

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

1 - 3 February 2012



The 2012 Naturetrek Group



Mallards



Wigeon take flight



Winter berries

Report and images compiled by Ed Drewitt



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Summary

After a relatively mild winter, our tour began at the start of a very cold spell but in glorious sunshine as we explored and found most of the wildlife delights which the Somerset Levels have to offer. Braced for the Baltic temperatures, we wrapped up in our layers and ventured out finding thousands of waterfowl including Wigeon, Mallard, Teal, Shoveler and Gadwall. Short-eared Owls were in abundance with at least seven hunting one evening. Great White Egrets, Bitterns, Grey Herons and Little Egrets were all seen while millions of Starlings didn't disappoint as they came into roost, blackening the sky, trees and fields where they swarmed in their murmurations. We caught up with some of the reintroduced Common Cranes and even spotted a truly wild crane at Shapwick Heath. Water Rails were sharming in the reeds, Cetti's Warblers were shouting out their songs, and even a drumming Snipe joined in the soundscape. Peregrines were seen at most sites while we watched a Marsh Harrier quartering the reed beds at Shapwick. The fields were full of Lapwings, Starlings, and Redwings while a quick scan often revealed three or four Roe Deer at most sites. Overall, we experienced the atmosphere and charm that the Somerset Levels offers and shared many of its specialities over our two-day visit.

Day 1

Wednesday 1st February

With a very cold but sunny weather forecast for the following day 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 excellent views of Wells Cathedral beaming brightly in the late afternoon sunshine.

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. Meanwhile outside, the starry sky revealed a glowing Jupiter of frost-bright intensity while the Moon and Orion's Belt were all easily visible. The lack of light pollution made it an ideal evening for stargazing.

Day 2

Thursday 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 – Dunnock, Robins, Blue Tits, Coal Tits, Chaffinches and Great Tits were singing away. Swell Wood was busy with its woodland inhabitants from Treecreepers to Nuthatches and various tit species. Chaffinches were common around the car park. Song Thrushes were singing in the woods, including one mimicking a Nuthatch! Two Goldcrests busily foraged in an ivy-covered Oak Tree while a Stock Dove 'whooped' in the trees below. A few were also seen in flight, lacking the white on the neck and wings of a Woodpigeon. There were no early herons at their nests so we walked through the woodland to look down and out across the RSPB's West Sedgemoor Reserve. A few Skylarks were heard flying over – no doubt part of a cold weather movement. A small icy pool was home to a few hundred Wigeon huddled together.

We drove down to Dewlands Farm, the HQ for the RSPB's staff on the Levels and set out across the fields to a bird hide fixed into a barn. A few Redwings, a Song Thrush and a Buzzard were seen on the way. The ground was hard and puddles along the farm track were frozen solid but the sunshine was glorious! Most of the flooded water was also frozen over with only a few birds to see. However, tucked into an area of reeds, one unfrozen pool was full of at least a thousand Wigeon plus a few Teal, Shoveler, Mallard and Pintail. A single very white bird at the other end of the frozen stretch was a fine female Peregrine identified by Steve. Small flocks of Lapwings flew overhead while larger groups of Mute Swans fed in distant fields. Four Roe Deer was stood at the back of the reserve. A pair of Canada Geese was also nearby, while Rooks gathered in a clump of large willow trees, their breeding colony for the next few months. A Kestrel was also hovering nearby.

Before lunch we took a short walk by the River Parrett at Aller Moor – a ploughed field was busy with around 200 Skylarks, a remarkable number! Steve was quick to spot the birds we had come to look for, cranes. Eleven Common Cranes (of the 33 reintroduced onto the Levels) were busy feeding below a stand of Poplar trees by some feeds. Their tall, steely grey bodies were easy to make out and as one client commented, they look like their feathers just hang from their bodies!

After a great finish to the morning we travelled a few miles down the road to the King Alfred pub at Burrowbridge for a fine lunch of soup or Somerset Smoky, a local smoked fish dish in a cheesy sauce! Ed also made a quick call on the Starling hotline to find out where the Starlings may be coming to roost that evening.

