

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

1 - 3 February 2011



Common Cranes



Starlings and Little Egrets



Eurasian Wigeon



Cranes flying

Images and report compiled by Ed Drewitt



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Summary

This tour around the Somerset Levels in early February was a brilliant opportunity to see the diversity and abundance of waterfowl using wetlands during the winter. Seeing sixteen of the reintroduced cranes was a real highlight for the group while large numbers of wigeon, teal, pintail, gadwall and shoveler delighted us across the different reserves. Great white egrets were seen well, while bitterns put in brief appearances. Bewick's swans were a treat away from the main wildfowl centres. The group was delighted by the millions of starlings which are now famous for their huge gatherings as they come to roost in the reedbeds. The group marvelled as large flocks joined the main murmuration forming a dark shadow across the countryside.

Day 1

Tuesday 1st February

As the temperatures rose after recent freezing weather, spirits were high as the group gathered pre-dinner for everyone to mingle and learn of the plan for the next few days. This was all in the cosy setting of the Swan Hotel with Wells Cathedral glowing in floodlight opposite, easily viewable from the bar. After a delicious dinner the group enjoyed an illustrated talk by Charles Martin, exploring the human and natural history of the Somerset Levels over the past 10,000 years and an insight into some of the wildlife we hoped to see over the next two days.

Day 2

Wednesday 2nd February

After breakfast we set off to Swell Wood, part of the RSPB's West Sedgemoor reserve, where many of the woodland birds were cranking up their song – dunnocks, robins, blue tits, coal tits and great tits were singing away while we could hear the drumming of a great spotted woodpecker and the call of a marsh tit. Even a chaffinch was just beginning to sing, albeit a bit rusty! The empty nests of the grey herons were evident, and one lone heron was spotted visiting a nest - over the next few weeks this will change into a noisy, vibrant heron colony! A goldcrest was spotted briefly and nearby a mouse-like treecreeper was gently hopping up a tree! The tits were all busy feeding on the artificial feeders around the car park and a nuthatch called from the woods.

We moved onto Dewlands Farm, the heart of the West Sedgemoor reserve, and walked along the drove to the large barn hide, looking out across the RSPB's managed wetlands – this paid off as thousands of wigeons huddled in a huge flock on the flooded fields in front of us. The real surprise came relatively soon as, after a brief scan, the flock of recently re-introduced common cranes came into view (www.thegreatcraneproject.org.uk). Sixteen were busily feeding and interacting with each other – some wing displaying and dancing in the air was most probably hierarchical behaviour (rather than courtship). Everyone was delighted to see these birds, the first resident cranes since the 17th Century. Meanwhile, amongst the wigeon we spotted one or two black-tailed godwits and later found thirty five feeding in a grassy field. Lapwings were also mixed with the wigeon. While watching a flock of thirty lapwings over the reserve, a similar number of golden plovers also wheeled around with them! Mallards, mute swans and a few pochard were also spotted. A few very pale buzzards were perching on nearby posts while two stock doves were seen in flight. The tall, limestone tower we saw from the reserve was the 140 feet (43 m) Burton Pynsen Monument – built in 1757 it is made from Portland Stone and was restored in the 1990s.

We ventured to a site down the road where we were originally going to try for the cranes. On the way we slowed down by a field where hundreds of lapwings and at least one hundred fieldfares and some redwings were feeding. Various fields had mute swans tugging away at the vegetation and there was an unusually large group of seven roe deer in a ploughed field. We caught lovely views of their sandy brown winter coats and white bottoms beaming out in contrast to the dark peaty soil of the ploughed field. House sparrows chirped noisily from a batch of conifers in a nearby farmstead.

Lunch beckoned and we drove slowly along the lane below sea level (with the river above us) to the King Alfred pub in Burrow Bridge by the River Parrett. Here we warmed up and enjoyed a hearty drink and good food. A great spotted woodpecker was outside the pub and a few long-tailed tits called as we left. Just outside from the pub was Burrow Mump, a historic site with the ruins of St Michael's church on top.

