

# The Somerset Levels – A Beginners Birdwatching Tour

## Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

### Itinerary

**Day 1** Arrive Wells

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

### Departs

January, February and December

### Focus

Birds

### Grading

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

### Dates and Prices

See website (tour code GBR40) or brochure

### Highlights

- Enjoy the aerial artistry of a million-strong Starlings in murmuration as they gather at dusk prior to roosting
- Birds of prey possible includes Marsh Harrier, Hen Harrier and Sparrowhawk
- Large concentrations of beautiful wintering wildfowl & waders.
- A lovely hotel, with award-winning restaurant, directly opposite the Wells Cathedral in the historic market town
- Higher level of instruction aimed more specifically at beginners



Starlings (Mark Bretherton), Eurasian Kingfisher, Pintail



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

**T:** +44 (0)1962 733051

**E:** [info@naturetrek.co.uk](mailto:info@naturetrek.co.uk)

**W:** [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk)

## 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 the internationally important numbers of wildfowl found here in winter, such as Wigeon, Gadwall, Pintail and Shoveler. Bitterns are now an established breeding species on the levels and, during the winter, numbers increase with migrants from the continent; we have a good chance of catching sight of one or more of these elusive species. There are small numbers of wintering raptors such as Merlin, as well as Marsh and Hen Harriers, while the resident Barn Owls can be glimpsed at any time of day.

As well as the success with the Bitterns, the superb habitat that makes up the Somerset Levels has attracted another exciting bird. In 2012 the Great White Egret bred for the first time ever in the UK choosing a location in the levels to do so. It successfully raised a single chick and was successful again in 2013 and the breeding success has since been going from strength to strength. In 2023, 88 chicks fledged in the region. These elegant birds can now be regularly seen on both our winter and summer tours. Another bird we'll be hoping to see is the Starling – or, to be more precise, hundreds of thousands of them! Bill Oddie's now well-known footage of vast flocks put the levels firmly on the must-see British 'birdwatching map' with unforgettable images of vast flocks of Starlings at dusk, swirling and diving before flying to their evening roosts. The Somerset Levels



The incredible murmuration of the Common Starling

undoubtedly offer some very good birding opportunities and our trip is focused on the special birdlife found here.

In addition to the birds the area has a flourishing population of Otters and although typically nocturnal, groups have been lucky enough to see this gorgeous animal as it continues to bounce back across the UK.

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. We will aim to finish the tour in the evening of the second day taking the opportunity to watch the Starlings again before returning to the hotel. We would expect the tour to finish at around 1700.

The Somerset Levels have a unique and understated charm. A visit here often brings birding surprises, as well as a chance to see some of the country's most spectacular gatherings of Starlings. On this beginners tour more emphasis will be put on identification of the birds we encounter both by sight and by sound than on a standard tour. We will still be aiming to see all the star species that the levels have to offer but with a little more instruction and at a slightly slower pace.

## 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 across various sites all within easy driving distance of each other and our hotel. The whole area however is good for wildlife and there is every chance of 'bumping' into something interesting at any point as we drive along quiet minor roads between sites. A hunting Marsh Harrier maybe or a perched Peregrine. 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 ducks, waders, swans 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. 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. Glossy Ibis have been seen in recent years so we can hope to see



Marsh Harrier

them during our explorations. 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. Little Egrets can be seen throughout the year as can Great White Egret. The area is also well known for its gatherings of Cattle Egret and we shall be on the lookout for these on our travels. Marsh Harriers are often seen patrolling the reedbeds and

marshes for prey and Peregrines are often patrolling overhead. Some of the smaller birds we'll be looking out for include Siskin and Redpoll that enjoy the alders that line many of the paths. 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 this area.



Eurasian Teal

There's a small population of Otters here, and we may see signs of them such as spraint as we explore the area.

## Starlings

The gathering of hundreds of thousands or over a million Starlings is one of the famous sights of the Somerset Levels and we will visit at the perfect time on each evening to coincide with their swirling flights as they assemble and make a spectacular aerial display over the marshes and moors before dropping dramatically into their roosts. The exact location of these dynamic gatherings is unpredictable as it can vary from one evening to the next; however, our guides have been fortunate

to watch the murmurations countless times and they will use their knowledge and experience to predict their movements, giving us the very best chance of watching this stunning visual feast. If we are lucky we may see the birds attempting to evade avian predators such as Peregrine Falcon or Sparrowhawk – a truly stunning sight! We also provide for those who wish the opportunity for a pre-breakfast outing to be in position to see, and hear, the Starlings incredibly erupt from their roost site, which to many people is just as a spectacular experience as the evening murmurations. Again, our guides will know where best to be at the right time.

## Greylake & King's Sedgemoor Drain

We will explore this area that can be excellent for Golden Plover, Lapwing and wildfowl such as Shoveler, Teal and Wigeon. Water Rail may be heard and seen at any of the sites around the levels and waders such as Redshank, Dunlin, Snipe and possibly even Ruff will be looked out for here. This area is also one of the most reliable sites in the area for Hen Harrier and Merlin.

## West Sedgemoor and Swell Wood

West Sedgemoor is one of England's largest remaining wet meadow systems. During the winter the area floods and this attracts large flocks of Teal, Wigeon, Lapwing and waders including Golden Plovers. There is also a heronry here where over 120 pairs of Grey Heron nest. Breeding activity will be well under way in February and we will hopefully have the opportunity to watch courting and nest building birds from a well-positioned hide.

In Swell Wood we will have the opportunity to search for some woodland birds with Marsh Tit and Nuthatch being quite abundant here and many other tits and finches coming down to the feeders.



Common Crane

With the Somerset Levels being such an extensive and varied habitat it was decided that this would be the site to release the Common Crane back into the West Country. The "Great Crane Project" is still ongoing and we hope on this tour to find and watch these beautiful and majestic birds. We will have local knowledge and information and with luck we hope to be able to locate them which is always a special sight.

On our final day (Day 3) we will finish birding in the late afternoon, in time to arrive back to our hotel in Wells in the early evening between approximately 1700-1730pm.

## 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 and at the Starling gatherings, but we will take time to appreciate any interesting wildlife which the group find.

More time will be spent on this beginner's tour for instruction and explanation about identification of the species we encounter. We still aim to see all the star birds the area has to offer.

## Weather, Clothing & Equipment

The weather is of course unpredictable and we recommend bringing layers of clothing including a warm jumper/fleece and a waterproof jacket and waterproof walking boots. A hat and gloves is also advised, whilst very warm garments are essential for tours taking place in February on the Somerset Levels. 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](http://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.

## Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk) to sign up.