

# The Forest of Dean & Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

25th November – 1st December 2023

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Dipper



Great White Egret



Bewick's Swan



Golden Plovers

Tour report and photos by Oliver Smart



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)

Tour participants: Oliver Smart (leader) with eight Naturetrek Clients

## Introduction

Our six-night tour covered two distinctive regions in the south-west, with visits to the Forest of Dean and Somerset Levels. With cold weather forecast we wrapped up warm and enjoyed plenty of wildlife including Wild Boar, White-throated Dipper, hundreds of Siskins and plenty of Brambling, Red-crested Pochard, Marsh Harrier and a fabulous Starling murmuration.

## Day 1

**Saturday 25th November**

### Wenchford & Parkend Church

After meeting at 6.30pm, the group bonded over a delicious three-course meal as we discussed the itinerary for the week ahead. We were staying in the heart of the Forest of Dean at the Speech House Hotel and for the first couple of days we would be exploring the Forest in search of birdlife and mammals.

After dinner we took a night drive to Wenchford and Parkend Church. The temperature had dropped to -1°C, but there was no wind and the conditions were incredibly still. We were only minutes into the drive when we located lots of Fallow Deer. A single young Wild Boar wandered and foraged beneath a canopy of European Beech trees. Later, a sole Reeve's Muntjac was spotted on a roadside bank and, close to Parkend Church, a Red Fox was tantalisingly close but not giving too much away.

## Day 2

**Sunday 26th November**

### Parkend, Wenchford, Cannop Ponds, Spruce Ride

After breakfast we headed straight to Parkend. The misty early conditions worsened throughout the day so viewpoints were not on the agenda. A Mistle Thrush was holding territory in a Hawthorn tree and scolding every other bird that came near: Song Thrush, Redwing, Blackbird, Chaffinch and various tits. Greenfinch were spotted around the Yew trees, but initially there was no sign of Hawfinch. After 30 minutes or so a small flock of five flew over, but most of the group didn't get much on them. Shortly afterwards our leader spotted a sole female which perched up and gave good but brief views.

In the gloom we wandered along the river and connected with a large flock of 50+ Siskin. Nuthatch called throughout and a pair of Stock Dove showed well. We then dropped in to Wenchford and located a White-throated Dipper as soon as we arrived. It was not totally obliging but everyone did see it well enough. We then continued to Cannop Ponds and watching with glee as the number of passerines came down to some seed our leader put out for them. It was super to see so many finches, tits and Nuthatch at such close quarters. Strangely, there was no sign of any Mandarin, so we'd have to look for those elsewhere.

After lunch in Sling, we returned to the northern pond and added Little Grebe, Raven, Cormorant, Tufted Duck, Wigeon, Grey Wagtail and best of all Marsh Tit coming to a feeding platform. There was still no sign of Mandarin...

Our final stop was to walk along Spruce Ride. The conditions were now pretty miserable, but without any wind it was still an enjoyable walk. We started with good views of Treecreeper before happening upon another big flock of Siskin. We tried again for Mandarin at Speech House Pond but scored yet another blank space in the book! We ended in the arboretum watching a female Bullfinch feeding, a bird on at least one of the group's target lists.

With checklists and dinner completed, we retired for a well-earned rest: the weather had closed in and the chances of seeing much in misty and rainy conditions were low to zero!

## Day 3

## Monday 27th November

### Symonds Yat, New Fancy View, Woorgreens Lake & Crabtree Hill

We woke to blue patches in the skies and a very calm and still morning: excellent! We headed straight to Symonds Yat to enjoy the fantastic views on offer as the sun peeped through and warmed us. Our leader immediately spotted a male Peregrine Falcon (the tiercel) in nearby trees. We spent an hour or more scanning the River Wye below and across to the horizons in both directions. We managed a few new birds including four Goosander (one male and three females), Common Buzzard, the distinctive calls of a Green Woodpecker and a flyover Great Spotted Woodpecker. A large flock of 54 Common Gull passed by too. Mistle Thrush, Stock Dove, Goldcrest and Raven were also close and delightful to observe once again.

As the weather was still fine, we took the opportunity to visit another viewpoint at New Fancy View. The footpath has been re-laid and made climbing a little easier. Along the way we spotted a couple of clusters of Meadow Coral fungus. From the top we had clear views across the forest towards Cinderford. Soon we started spotted birds and a lot of birds at that. It was not long before our leader called out 'Brambling!' as one flew by, then another a little later, and then more. By the time we'd finished some 20+ had been seen. A very large flock of over 200 Woodpigeon was perched in the conifers and Raven, Buzzard and a Sparrowhawk were seen. Several Crossbill flew over too, but sadly none of them perched this morning. Chaffinch, Siskin, Coal Tit and the distinctive sound of Marsh Tit were also noted.

