The Forest of Dean and Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

22nd - 28th November 2025



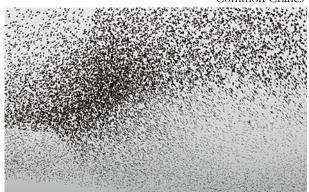




Common Cranes



Mandarin Duck



Starling murmuration

Tour report by Marcus Ward



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Summary

This trip took us to two diverse and wildlife-rich areas of south-west England, offering an excellent opportunity to enjoy a broad range of classic winter species. The Starling roost was undoubtedly one of the standout highlights, with two dawn and two dusk visits providing unforgettable views of the murmuration. Other memorable moments included a Merlin feeding on prey, the wonderfully showy Cranes at Slimbridge, encounters with Wild Boar in the Forest of Dean, entertaining groups of Cattle Egrets, and superb views of Marsh Harrier. We were also treated to scarcer species such as Purple Heron and Glossy Ibis.

All of this was set against the beautiful scenery of the region, from the sweeping autumnal treescapes of the Forest of Dean, to the vast, open skies and wild, expansive feel of the Somerset Levels.

Day 1

Saturday 22nd November

Wenchford and Parkend

The group gathered at 6.30pm to run through the plans and itinerary for the coming days, before getting to know one another over a lovely three-course meal. Our base for this first part of the trip was the historic Speech House Hotel, set in the heart of the Forest of Dean. Originally built as a hunting lodge, it later served as the seat of the Verderers of the Forest, and made an evocative setting for a wildlife-focused weekend.

After dinner, we headed out for an evening drive around Parkend and Wenchford. We had barely left the hotel when we encountered our first wildlife of the trip: a group of four Wild Boars foraging close to the roadside. Unfortunately, they were on a narrow and rather precarious section of road, so our stop was brief. Continuing through the forest, we came across three separate groups of Fallow Deer, also feeding close to the verges, bringing our first evening together to a memorable end.

Day 2

Sunday 23rd November

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Parkend, New Fancy View, Cannop Ponds and Wenchford

After a hearty breakfast, we met in the car park, enjoying excellent scope views of a flock of (Lesser) Redpolls feeding alongside Goldfinches in the birches surrounding the hotel. From here, we headed straight to Parkend, and parked by the green with a clear view of the Yew trees. Unfortunately, an extremely loud alarm was sounding, and local dog walkers were already out in force, so we didn't linger: unsurprisingly, no Hawfinches were seen. We relocated to Parkend Church for a walk along the tracks to a lovely viewpoint, where we obtained good scope views of male and female Crossbills perched atop a larch, along with Buzzard, Raven and a nice mix of woodland species.

After picking up lunch supplies from the excellent village store in Parkend, we continued to New Fancy View, a superb vantage point overlooking the forest towards Cinderford. Our main target here was Goshawk. Despite ideal conditions, only a single distant bird was seen during our hour at the viewpoint.

We then moved on to Cannop Ponds, where we parked by the stone works and walking the length of the pond, before settling at the picnic tables near the main car park for lunch. The walk began well, with great views of Marsh Tit visiting a feeding station, accompanied by Siskin, Nuthatch and other woodland birds. Mandarin Ducks soon became a theme of the visit, with good numbers on both ponds: the largest group totalled twenty-six. During lunch, we were entertained by an opportunistic Raven which made a living helping itself to picnic leftovers. It had been a thoroughly enjoyable and productive walk.

We headed back to the hotel for a quick cuppa, before making the most of the fine weather with a walk to Woorgreen Lake. Here, we found several groups of Goosanders loafing on the water, along with Grey Herons, and heard flyover Brambling and Redwing. On the return route through the arboretum, we were treated to close views of a dark-morph Fallow Deer which paused to watch us from the path.

We regrouped at 6.00pm for the nightly list check and planning session, followed by another excellent dinner. Afterwards, we headed out for a circuit around Parkend and Wenchford. With the help of the thermal imaging camera, we quickly located two young Wild Boar near the roadside, followed by several Fallow Deer and a single Muntjac. Back at the hotel an hour later, a scan of the adjacent field revealed two more Fallow Deer and a pair of Foxes. It was a satisfying end to the day, before we retired for a well-earned night's rest.

