter's coastal wildlife walks, but from the attic window of his city home.

"They've colonised Norwich in the past 10 years and people are worried they are going to reach pest proportions, but I love to see them," says Peter, 53, who admits to a lifelong fascination with birds and other wildlife.

A great ambassador for Norfolk's wildlife, Peter runs a wide range of activities in the county through which he shares his knowledge and enthusiasm with people of all ages and experience. "I am passionate about getting people out in the field to enjoy wildlife and encouraging them to support conservation," he says.

Having taught bird and wildlife adult-education courses for Norfolk County Council for 30 years, Peter has fledged many of the county's keenest birders, and frequently bumps into former students at Norfolk's top sites. "Often they are people who have retired without a hobby; it is rewarding to know I

helped give them a new lease of life.

"Of course, everybody knows about birds, they are all around us and are so easy to watch, but I give people the support to actually focus in a bit more, and know what they are looking for. Once I've got people up and running, there's often no stopping them," says Peter, whose popular daytime and evening ornithology courses at Wensum Lodge and Whittingham Country Park in Norwich, include four classroom sessions and four field trips, with wildlife day courses also available.

In his quest to get Norfolk wildlife-watching, Peter holds talks in schools for the Norfolk Family Learning Partnership, works with prisoner probationers at Mousehold Heath, and runs countless events around the county, including short holidays at Thornham Lifeboat Hotel and Kelling Heath.

Part of a team of experts at Kelling Heath holiday park for 15 years, Peter encourages guests to join him on weekly nightjar, dragonfly and butterfly walks, and moth-trapping. Holder of a David Bellamy Gold Conservation Award, Kelling was featured in a special edition of BBC Springwatch last year, when presenter Martin Hughes-Games joined Peter to talk about adders and listen to the



dawn chorus.

Next Saturday, September 11, Peter has teamed up with Smokesilver, the Burnham Market outdoor-lifestyle shop owned by photographer Harry Cory Wright, to offer a "Migrating Birds" morning at Holkham. It's a special time in the bird-watching calendar and Peter has great hopes for some thrilling sightings.

"There are lots of bird species moving south to Africa, not only from this country but also from places like Scandinavia and Russia, but what we see very much depends on the weather," says Peter. "On September 3, 1965, the conditions were so perfect that the Norfolk coastline was absolutely covered with birds, many of them rarities.

Such a spectacle requires an easterly air flow, to encourage the birds to drift across the North Sea, followed by showers. "The moisture on their wings makes it hard work, so they will head to the first bit of coastland they can find, and North Norfolk often fits the bill."

One special bird Peter hopes to see is the yellow browed warbler, an olive-green bird with a yellow "eyebrow", two creamy wing bars, and a distinctive song. He will be scanning flocks in search of this jewel which

will be migrating south after breeding in Siberia.

"You might get a flock of resident species, various different tits and a few warblers, mixed in with something unusual. You can hear the flock coming, announced by the incessant 'c-c-c-c' of the long-tailed tit, and if you are lucky you might spot a pied flycatcher, chiffchaff, lesser white throat or, my favourite, the yellow browed warbler."

There's lots of excitement and energy on the sea at this time of year, says Peter, with seabirds like kittiwakes, gannets, shearwaters and skuas often flying low and fast above the waves as they head south. "Hawks of the sea, skuas are fascinating to watch, as they terrorise other birds into dropping their food, chasing them high into the air, and twisting and turning."

Peter's feathered fanaticism was ignited during his childhood in the Wirral, the peninsula between Liverpool and Wales, bounded to the west by the River Dee and to the east by the River Mersey. "The Dee Estuary is a significant area for wading birds. We used to see huge wheeling flocks of waders and you could walk out to tidal islands to get closer to them," recalls Peter, whose fascination was



Make a date

Peter Walton is running three Norfolk County Council adult education ornithology courses starting in September at Wensum Lodge and Whittingham Country Park. He also has a series of single session courses coming up, including Moths around Norwich at Whittingham Visitor Centre on Thursday, September 9, and Birds in Autumn at Wells on Saturday, September 25, and at Titchwell on Saturday, October 16. For more information about these and future courses, contact Peter Walton on 07780 514276, email peterwalton@wildlifenorfolk.co.uk or visit www.wildlifenorfolk.co.uk

encouraged by his science teacher, who ran nature walks for interested pupils on Saturday afternoons.

"I thought it was great. I was very, very keen. When I was at school in the 1960s and 1970s, an enthusiasm for bird-watching was quite unusual. It is becoming more mainstream today as the nation gains a greater awareness for the environment around us," says Peter.

In his early teens, Peter had his first introduction to the birds of Norfolk, when he stayed with a couple of close friends at the Watch House at Blakeney Point. Warden Ted Eales and his wife ran a B&B from the house, and it was a great adventure for the boys. "We were in the perfect spot to see the migrants. Other bird-watchers had to make the long walk up from Cley, so we always had a couple of hours on them."

