

Somerset's Winter Wildlife

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Arrive Somerset
Day 2	Quantock Hills
Day 3	Avalon Marshes & Polden Hills
Day 4	Mendip Hills

Departs

Nov - Feb

Focus

Birds

Grading

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

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code GBR281) or brochure

Highlights

- A visit to the Somerset Levels for Bitterns, Great White Egrets, Cattle Egrets and the spectacular Starling murmuration
- A special effort to find Common Cranes
- Birds of prey may include Peregrine and the possibility of Hen Harrier and Merlin
- Visit Steart Marshes and Cheddar Gorge
- A rural hotel surrounded by countryside
- Led by expert naturalist guides



Bearded Tit, Bittern and the Somerset Levels



Naturetrek Mingedown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Introduction

Somerset offers some of the most spectacular and internationally recognised habitats and wildlife in the UK including 124 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), 2 Special Protection Areas, 11 Special Areas of Conservation and 4 Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). During this wonderfully varied short break we will visit a number of these beautiful areas and enjoy a range of the iconic and rare species which thrive in the county's wetlands, meadows, gorges, woodlands and marshes. Bittern, Great White Egret, Bearded Tit, Cattle Egret, Red Deer and Otter provide just a selection of the diversity found throughout the county.

Our accommodation is located within easy striking distance of the key habitats of the Somerset Levels, an area which supports such a rich variety of plant, insect and birdlife that it is under consideration for status as a World Heritage Site. Sites we shall visit include the Quantock Hills, Steart Peninsula, Avalon Marshes, Brean Down, Cheddar Gorge and the Mendip Hills among others. Dartford Warbler are just some delights in the woodlands and heathlands; while Bearded Tit, Marsh Harrier, and a range of breeding warblers will be enjoyed on the waterways and reedbeds of the famous Somerset Levels.

We are set for a fascinating and wide insight into the wonderful natural history right on our doorstep.



The Somerset Levels with Glastonbury Tor

Itinerary

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 Somerset

Your tour leader(s) will meet you in the bar & lounge area of our lovely hotel in the early evening where we will enjoy a drink and an introductory talk outlining the programme for the next couple of days, and some of the wildlife we will hope to see, before enjoying our first meal together.

Day 2

Stearth Marshes

After an excellent breakfast, we will head off to the coast to spend the day at Stearth Marshes & Stearth Point. The sea-level walks will take us around the reserve and we shall scan across the saltmarshes and open lagoons which flood at high-tide. A good number of waders, egrets and ducks use the pools while Merlin and Peregrine patrol the marshes through the winter months along with Short-eared Owls and sometimes Hen Harrier. The area is excellent for raptors.



Spotted Redshank

This extensive site, designated as a WWT reserve and a real conservation success story, is superb for waders, especially Avocet, whilst large flocks of Dunlin, Knot, Redshank and Black-tailed Godwit are often present. In fewer numbers we may find the delightful Spotted Redshank and Ruff, both species in their winter plumages.

Although egrets and herons should be in good numbers, we will also be on the search for Spoonbill, a species which has increased on the reserve in recent years, and we will hope to observe them using their peculiar bills as they feed in the deeper water.

The bushes and various waterbodies are also excellent places to find a number of passerines and wildfowl, with the number of ducks being particularly impressive here. Wigeon, Teal, Shoveler and Pintail. Stearth has also enjoyed the presence of a long list of rarities: Penduline Tit is just one of the exciting rarities which has been found here during the winter months!

Day 3

Somerset Levels

The Somerset Levels can only be described as an ornithological success story! The maze of reedbeds which criss-cross the land close to Glastonbury are home to Great, Little and Cattle Egrets, Bitterns thrive here and Marsh Harriers are a common sight cruising over the reedbeds. We stand a good chance of observing all these species.

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 ducks, waders, swans and herons. There are tracks running alongside many of these habitats, and there should be plenty of bird activity as



Cattle Egrets

we stop at a scrape, viewing point or a lakeside hide. It is worth keeping a careful eye out for Bitterns – their cryptic plumage never makes them easy to see but with numbers boosted in winter with continental birds we will be keeping a sharp eye on any reed beds

If the weather is suitable, your tour leader may opt for an optional pre-breakfast visit to Ham Wall RSPB for the departing Starlings, which number here in their hundreds of thousands. This is also an ideal time to find Bitterns leaving their roost site, as well as observing Marsh Harriers, Peregrine Falcons, and other birds of prey. The song of Cetti's Warblers will also be the main feature of an early morning visit here, as will the squealing of Water Rail.

Large congregations of wildfowl assemble in the lakes and pools, and we'll be hoping to see good numbers of Gadwall, Teal, Wigeon, Pintail and Shoveler, along with the possibility of wintering Goosander or Smew. Some of the smaller birds we'll be looking out for include Siskin and Redpoll



Starling murmuration

that enjoy the alders that line many of the paths while Bearded Tits are becoming more reliable to see here.

With the Somerset Levels being such an extensive and varied wetland habitat, it was decided that this would be the site to release the Common Crane back into the West Country. The "Great Crane Project" was a great success, and a small population now breeds on the

levels, and we hope on this tour to find and watch these beautiful and majestic birds.

After a superb day's birding, we will set ourselves up to observe the incredible Starling murmuration, as up to one million birds arrive onto the levels to roost. The abundance of raptors on the reserve triggers the spectacular shapes the birds create, and this event can only be described as one of the ornithological highlights in the birding calendar!

Day 4

Mendip Hills & Cheddar

Today we will start at a local coniferous woodland to search for a number of finches, including Crossbill, Siskin and Redpoll before carrying on to the famous Cheddar Gorge. Here we will enjoy some fantastic views and walk down through the gorge where we may see Peregrine, Raven, winter thrushes and more finches. We'll finish the day with a walk at nearby Cheddar Reservoir. A lot of birds spend the winter on the sheltered reservoir with good numbers of Tufted Duck and Pochard and we may be lucky with a wintering Great Northern Diver or Black-necked Grebe and rarities are



Black-necked Grebe

often found here. The gull roost here can often hold interesting species such as Mediterranean Gull and sometime Iceland Gull in the winter and we will watch the gull roost to maximise the opportunities for seeing what comes in.

Throughout the holiday we will enjoy everything we may find and of course keep sharp-eyed for mammals with Roe Deer, Red Fox, Brown Hare, Water Vole and Otter all possible throughout the tour

while during this season some interesting fungi can be found at some of the sites.

Tour Grading & Focus

There will be some easy walking on this holiday, covering around four miles per day on generally flat but varied terrain. We will maintain a very broad focus and enjoy everything we are lucky enough to find.

Weather, Clothing & Equipment

The weather is always unpredictable and through the winter months, rain and cold weather must be prepared for. Layers are advisable, 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.

Binoculars are very much advised for the tour, and a torch may be useful when walking back from the Starling display.

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 4.



Accommodation

the time of booking.

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 the hotel at the start and end of the tour. We will stop at a local pub or Café for lunches, or in good weather may be collected from a supermarket to maximise time in the field.

Larger 'Superior' rooms are available for a supplement of £20pppn. Please request these at

Extending Your Holiday

We are more than happy to book additional nights at the hotel on a 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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