

The Somerset Levels in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline Itinerary

Day 1 Arrive Wells

Day 2/3 The Somerset Levels, Avalon Marshes and West Sedgemoor

Departs

April/May

Focus

Birds & Other Wildlife

Grading

A. All walking will be at a slow birdwatching pace over mostly flat ground.

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code GBR17) or brochure

Highlights

- Enjoy spring birdlife on the Somerset Levels
- Hobbies and summer plumaged waders
- Booming Bitterns, Garganey, Marsh Harriers and Barn Owls
- A great chance to see Great White Egret and Common Crane
- A comfortable hotel with award-winning restaurant, opposite the cathedral in the lovely historic market town of Wells



Bittern, Hobby, Barn Owl



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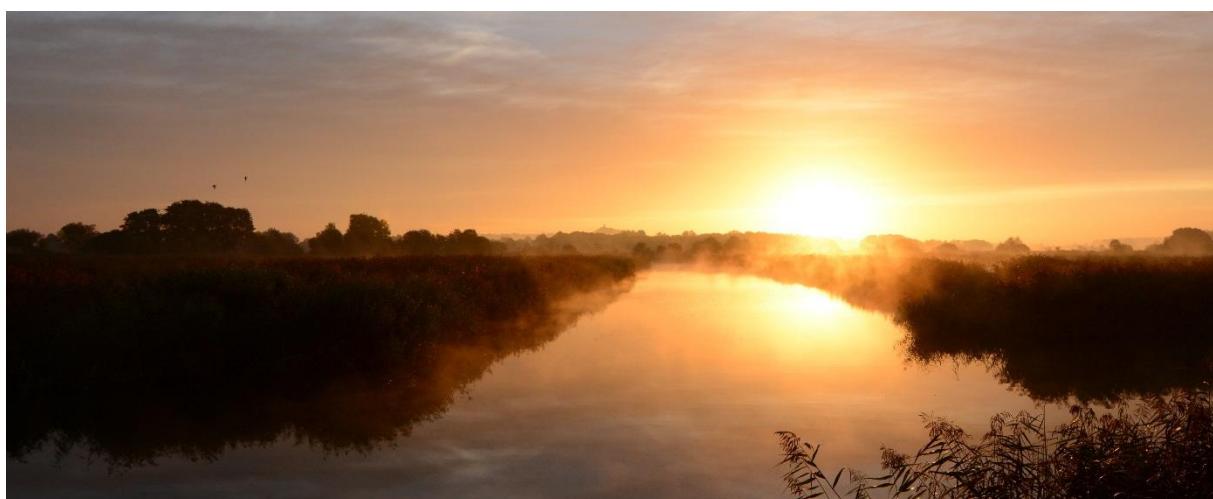
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Introduction

The Somerset Levels is an area of wetland and coastal plain covering 650 square kilometres in central Somerset, between the Quantock and Mendip Hills. It consists of marine clay 'levels' and inland moors, many of which are peat-based with very rich soil, and it supports such a rich variety of plant and birdlife that it is under consideration for status as a World Heritage Site. Much of the levels and moors are at or only slightly above sea level and historically this has meant the area being frequently flooded by the sea – indeed early efforts to control flooding were noted in the Domesday Book, and the situation finally resolved in the 20th century! In the 1700s drainage channels known locally as 'rhynes' (pronounced 'reens') were dug, resulting in the levels' distinctive patterning of channels separating plots of land that is seen today. Glastonbury Tor is the most prominent landmark of the area, and there are wonderful views of the Tor from Deer Leap on the Mendip Hills and across the levels, as far as the sea on a fine day!

The levels and moors make up a wetland area which includes 32 Sites of Special Scientific Interest. Our visit is timed to coincide with migrating spring birds which pass through the Somerset Levels on passage, as well as one of the area's other special bird species, the Hobby. In addition to Hobby, there are small numbers of raptors to be seen on the Levels during spring including Marsh Harriers, Sparrowhawks, Kestrels, Buzzards, and Peregrines. Bitterns are now an established breeding species on the Levels and during May, if they have bred early, we have a good chance of catching sight of one or more of these elusive and superbly cryptic members of the heron family as they make feeding flights across the reedbeds. Little and Great Egrets are likely, as is the majestic Common Crane which is seen on this tour with great success. Our leaders know the best places to find them.

The Somerset Levels undoubtedly offer some very good birding opportunities and are, in our opinion. This tour will provide a taste of the excitement of identifying birds during peak spring migration times as well as an introduction to identifying bird songs, and a range of the species on the levels at this time of year. Our base for this tour will be the unspoiled market town of Wells, famous for its cathedral, situated in the Mendips, and within easy reach of Wookey Hole and Cheddar.



Sunrise on the Levels

Itinerary

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Arrive Wells

You will be welcome to check in to the hotel from 1400 onwards and spend the afternoon at leisure. If you wish to arrive earlier the hotel staff will be happy to hold your luggage until your room is ready. Your tour leaders will be in the foyer of the hotel from 1830 to meet you for dinner at 1900 and to have a short introductory talk outlining the programme for the next couple of days and some of the birds we will hope to see.

Days 2 - 3

The Somerset Levels

We will deliberately keep a flexible programme in order to make best use of the prevailing weather conditions and to maximise our chances of seeing key species. Our time will be divided between two main areas, within easy driving distance of each other and our hotel. However the whole area is good for wildlife and there is every chance of 'bumping' into a hunting Barn Owl or a feeding Hobby elsewhere. Our tour leaders know the area extremely well, and will make decisions on the day as to exactly where we will go. Some of the areas we are likely to visit are described below.