It was just a few years later that Peter decided to make a career out of his all-consuming passion. "When I was 16, I did two weeks of voluntary work for RSPB Minsmere in Suffolk, where I experienced a variety of different jobs you can do on a reserve. I discovered that I most enjoyed showing people the birds, and thought: 'That's what I am going to do.'"

A purchasing director for an oil refinery,

Peter's father disapproved of his son's ambition and encouraged him to get a "secure" job after he completed his A-levels. "I wasn't interested in doing anything but bird watching. My parents wanted me to get into accountancy or banking. They couldn't understand why I struggled with it, but it just wasn't me."

So, aged 20, Peter gave up his ill-suited job at the local bank, and went abroad for three years, funding his travelling with an initial stint on Shetland doing bar work and manual labour. Drawn to out-of-the-ordinary experiences, Peter travelled across the Sahara; ventured to remote outposts of Alaska, getting within 40 miles of Siberia at time of the Cold War; and stayed in tents with Baluchis in the southeastern tip of Iran.

"My three months in Iran were real ornithological highlight. I went in April of 1978, when the Shah still ruled and you could travel freely. Just a few months after I left, the Islamic Revolution took place, paralyzing the country," he says.

"I used to go to a country, find out everything I possibly could about its birds, and get to know the key ornithologists." In Thailand, Peter met Dr Boonsong, author of A Guide to the Birds of

Thailand and friend of the country's Royal Family. "He was keen to produce a second edition of his book and, as he was quite elderly, he asked for my help. He wanted to know what birds I had seen and gave me his book to annotate.

"He also equipped me with what I called "my magic card". It was his business card on which he had scribbled something in Thai - I have no idea what, but it opened all sorts of doors for me as I travelled around the country. One flash of the card at a nature reserve, for instance, and they would put me up, look after me and show me the sights."

Even though Peter's main interest was wildlife, he became very interested in how people were living as he travelled. On his return, he chose to do an anthropology degree at the University of East Anglia. "I didn't want to study ornithology as I am so driven to do that anyway, so I thought I would do something else," he says.

According to Peter, the UEA was the place to be for bird watchers in the early 1980s. "A lot of people came to be part of the scene. I met the keenest birders in the country at that time, the vast majority of whom have made a living out of it." One of Peter's closest friends was Paul Lewis, now head of PR for the RSPB, and Mark Cocker, the Norfolk-based author of Birds Britannica and Birders, was also a fellow student.

It was during his time at UEA that Peter met his wife, Adrienne, a primary school teacher, with whom he has an 11-year-old daughter Rosa. "It can't always be easy living with someone who is so intense about what he does and I must acknowledge that my wife and daughter are both very supportive," says Peter. Goodness knows what Adrienne makes of the moths in her fridge though...

"You can store them there without harming them, it just slows down their metabolism," says Peter, whose enthusiasm for moths has brushed off a little on Rosa, who can name many varieties. "I love their indulgent Victorian names, like Alder Kitten, Silver Cloud, Yellow Belle and Reed Dagger," he says. "People tend to think of moths as being rather drab, second cousins to butterflies, but there is so much variety, with 2,400 moth species in Britain, compared to 60 butterflies."

Peter is keen to emphasise that there is always wildlife to see, whether you are in the middle of Norwich or the countryside. "I tend to go out into our garden at this time of year to see the overhead migration, and I've heard all manner of birds flying over at night," says Peter. "At the end of October, I'll be listening out for huge movements of redwings, which fly fairly low and often at night. They tend to make a "Ssssp" sound as they pass over, which can be heard above traffic noise if you tune into it."

Towards the end of September there is also the potential to see pink-footed geese in the city's skies, but the real spectacle happens at the coast. "You might see more than 100,000 geese flying in V or W formation, silhouetted against the sky," says Peter, who rates it as one of his favourite sights.

Peter's number one spot for bird-watching is Cley, which brings back fond memories of his childhood holidays, when the East Bank was decidedly less crowded. "I can't complain about there being a lot of birdwatchers in Norfolk now, as it is my livelihood, but I do hanker after being in remote places on my own. Luckily, I know a few in Norfolk to service that need." While he is keen to share his expertise, this is one area that Peter won't elaborate on.

The Migrating Birds morning will take place at Holkham from 9am to 1pm on Saturday, September 11, and costs £25 per person including hot drinks. To book or for further information, call Smokesilver on 01328 730382 or email info@smokesilver.co.uk

For information on Peter's wildlife holiday in November at Thornham Lifeboat Hotel, visit www.maypolehotels.com/lifeboatinn and look under "forthcoming events" or visit www.scenterprisetoours.co.uk Or for the long weekend at Kelling Heath in November, visit www.kellingheath.co.uk