Day 3

Monday 24th November

Parkend, Symmonds Yat and Crabtree Hill

A pre-breakfast outing was organised today; we met at 7.30am with the aim of reaching the famed Yew trees at Parkend ahead of joggers and dog walkers. After around forty minutes, with only a calling fly-over Hawfinch to show for our efforts, we moved on to Parkend Church. Here we were entertained by feeding Chaffinches, but despite hearing one or two Hawfinch calls, none were seen. We returned to the hotel for a late breakfast.

After breakfast, we headed to Symonds Yat. A short wait was rewarded with prolonged views of a young male Peregrine, first engaged in a dramatic chase of several Carrion Crows, before it settled in a tree, giving excellent scope views. Other species here included a handful of Goosanders on the river, several Buzzards, and the everpresent Ravens. From the viewpoint, we took the circular walk back to the car park, adding little to the bird list, but noting some interesting fungi, including Dusky Puffball and Candlesnuff Fungus.

Following a quick lunch at the hotel, we set out on the circular walk up to Crabtree Hill. The going was muddy in places, with plenty of evidence of Wild Boar rooting along the trail. Two overflying Hawfinches and a brief sighting of a young male Goshawk were the highlights on the outward walk, along with repeat views of the Goosanders and Grey Heron seen yesterday on the pond, now joined by three Teals. Other observations included some rather characterful Highland Cattle, a small group of roosting Linnets, a handful of Fallow Deer, and clusters of Trooping Funnel fungi.

At dusk we headed back to the hotel for a much-needed break, before meeting for the checklist, and dinner at 6.00pm.

A smaller group joined the night drive this evening, locating a single Wild Boar via the thermal camera, along with good numbers of Fallow Deer, before we returned to the hotel for our final night at Speech House.

Day 4

Tuesday 25th November

Slimbridge WWT

Another early pre-breakfast visit to Parkend gave us one final attempt at locating Hawfinch. Although a bird was heard overhead, an hour spent between the church and the green produced no sightings of birds coming to the bait. We could only assume that the bumper Beech and Hornbeam mast this year was offering abundant natural feeding opportunities elsewhere.

After our final breakfast at the hotel, we packed the van and began the onward journey to Slimbridge, ahead of the second part of the trip on the Somerset Levels. Slimbridge, as always, was full of birdlife. The highlight for everyone was the excellent and prolonged views of up to thirteen Common Cranes, including a trio of juveniles which treated us to a short bout of exuberant dancing. Other highlights included superb views of Greater White-fronted, Barnacle, and Greylag Geese, along with huge numbers of Dunlin, Lapwing, and Golden Plover, among which we managed to pick out a rather elusive Ruff. Only a handful of Bewick's Swans were present, but the opportunity to study such a diversity of birds at close quarters was a real treat.

Lunch was taken in the café, giving everyone a welcome chance to warm up before we moved on to the Zeiss Hide. Activity here was a little quieter due to nearby conservation work, but we still enjoyed discussing the identification features of the various captive wildfowl en route.

The M5 came as something of a shock to the system after several days immersed in quiet, wildlife-rich landscapes, but we made good time to Wells and checked into The Swan, ready for the next portion of our stay.

Day 5

Wednesday 26th November

Shapwick Heath, Avalon Marshes and RSPB Ham Wall

An earlier start today saw us leaving the hotel at 8.00am after another hearty breakfast, stopping at a bakery in Wells to collect supplies for lunch. It was a beautifully sunny but cold morning, with a good layer of frost to clear from the windscreen.

Our first stop was Shapwick Heath, where we walked along the old railway line to Noah's Lake. The initial wooded section was alive with birdlife: Redwings were giving beautiful subsong, flocks of Redpoll and Siskin were feeding, and Bullfinches were slipping quietly through the hedgerows. We also enjoyed nice views of both Goldcrest and Firecrest. An Otter spraint was spotted on the path, and duly sniffed by most of the group!

As the landscape opened out, we were treated to several close fly-bys from up to three Marsh Harriers, and an excellent selection of wildfowl. Water Rail and Cetti's Warbler were both heard calling, but stayed resolutely out of sight. At the hide overlooking Noah's Lake, a handful of Goldeneyes were picked out among the thousands of

wildfowl, and a Great Egret dropped in to fish directly in front of the hide. A Kingfisher also gave brief but welcome views as it hunted along the reed edge.