Avalon Marshes

Willow trees and the now converted flooded peat-diggings are characteristic of the landscape here, and the resulting wetland pools and reedbeds provide superb habitat for wildfowl, waders, and herons. There are tracks running alongside many of these habitats, and there should be plenty of bird activity as we stop at a scrape, viewing point or a lakeside hide. Indeed, spring is an excellent time for birdlife on the Somerset Levels, and our visit in late May is timed to coincide with the breeding season and peak migration. The number and variety of passage waders depends on water



Little Ringed Plover

levels, but we can expect small flocks of waders, and we may see migrating summer plumaged Black-tailed Godwits, as well as a few Ruff and Little Ringed Plover among other commoner species such as Lapwings and Redshank.

May is also one of the best times to watch one of the area's special birds, the Hobby. These exquisite falcons congregate over certain lakes to take advantage of the abundance of prey – in

particular the vast numbers of dragonflies which are emerging at this time of year – and it is possible to see over 40 in the air together. It is worth keeping a careful eye out for Bitterns – their cryptic

plumage never makes them easy to see but our chances are good as they make frequent feeding flights across reedbeds at this time of year. The large winter congregations of wildfowl which assemble in the lakes and pools have gone by spring, but we can hope to find Garganey. Little and recently Great White Egrets can be seen throughout the year, and Marsh Harriers are often seen patrolling the reedbeds and marshes for prey. As we bird the levels and moors we'll be constantly on the alert for the explosive call of the Cetti's Warbler, one of the most distinctive and easily recognisable bird songs of the Avalon Marshes and we will listen out for the characteristic 'squealing' of Water Rail as well as Cuckoos, which are still doing well here. We can expect up to 10 species of warbler to be present by late May including Reed and Sedge Warbler, Blackcap, Garden Warbler, Whitethroat and Lesser Whitethroat, Chiffchaff and Willow Warbler, and there will be a chance for those interested in learning some bird song to practice their identification skills – either during the day or as an optional dawn chorus walk.



Lesser Whitethroat

There's a small population of Otters here, and we may see signs of them such as spraint as we explore the area. We'll also be on the lookout for dragonflies, butterflies, reptiles and amphibians.

West Sedgemoor

West Sedgemoor is one of England's largest remaining wet meadow systems. This is excellent habitat for woodland birds such as warblers and Spotted Flycatchers. Marsh Tits and other tit species are present and in May newly fledged youngsters should be apparent, as well as open meadow grassland birds such as breeding Lapwing and Redshank. We'll also keep a look-out for newly fledged Grey Herons and Little Egrets from the nearby herony. This is also a good place to watch for Hobby as large numbers of dragonflies are emerging from pools and Curlews may be calling and displaying at this time of year over the wet meadows.

On our final day we will finish birding in the late afternoon, in time to arrive back to our hotel in Wells in the early evening at around 1730. We can easily arrange extra nights at our comfortable hotel base, and many clients do enjoy this option. Please let me know if you would like to opt for this and I can get back to you with a cost for either Bed and Breakfast or Dinner Bed and Breakfast, depending on your preference.

Tour Grading & Focus

There will be easy walking on this holiday, covering between three and five miles per day, at a slow birdwatching pace, on flat ground, and will be interspersed with time spent in hides. We will spend the majority of our time birdwatching but we will take time to appreciate any interesting wildlife which the group find.

Weather, Clothing & Equipment

In late May temperatures should be comfortable on the Levels, and can sometimes be surprisingly hot; however the Levels are exposed in many places and sitting in hides can mean you get chilly, so it is always advisable to take layers and prepare for cold or warm weather. Waterproof clothing and sturdy – preferably waterproof or water-resistant – footwear is recommended in case of showers, as we could get caught in rain away from shelter. We strongly advise high factor sun cream (even if it is raining!) and a hat.

You should bring warm clothing in case we make dawn or evening birdwatching excursions, and for the evenings mosquito repellent is advisable. Binoculars are required for the tour. A telescope will be very useful if you have one.

What's Included

Breakfasts and evening meals are included in the holiday cost beginning with the evening meal on Day 1 and finishing with breakfast on Day 3. Accommodation will be at the Swan Hotel, Wells in twin, double or single rooms, all en suite and with tea and coffee making facilities. The hotel, which does have parking facilities, is situated opposite Wells Cathedral and is within easy reach of the key birding and other wildlife sites on the Somerset levels which we will be visiting during this tour. The Swan Hotel has an award-winning kitchen and meals are served in an attractive oak-paneled restaurant. The tour price includes a 3-course meal on both nights; the food is a combination of modern and traditional British cooking and, where possible, uses locally sourced seasonal ingredients. Vegetarian and vegan options are available on request. There is also a gym and sauna.

Lunches, and daytime snacks and drinks, are not included in the cost of this tour, and you will be responsible for making your own way to and from Wells at the start and end of the tour. We will stop at a local pub for lunch and a comfort break on both days. You will need to bring any snacks or drinks that you want during the rest of the day with you as these are not provided.

Extending Your Holiday

As mentioned above, we are more than happy to book additional nights for you at the hotel on either a dinner, bed and breakfast, or bed and breakfast basis at additional cost. Please request this at the time of booking.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests, at the time of booking.

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