After lunch back at Speech House Hotel, we headed to Woorgreens where a sole Grey Heron was the best bird on the water. A huge flock of over 300 Siskin was very mobile and splitting into smaller groups as they alighted on Alder trees. We walked the circumference of the lake and despite the muddy conditions had lovely views of them. Eventually we located a Redpoll amongst the Siskin flock and everyone was able to see this delicate finch.

As we walked the drier footpath around the hill, we watched flocks of Redwing and Fieldfare perching in Silver Birch trees. This was a great comparison for those less familiar with the size difference. A few Highland Cows were enjoying munching the marshy vegetation as our leader spotted another flock, this time Brambling visiting Beech trees in the distance. Birds perched more frequently this time and the group were able to see them, albeit slightly distantly.

Further on a small group of Linnet were spotted, with one perching well for all to see. We slowly made our way back to the vehicle with a Kingfisher dashing ahead of our guide without anyone else seeing it: typical!

After our final dinner in the Forest, three of the group and the leader headed out for our second night drive. We were soon to be rewarded and with better viewing conditions we drove through Littledean, Soudley, Wenchoford and Parkend. We picked up one Red Fox, one Roe Deer, seven Reeve's Muntjac, at least eight Wild Boar and over 70 Fallow Deer!

## Day 4

## Tuesday 28th November

### Slimbridge WWT

After checkout, we navigated to Slimbridge WWT for our day in transit. We spent the morning exploring the Rushy Pen and Estuary Tower hides, with plenty of exciting birdlife. From Rushy Pen, we scanned through vast numbers of waterfowl and a few waders with Dunlin, Lapwing and Common Snipe featuring. Our leader talked through the different identification features. A few Bewick's Swan, Pochard, Tufted Duck, Shelduck and Shoveler were present too.

At the Estuary Tower, we scanned the vast grassy area towards the Severn Estuary and spent the best part of an hour working through the different species of geese. We quickly picked up Canada and Barnacle and shortly thereafter located a sole (Dark-bellied) Brent Goose. We also spotted Ross's, Lesser White-fronted and a Pink-footed Goose but the origins of these are not known and their behaviour and migration strategies suggest they are most likely captive escapes. We also located three White-fronted Geese which was a bonus. Hundreds of Golden Plover and Lapwing regularly took to the skies and the perched Buzzard or Peregrine may have been the culprits for the many disturbances. A few Skylark, Goldfinch and some flyover Fieldfare bolstered the passerine tally, and three Roe Deer gave a 'tick' to those who missed those on the evening mammal-spotting drive.

After lunch, we ventured to the South Lake Observatory and then to the Zeiss hide. We began working through the roosting waders with further Dunlin and some Black-tailed Godwit: it is always good to examine even commoner species at close quarters. Viewing from the Zeiss hide is always enjoyable as you never know what is going to materialise, and we again enjoyed large flocks of waders taking to the air. A pair of Ruff were also spotted by our leader who scanned through the birds trying to locate some new species for the group to see. Our final decent sighting was of four Common Crane out on The Dumbles, feeding and generally keeping their heads down. With three pairs breeding here this year, the future is definitely looking up.

From 3.00pm we made our way to Wells in Somerset for the second leg of our tour. After check-in and a short rest, we met up for our daily checklist and a short presentation before sitting down for dinner.

## Day 5

## Wednesday 29th November

### Shapwick Heath, Westhay Moor, Aller Moor & Ham Wall

We departed the hotel at 8.00am and headed directly for Shapwick Heath. We walked the railway line to Noah's Lake and encountered a good number of passerines on the way, including Bullfinch, Reed Bunting and Stonechat. Both sexes of each species showed really well and we discussed their different feeding strategies, calls and identification tips.

Marsh Harrier, Great Egret and plenty of waterfowl were seen along the route. We spent a short time in the hide scanning the vast rafts of waterfowl: mainly Wigeon and Pintail. A Kingfisher twice flew into the nearside bushes but not everyone managed a glimpse. We spotted some Otter spraint along the woodland trail on a submerged overhanging branch, and we enjoyed more Goldcrest and Chiffchaff. Bearded Tit pinged briefly from the reedbed at the crossroads but we could not locate them. Another Kingfisher hovered and then perched again for some to see.