Our next stop was the RSPB's Greylake reserve where we were particularly hoping for snipe - we weren't disappointed! In amongst peat and newly cut reed stems we had to look mightily hard to spot the cryptically hidden snipe, but the numbers rose from three to six to a final count of nine! Once fields full of potatoes, these wetlands now full of shallow pools and Phragmites reeds played host to a variety of colourful and entertaining birds. Hundreds of wigeons fed on the pool and took flight in a spectacular display as two peregrines, a male and female, took flight. They had been perched on nearby gates. As the wigeon settled, many of the ducks decided to wash including other species such as teal, gadwall and a few shoveler. The odd buzzard loomed nearby while a few members of the group spotted a little egret.

Back near the car park an obliging pied wagtail allowed for lots of close photos! Some redwings, fieldfares and starlings fed close by, while the odd reed bunting and Cetti's warbler could be heard from the reeds. A female kestrel perched in a nearby tree.

After a comfort stop at the Peat Moors Centre we finished off the day at the RSPB's Ham Wall reserve for the starlings. The reserve was busy with birds with plenty of tufted ducks, shoveler, gadwall, coot, mallards and wigeon to keep us occupied. Some of the water was still frozen and four little grebes huddled close to each other. On another pool a great crested grebe, almost in full breeding plumage, was busily feeding. A water rail half flew and half ran across the water, dashing into cover hoping not to have been spotted. Some special visitors from France, great white egrets were seen throughout our time here – we counted five or six although it was difficult to tell exactly how many as they couldn't always be seen at the same time! These are recent visitors, and with only twenty in the whole of the UK it was great to see so many on this special reserve. The affect of the starling's droppings appears to have meant fish are more easily available to the great white egrets which have been favouring the more reedy parts of the reserve. However, one was also out in the open, shuffling its feet to disturb a tasty fish or eel! The odd grey heron also glided over the reeds while one little egret was seen flying away from the reserve.

As we watched the gadwall and coots feeding together, the first of the large starling flocks flew past in the distance. They were flying beyond Ham Wall and on towards Shapwick Heath. Over the next twenty minutes we watched various sized flocks of starlings ranging from six birds to over five thousand streaming low over the reedbeds or moving as a globular shape across the sky. A flock of twenty or so pied wagtails also joined in, on their way to roost while a group of long-tailed tits flew low over our heads along the tree line.

We headed back to vans and had a rest before a lovely dinner. After, the group reflected on the tour's delights with a selection of images from the day's excursion and checked through the wide range of birds seen. This was followed by an illustrated talk by Ed Drewitt about his work on urban peregrines.

Day 3

Thursday 3rd February

After a wholesome breakfast and checking out we set out at 8.30am for Butleigh Moor – as we edged along the lane we were finding just mute swans but as we came to Nythe Bridge, just south of Pedwell, a few of the mutes didn't look quite right. As we stopped a flight of eight Bewick's swans glided in overhead and landed with three others already feeding. We watched them busily feeding, there was one soft grey juvenile. Meanwhile, on the other side of the road, over twenty mute swans busily fed in the river and fields while a raven 'croaked' from a willow tree. Starlings whistled in a nearby field while lapwings remained cryptic in amongst the sedges. A great tit sang its distinctive 'teacher teacher' notes. As we left the Bewick's swans took flight – a fox was walking across 'their' field. They circled round with some mute swans close by, allowing for an opportunity to compare size, shape and flight between the two species. They came back down close to where the fox disappeared, no doubt to show the fox it had been seen. On our journey along the lanes, many of the local rookeries were busy with rooks, some even with twigs to rebuild their nests after the winter storms.

We drove on to Ashcott Corner and walked along Shapwick Heath – Charles spotted a very distant bittern in flight which many of the group just caught sight of. In the glorious winter sunshine, twenty or so gadwall looked splendid in their tweed plumage, busily dabbling in some weed while the odd shoveler and mallard fed close by.