After we had warmed up and eaten some fine food, we travelled a short distance to the RSPB's Greylake Reserve. Once fields full of potatoes, these wetlands are now full of shallow pools and Phragmites reeds, which play host to a variety of colourful and entertaining birds. It was a glorious afternoon and we weren't disappointed at the hide. The frozen pool meant all the ducks were congregated together in the only free area water – hundreds of Wigeon, Mallard and Teal swam around, many calling and displaying in the winter sunshine. The orange legs of the Mallards glowed!

Close to the hide we had incredible views of two different Water Rails, probing in the leaf litter like snipe. Meanwhile, a Common Snipe itself was cryptically hidden on the main island in front of us – it could only be seen properly by looking down the telescopes. At least 20 snipe were also seen in different sized parties flying over. A female Peregrine was sat on a mound of earth while Mute Swans fed nearby, including a family party of seven or eight well-grown cygnets following their parents in a line. A single Dunlin dropped in for short while. Some of us at the back of the group had a nice view of a Reed Bunting on a reed stem, while Chaffinches, Dunnock, Robins and a Pied Wagtail fed on some food laid out on a fence post close to the car park.

By mid-afternoon we were travelling towards the levels in the north of the area and stopped for a toilet break and hot cuppa at the Avalon Marshes Centre (aka Peat Moors Centre). The group was entertained by some tits, finches and a lovely female Reed Bunting coming to feed behind the centre.

We finished the afternoon at the RSPB's Ham Wall reserve with a splendid Kingfisher perching over the canal, six Lesser Redpolls flying overhead and a Great Spotted Woodpecker perched at the top of a Silver Birch tree. As the sun began to set we had splendid views of around 200 Shovelers feeding in small groups. They had been absent from most of the other reserves and had no doubt moved from these to the ice-free waters at Ham Wall. A group of Gadwall were busy at the back of the lake while Coots and the odd Great Crested Grebe, Pochard and Little Grebe were also swimming around. Meanwhile, three Great White Egrets flew overhead including one which landed on the lake in front of us. The others flew low over the reeds. A pair of Little Egrets also flew past, silhouetted in the vanishing light while Bitterns were spotted on three occasions including one particularly good view as it also flew low over the reeds.

After seeing small flocks of 20 or 30 Starlings, the whole group was amazed when a long ribbon of millions of Starlings appeared. The flock was stretched right out across the Ham Wall reserve. With the Mendips in the background, we could appreciate just how wide and long the ribbon of birds was. When the Starlings landed they turned the trees and ground black! As they disappeared down into the reeds, thousands and thousands more appeared behind us with Glastonbury Tor as a backdrop. They funnelled into the reeds like tea pouring out from a teapot! As the light faded late flocks of Starlings still came in across the reserve – perhaps these were birds that had come from further afield. As all this was happening, the soundscape was full of the 'screaming' or sharming sounds of Water Rails – at least ten were heard, sounding like the calls of a piglet in distress.

We ventured back to the vans and then to the hotel leaving an hour for the group to rest and freshen up for a lovely 3-course meal. 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

Friday 3rd February

After a wholesome cooked breakfast and checking out of our rooms, we set off at 8.30am. The temperature got colder and colder as we ventured towards the levels and in Ashcott Corner car park it was down to minus 4.5 degrees Celsius! However, the air was so dry that it didn't feel this cold and with brilliant winter sunshine we had a glorious walk exploring Natural England's Shapwick Heath which is a National Nature Reserve. Like Ham Wall, it is a busy reed bed with open pools and some Alder Carr.

The frosted reed beds looked frozen in time but little signs of life were present with the odd Robin, Dunnock and Goldcrest lurking in the bushes. The occasional Cetti's Warbler sang with its sudden explosion of notes. A Grey Heron was perched on the edge of an Oak Tree and Blue Tits were foraging in the Phragmites reeds. These were also popular with the Reed Buntings and five or so were feeding near to each other, picking at the abundance of seeds at the top of the reed stems. The odd Buzzard flew overhead or perched in trees and as we gathered close to the bridge a female Marsh Harrier flew past. A few of the group spotted a Raven flying overhead while a Siskin and the odd Lesser Redpoll called briefly.