We dropped in to Westhay and then Aller Moor to pick up a flock of Cattle Egret, with Little and Great White too: so we had all three species in the same view! On to the Sweet Track, we walked a shorter route due to timing and we enjoyed perfect views of male and female Great Spotted Woodpecker and some fungi, including the delightful Candlesnuff Fungus. At the Decoy hide we scanned through swathes of water birds, before we finally connected with a Bittern flying over the lake in fantastic light. Everyone saw this bird and for many it was their first ever, so it made a super highlight for the trip.

Lunch was taken at The Duck in Burtle before we quickly returned to the road along Westhay Moor where we connected with a male Ring-necked Duck, a North American vagrant. We spent time comparing it to the Tufted Duck it was mixing with and everyone was delighted with this bonus bird.

Our final stop was at Ham Wall, and no sooner had we arrived than our leader shouted 'Glossy Ibis!' as one flew directly over the car park! We walked to Viewing Platform 1 and spent the late afternoon watching the water birds while we fed Great Tit and Robin by hand! Of course, the Starlings were the stars of the show. They roosted on Walton Heath this evening, so we had front-row standing views as they twisted and turned and were sucked out of the sky: an unforgettable experience.

Before we returned to the minibus, our leader set up his telescope to observe Jupiter and its four visible moons (Io, Europa, Ganymede and Callisto): a fitting end to a beautiful day on the Somerset Levels.

After our checklists and dinner, we retired for a well-deserved rest.

## Day 6

Thursday 30th November

### Cheddar Reservoir, Cheddar Village, Catcott Lows, Greylake & Swell Wood

For our penultimate day, we would have to keep moving and wrap up warm. The temperature had dropped almost to freezing, but the wind had picked up to 27km/h from the north-east! We headed straight to Cheddar Reservoir to enjoy scanning the water birds and picking up the resident star of the show: a beautiful male Red-crested Pochard. A small number arrive in Britain in the autumn and winter, with a few pairs breeding. This particular male has been resident for a few years and is such a confiding bird.

We dropped in to Cheddar village to purchase some local Cheddar cheese, only to discover they open much later in the winter. Our leader offered the group a chance to nip to the loo before we carried on with our day. As with most Naturetrek group tours, an opportunity to take a comfort break is very important and today proved to be one of those great birding moments too. Whilst our leader was inside the loo, he heard the distinctive singing of a Dipper and on his exit discovered the bird just 15 feet away, perched on a wall! He rushed back to the van and

summoned everyone to come and see it. We enjoyed amazing views and photographs for over ten minutes as it sang and then 'dipped' into the water to feed!

We dropped in to Catcott Lows on our way south-west and watched a lovely juvenile male Marsh Harrier quartering and spooking Teal and Snipe from the marsh. A couple of Kestrel and a very close Great White Egret were additional highlights of our brief stop.

Next was Greylake, and by now we were beginning really to feel the cold weather. The wind had dropped but the bitterness was seeping through our multiple layers. We watched a Peregrine Falcon, this time scaring the living daylights out of Lapwing, while Snipe potted around close in front of the hide. Large flocks of Wigeon and Teal hung out, snoozing on the grassy banks.

We took lunch at the King Alfred Inn in Burrowbridge: both food and warmth were much-needed! We finished the day at Swell Wood, taking a short loop walk through the forest and enjoying more fungi than birds as the latter appeared to be rather quiet. We spotted a number of attractive species, including Hairy Curtain Crust, King Alfred's Cakes, Scarlet Waxcap, Clouded Funnel, Stump Puffball, Bitter Oyster and Artist's Bracket. The last sighting of the day which rounded off a wonderful second day on the Somerset Levels was a group of four Common Crane on West Sedgemoor as we viewed over the marsh. An adult pair and their two young were feeding contentedly in the flooded fields.

## Day 7

Friday 1st December

### Stear Point & Steart Marshes

This was our final morning, and after checking out we made our way to Steart Point to coincide with high tide. There were hundreds of thrushes feeding on hawthorn, with Redwing and Fieldfare dominating. Greenfinch, Chaffinch, Linnet and Goldfinch foraged in numbers along the hedgerows, and Golden Plover and Lapwing moved slowly through the farmland.