The occasional reed bunting flew overhead while the odd Cetti's warbler sang out its explosive song. A redshank was heard but wasn't seen. We split into two and went in opposite directions to the hides. Meare hide was quiet – just some distant rooks and the odd buzzard. However, Noah's hide was busy with two Bewick's swans upending not too far away and plenty of wigeon, tufted ducks, gadwall, cormorants and mute swans. Two male goldeneyes were further back on the lake as were just a few greylag geese. Meanwhile, a great crested grebe fed nearby. Three whooper swans took flight at the back of the lake. In some trees near to the hide two male and one female siskin were spotted by a few. Two great white egrets flew across the reedbeds, their plumage brighter than white in the sunshine.

As we headed back to the vans another two bitterns were briefly spotted by some of the group while a little egret and another great white egret were seen in flight. In the canal by the footpath a sub-adult male mute swan was charging and flaring his wings at an adult pair, the female obviously slimmer necked and petite compared to her mate. Nearby, two shovelers swam along, still in partial eclipse plumage.

After a brief comfort stop in Burtle we headed for the Somerset Wildlife Trust's Catcott Lows. Just three days ago the flooded fields were frozen and devoid of birds so it was a relief to find over ninety elegant pintail, thirty shoveler, a few teal and hundreds of wigeon feeding on the edges. A small group of lapwings flew in and some black-headed gulls rested near some shoveler.

We headed back to the Burtle Inn, Burtle, the highest land in the area all of twelve feet above sea level. House sparrows cheeped from the gardens and telephone wires while a few goldfinches and greenfinches perched in a nearby birch tree with some starlings and sparrows.

All fed and watered, we finished off our final day at the other end of Shapwick Heath, close to the Peat Moors Centre. We spent some time looking for a wintering great grey shrike but to no avail. However, it was a chance to take in the wetlands and some of the group followed the ancient Neolithic 'Sweet Track' (named after the archaeologist who uncovered it). The wing remains of a water rail, from a mammal predator, was an interesting find, as was the moulted body feather of a bittern. Some of the group stayed to soak up the unique atmosphere of the Levels while others briefly headed to the Peat Moors Centre for a comfort stop – two great spotted woodpeckers were busily chasing each other here.

We then gathered to wait for the starlings! Despite the weather being much brighter than yesterday, the starlings didn't delay their arrival and the first flocks appeared at almost 4.30pm spot on (the same as the previous day). With local information we knew to meet at the far end of Shapwick and were joined by many others hoping to catch the spectacle. As we waited a flock of twelve greylag geese flew past across the reserve. Despite the distance between us and the main murmuration of starlings, we 'ummed', 'urred' and 'wowed' at large flocks flowed past us from all directions, some as large blobs and others as tighter, dynamic, moving shapes. They merged with the main flock which became a huge dark shadow shifting across the reeds in front of the village of Catcott. What a spectacle!

We waited until the last few flocks drifted past and the light faded before venturing back to Wells to say our goodbyes and parted after a hugely enjoyable and fulfilling few days.

Species List

Birds (✓ recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			2	3
1	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	✓	✓
2	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓	✓
3	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓
4	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓
5	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓
6	Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓	✓
7	Great Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>	.	✓
8	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
9	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	.	✓
10	Bewick's Swan	<i>Cygnus columbianus</i>	.	✓
11	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	.	✓
12	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓
13	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	✓	✓
14	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	✓	✓
15	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓
16	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
17	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	✓	✓
18	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	✓	✓
19	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	✓	✓
20	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
21	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	.	✓
22	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	.	✓
23	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
24	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	.
25	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	✓	.
26	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓
27	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	✓	.
28	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	✓	✓
29	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
30	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
31	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
32	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	.
33	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
34	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓
35	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
36	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	✓	.
37	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
38	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
39	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	✓
40	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓
41	Northern Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	.
42	Duncock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
43	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	.
44	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓
45	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	✓
46	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			2	3
47	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
48	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	✓
49	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	✓	✓
50	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
51	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	✓	.
52	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓	✓
53	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
54	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
55	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	✓	.
56	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	✓	.
57	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
58	Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓
59	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
60	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
61	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	.	✓
62	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
63	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
64	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
65	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	.	✓
66	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>	.	✓
67	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
68	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓

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