With the cold beginning to bite, our next stop was the excellent Avalon Marshes Centre for a warming drink (and cake for some), before we headed out to explore the wider marshes. Here we found several groups of feeding Cattle Egrets, the largest flock totalling twenty-six birds.

Our final destination for the day was RSPB Ham Wall: we arrived in good time for the famed Starling roost. After eating our lunch, we settled in at the viewing point. A small group of Black-tailed Godwits provided entertainment as they periodically lifted into the air, while we also scoped feeding Snipe and watched numerous Marsh Harriers and Great Egrets hunting over the reedbeds.

Then came the main event: the Starling roost. Around 90,000 birds arrived over a period of roughly forty minutes. The murmuration displays were spectacular, and the soundscape was truly unforgettable. The gathering prey also attracted a Peregrine and a Sparrowhawk, although both left empty-taloned.

At dusk, we made our way back to the vehicle and returned to Wells and the welcome warmth of the hotel. After the checklist and dinner, Marcus gave a talk on Pine Marten ecology in the New Forest, illustrated with video clips from recent trail-camera work.

Day 6

Thursday 27th November

Ham Wall, Cheddar Reservoir, Greylake and Ham Wall

We made an early start today and headed back to Ham Wall to watch the Starlings emerge from roost. Even in the darkness, the cacophony of 90,000 chattering birds was an unforgettable experience; it was so loud that we could barely hear the Tawny Owl calling nearby. The spectacle of their dawn departure was, if anything, even more awe-inspiring than their arrival the previous evening.

Afterwards, we returned to the hotel for breakfast and a quick freshen-up, before heading to Cheddar Reservoir. The target bird, Greater Scaup, proved tricky to pick out among the dense raft of hundreds of Pochard and Tufted Duck, and what was likely over a thousand Coot. Unexpected highlights included a fly-over Glossy Ibis, and we had excellent views of a Green Woodpecker feeding on ants on a nearby lawn.

We made a brief stop in Cheddar, hoping for both a Dipper on the River Yeo and a tasty bakery lunch; unfortunately, we struck out on both counts and ended up in the local Tesco!

Eager to get back into the wilds of the Levels, we continued on to RSPB Greylake, noting numerous Cattle Egrets en route. Greylake was lively, in part due to the presence of a Penduline Tit found the previous day. Highlights included two Jack Snipe, one conveniently next to a Common Snipe for comparison, and a superb adult male Marsh Harrier which gave prolonged views.

After a short lunch stop, we divided into two groups; some were dropped at Ham Wall to continue birding, while the rest returned to Wells to explore the city and cathedral. At the evening roost, Starling numbers had increased

significantly, with an estimated 120,000 birds performing another mesmerising display. Their performance was briefly overshadowed by a surprise appearance from a juvenile Purple Heron, much to everyone's delight.

Back in Wells, some of the group made it in time for evensong at the cathedral, before we all reconvened for the nightly list check and yet another delicious three-course meal.

Day 7

Friday 28th November

Ham Wall, Steart Marshes and Burnham-on-Sea

Our final day began, appropriately, with one last visit to watch the Starlings depart their roost. The spectacle was, as ever, utterly breathtaking: it was a full sensory experience of sound, movement and cold morning air. While we waited, a Barn Owl hunted over the reeds, and on the drive back a juvenile male Sparrowhawk perched on a roadside gate, offering exceptional, point-blank views for all.

Back at the hotel, we enjoyed our final breakfast together, before saying goodbye to one member of the group who was heading south-west. The rest of us loaded the van and set off westwards for our last birding stops of the trip.

Arriving at Steart Marshes in calm, sunny conditions, we took the track out to the tower hide overlooking the mouth of the River Parrett. Along the way, we enjoyed our first Stonechat and Greenfinch of the trip, a fly-by Peregrine, and up to three hovering Kestrels. From the tower, we quickly located a Merlin perched on a post, busily plucking a small wader, likely a Dunlin. It remained in view for around twenty minutes, before being displaced by a Carrion Crow. With the tide high, the waders gathered into impressive flocks, giving superb side-by-side comparisons of Dunlin, Knot and Grey Plover. It was a wonderful spot, and it was hard to tear ourselves away.