At the Point, waders were returning to the mudflats as they were exposed by the falling tide. Dunlin numbered in their thousands with smaller numbers of Grey Plover, Red Knot, Common Redshank, European Oystercatcher, Eurasian Curlew and three Pied Avocet. Shelduck loafed around and Little Egret potted in the shallow lagoons: a great spectacle.

Back at Steart Marshes we scanned the waders, finding Dunlin and six Black-tailed Godwit foraging, and waterfowl milled about in the shallow pools. A female Marsh Harrier cruised overhead spooking the mixed flocks.

After lunch in Holford, we returned to the Forest of Dean, passing by a very large Wild Boar which had been struck by a vehicle. We dropped in to Cannop Ponds for one final search for Mandarin. None was present, a bizarre absence at this time of year. This strange omission didn't dampen our spirits, however, after what had been a fantastic week exploring forest and marsh, with many memorable moments.

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## Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	November - December 2023						
		25	26	27	28	29	30	1
Ross's Goose (unknown origin)	<i>Anser rossii</i>				✓			
White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>				3			
Lesser White-fronted Goose (unknown origin)	<i>Anser erythropus</i>				✓			
Pink-footed Goose (unknown origin)	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>				✓			
Canada Goose - I	<i>Branta canadensis</i>			✓	✓		✓	
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>				✓	✓	✓	
Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>				✓	✓		
(Dark-bellied) Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>				✓			
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Bewick's Swan	<i>Cygnus columbianus</i>				✓			
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>				✓			✓
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>				✓	✓		
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>				✓	✓	✓	
Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>						✓	
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Ring-necked Duck	<i>Aythya collaris</i>					✓		
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>			✓		✓		
Common Pheasant - I	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>			✓			✓	✓
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>				✓			✓

Common name	Scientific name	November - December 2023						
		25	26	27	28	29	30	1
Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>		✓	✓				✓
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>					H		
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>				5		4	
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>				✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>							✓
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>							✓
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>				✓			✓
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>							✓
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>				✓			✓
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>				✓			✓
Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>							✓
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>				✓			✓
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>				✓	✓	✓	
Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>				2			
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>				✓			✓
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>			54		✓	✓	✓
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>				✓			✓
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>					✓		
Eurasian Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>					✓		
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>					✓	✓	
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>				✓	✓	✓	
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>					✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			✓		✓		
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>					✓	✓	✓
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>			H				
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>			✓		✓		
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓
European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>			H		H		
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>					✓	✓	✓
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			✓	✓		✓	
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		✓	H		✓		
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓



Common name	Scientific name	November - December 2023						
		25	26	27	28	29	30	1
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>				✓	✓	✓	
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓			✓	✓
Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>		✓	✓		✓		
Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>		✓	H			H	
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bearded Reedling	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>					H		
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>				✓			
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>				H	H	H	
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>				H	✓	H	
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		✓	✓		✓		
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		✓	✓				
Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>		✓					
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓	✓	✓			H
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>					✓	✓	✓
White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>		✓				✓	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	H	✓	✓
Duncock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	H
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		✓	H				
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>			✓	✓		✓	✓
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>			✓				
Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>		✓					
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		✓			✓		
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓	H	H			✓
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>			✓				✓
Lesser Redpoll	<i>Acanthis cabaret</i>			✓				
Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>			✓				
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		✓	300+	✓	✓	✓	
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>					✓	H	

## Others

Common name	Scientific name	November - December 2023						
		25	26	27	28	29	30	1
Fallow Deer	<i>Dama dama</i>	✓		✓				
Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Muntjac Deer	<i>Muntiacus reevesi</i>	✓		✓				
Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>	✓		✓				D
Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	✓		✓		D		
Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Bank Vole	<i>Clethrionomys glareolus</i>		✓					
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>				✓			✓
<b>Fungi</b>								
Meadow Coral	<i>Clavulinopsis corniculata</i>			✓				
Candlesnuff Fungus	<i>Xylaria hypoxylon</i>					✓	✓	
Birch Polypore	<i>Fomitopsis betulina</i>					✓		
Hairy Curtain Crust	<i>Stereum hirsutum</i>						✓	
Bitter Oyster	<i>Panellus stipticus</i>						✓	
King Alfred's Cakes	<i>Daldinia concentrica</i>						✓	
Scarlet Waxcap	<i>Hygrocybe coccinea</i>						✓	
Stump Puffball	<i>Lycoperdon pyriforme</i>						✓	
Artist's Bracket	<i>Ganoderma applanatum</i>						✓	
Clouded Funnel	<i>Clitocybe nebularis</i>						✓	