Our final stop was Burnham-on-Sea for lunch in a seafront café, followed by a scan for the long-staying Kentish Plover. Sadly, it refused to show, though we did enjoy good views of Oystercatcher and Curlew feeding along the tideline. Here we said farewell to another group member, before making the journey back to Speech House in the Forest of Dean for our final goodbyes.

Overall, it had been a fantastic trip: we had enjoyed a diverse mix of species, consistently good weather, and above all a warm, enthusiastic group who made the week hugely enjoyable. It had been a truly memorable winter birding adventure in two of the UK's most rewarding regions.

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Species lists

Birds

			November 2025						
Common name	Scientific name	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	
Canada Goose - I	Branta canadensis			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Barnacle Goose	Branta leucopsis				✓				
Greylag Goose	Anser anser				✓	✓	✓	✓	
Greater White-fronted Goose	Anser albifrons				✓				
Mute Swan	Cygnus olor		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Bewick's (Tundra) Swan	Cygnus columbianus				✓				
Whooper Swan	Cygnus cygnus								
Egyptian Goose - I	Alopochen aegyptiaca								
Common Shelduck	Tadorna tadorna				✓			✓	
Mandarin Duck - I	Aix galericulata		✓						
Northern Shoveler	Spatula clypeata				✓	✓	✓	✓	
Gadwall	Mareca strepera					✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Wigeon	Mareca penelope		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Northern Pintail	Anas acuta				√	✓			
Eurasian Teal	Anas crecca			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Pochard	Aythya ferina				✓	✓	✓		
Tufted Duck	Aythya fuligula		√		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Greater Scaup	Aythya marila						√		
Common Goldeneye	Bucephala clangula					√			
Goosander	Mergus merganser		✓	✓					
Grey Partridge	Perdix perdix								
Common Pheasant - I	Phasianus colchicus				√	√	√	√	
Red-legged Partridge - I	Alectoris rufa								
Rock Dove	Columba livia				√	√	√	√	
Stock Dove	Columba oenas		√	√	√				
Common Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus		√	√	√	√	√	√	
Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto					√	√	✓	
Water Rail	Rallus aquaticus					√	√	√	
Common Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus		√		√	√	√	-	
Eurasian Coot	Fulica atra		<i>\</i>		√	√	√	√	
Common Crane	Grus grus		•		·	•	•		
Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis		√		•	√	√		
Great Crested Grebe	Podiceps cristatus		•			√	√		
Eurasian Oystercatcher	Haematopus ostralegus					•	•	√	
Pied Avocet	Recurvirostra avosetta								
Grey Plover	Pluvialis squatarola							√	
European Golden Plover	Pluvialis apricaria				√			√	
Common Ringed Plover	Charadrius hiaticula				V			√	
Northern Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus				√	√	√	∨	
Eurasian Curlew	Numenius arquata				√	V	V	√	
Bar-tailed Godwit	Limosa lapponica				V			_ '	
Black-tailed Godwit	Limosa limosa					,	,	,	
						✓	√	√	
Jack Snipe Eurasian Woodcock	Lymnocryptes minimus						✓		
	Scolopax rusticola					,	,	-	
Common Snipe Common Redshank	Gallinago gallinago Tringa totanus					✓	✓	√	

Common name	Scientific name	November 2025							
		22	23	24	25	26	27	28	
Spotted Redshank	Tringa erythropus								
Common Greenshank	Tringa nebularia								
Ruddy Turnstone	Arenaria interpres								
Red Knot	Calidris canutus							√	
Dunlin	Calidris alpina				✓			✓	
Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus				✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Gull	Larus canus				✓		✓		
European Herring Gull	Larus argentatus			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Great Black-backed Gull	Larus marinus				✓		✓		
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Larus fuscus		✓	✓	✓		✓		
Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Glossy Ibis	Plegadis falcinellus						✓		
Eurasian Bittern	Botaurus stellaris								
Little Egret	Egretta garzetta					✓		✓	
Great Egret	Ardea alba					√	✓	√	
Western Cattle Egret	Ardea ibis					√	✓	√	
Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea		✓	✓	√	√	√	√	
Purple Heron	Ardea purpurea			-	-	-	√		
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	Accipiter nisus					√	√	√	
Eurasian Goshawk	Astur gentilis		√	√		•			
Hen Harrier	Circus cyaneus			•					
Western Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus				√	√	√	√	
Red Kite	Milvus milvus		√	√	•	V	_		
Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo		√	√	√	√	√	√	
Western Barn Owl	Tyto alba		· V	V	· ·	V	V	√	
Little Owl - I	Athene noctua							V	
Short-eared Owl	Asio flammeus								
Tawny Owl	Strix aluco		√	√			√		
Common Kingfisher	Alcedo atthis		V	V		√	✓ ✓	√	
Great Spotted Woodpecker			,	,	,				
· · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · ·	Dendrocopos major Picus viridis		✓	√	✓	√	√	✓	
European Green Woodpecker				✓		√	√	,	
Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus					✓	✓	√	
Merlin	Falco columbarius					,		√	
Peregrine Falcon	Falco peregrinus			✓		√		✓	
Eurasian Jay	Garrulus glandarius		√	_	√	√	√		
Eurasian Magpie	Pica pica		√	√	√	√	√	✓	
Western Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Rook	Corvus frugilegus		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Carrion Crow	Corvus corone		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Northern Raven	Corvus corax		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Coal Tit	Periparus ater		✓	✓	✓				
Marsh Tit	Poecile palustris		✓						
Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Great Tit	Parus major		✓	✓	✓	✓			
Bearded Reedling	Panurus biarmicus								
Eurasian Skylark	Alauda arvensis							✓	
Cetti's Warbler	Cettia cetti					✓	✓	✓	
Long-tailed Tit	Aegithalos caudatus		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Chiffchaff	Phylloscopus collybita				✓	✓	✓	√	
Eurasian Blackcap	Sylvia atricapilla								

Common name			November 2025							
	Scientific name	22	23	24	25	26	27	28		
Goldcrest	Regulus regulus		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Eurasian Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Eurasian Nuthatch	Sitta europaea		✓	✓	✓					
Eurasian Treecreeper	Certhia familiaris		✓	✓		✓				
Common Starling	Sturnus vulgaris		✓	✓	√	✓	✓	✓		
Song Thrush	Turdus philomelos		✓	✓		√	✓	✓		
Mistle Thrush	Turdus viscivorus		✓	✓	✓					
Redwing	Turdus iliacus		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Common Blackbird	Turdus merula		✓	✓	✓	√	√	✓		
Fieldfare	Turdus pilaris						√			
European Robin	Erithacus rubecula		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Black Redstart	Phoenicurus ochruros									
European Stonechat	Saxicola rubicola							✓		
White-throated Dipper	Cinclus cinclus									
House Sparrow	Passer domesticus		√			√	√	✓		
Dunnock	Prunella modularis		√	✓	√	√	√	√		
Grey Wagtail	Motacilla cinerea		√				✓			
White Wagtail	Motacilla alba		√	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Meadow Pipit	Anthus pratensis					√		✓		
Water Pipit	Anthus spinoletta									
European Rock Pipit	Anthus petrosus									
Eurasian Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs		√	✓	√	√	√	√		
Brambling	Fringilla montifringilla		√							
Hawfinch	Coccothraustes coccothraustes			✓						
Eurasian Bullfinch	Pyrrhula pyrrhula			✓		√				
European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris							✓		
Common Linnet	Linaria cannabina			✓			✓	✓		
Redpoll	Acanthis flammea		√	✓		✓	✓	✓		
Red Crossbill	Loxia curvirostra		√	✓						
European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis		√	√	√	√	√	√		
Eurasian Siskin	Spinus spinus		√	√	√	√	√	√		
Corn Bunting	Emberiza calandra									
Yellowhammer	Emberiza citrinella									
Common Reed Bunting	Emberiza schoeniclus					√		√		

Mammals

Common name	Scientific name		November 2025								
		22	23	24	25	26	27	28			
European Rabbit	Oryctolagus cuniculus							✓			
Eastern Grey Squirrel	Sciurus carolinensis		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Pipistrelle bat sp.	Pipistrellus sp.					✓	✓	✓			
Reeves's Muntjac	Muntiacus reevesi		✓				✓				
Fallow Deer	Dama dama	√	✓	✓							
Western Roe Deer	Capreolus capreolus					✓		✓			
Wild Boar	Sus scrofa	✓	√	√							
Red Fox	Vulpes vulpes		✓								