We split into two groups and visited Noah's Hide and Meare Heath Hide. From Meare Heath hide Water Rails were busy 'sharming' while the harrier quartered the reed beds. Her creamy head and forewings glowed glorious sunshine. Lapwings flew over the farm at the back of the reserve. Behind us in the woodland, Great Tits, Blue Tits, Blackbirds and Redwings were busy feeding while a Song Thrush could be heard hammering a snail on an anvil. From Noah's Hide, the ice had pushed the waterbirds into two main groups on the little free water that was still available. A few thousand Wigeon along with some Mallards were huddling on the edge of ice while Coots, Gadwall, Tufted Ducks and a few Little Grebes spent time in the water. At one point Grey Herons, Great White Egrets and Little Egrets were all in the air together. Later, eight Little Egrets were stood on one island while on another, eight brilliant white Great White Egrets were resting with a few Mute Swans. The latter were also abundant on the ice. Cormorants in summer plumage were perched on individual trees. While watching a flock of Greylag Geese flying noisily over the lake, a truly wild Common Crane (ie not reintroduced) circled over the lake and disappeared off towards the village of Burtle.

We stopped briefly at the Avalon Marshes centre for tea and comfort break before driving a few miles to Nythe Bridge to look for Bewick's Swans which had recently turned up. Despite not seeing them we had nice views of four resting Roe Deer, Mute Swans, Lapwings, Redwings, Fieldfares, Stock Doves and Starlings. Lunch beckoned and we visited the characterful Crown Inn at Catcott where we received a warm welcome, a roaring fire and delicious variety of homemade lunches including soups and jacket potatoes.

We then drove down the road to the Somerset Wildlife Trust's Catcott reserve where a winter scene was set before us. The great expanse of ice, reflections and big sky, had, as ever, Glastonbury Tor as its backdrop. Despite most birds such as Pintail having vacated, a few hardy Teal were sitting on the remaining small pool of water while a flock of 100 Wigeon circled round and landed briefly. Yet another Peregrine, a second year bird, was sat on the far bank, flying around on a few occasions. Later, it circled higher and higher, spooking the Wigeon before suddenly reappearing in front of us across the pool. A flock of Golden Plover was also glittering in the sunshine. More Roe Deer gave splendid views, and a pair was bounding across the boggy field before resting.

By mid-afternoon it was time to set off for Chilton Moor to see some very special visitors which were in greater abundance in the southwest this winter – Short-eared Owls. As we drove slowly along the lanes we got close views of Lapwings, Starlings and Redwings. As the road opened out, a few other birders were present and we got our first glimpses of the owls. One was quartering on one side of the road while two were on the other side. As we spent more time watching we spotted at least seven, including one bird perching for some time on a bush. We watched others tussling in the air. The evening sun shone through their wings exposing their subtle golden brown and creamy markings. The perched bird was also calling. Their cat-like faces glared directly at us as they swooped and floated towards us. One flew right over the road and past the group.

We had stopped right by a field full of sedgy grassland and we realised it was full of Common Snipe. Every so often one would fly up, followed by several more. We must have seen over 20 and even heard an early drumming snipe, the sound of a bleating goat (they are aptly name bog bleater or sky goat). This sound is produced by special outer tail feathers which vibrate quickly in the air as the bird suddenly drops height. We also heard and spotted Curlew in flight. What a remarkable way of completing our holiday!

As the late afternoon sun set, we said our farewells as a group, which had quickly established a bond and camaraderie. Surrounded by the atmospheric beauty of the wintry Levels we drove back to Wells before parting to our homes across the UK

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Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; h = heard only)

	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>	✓	8
6	Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	3	8
7	Great Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>	3	
8	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
9	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	.	✓
10	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓
11	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	✓	✓
12	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	✓	✓
13	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓
14	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
15	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	✓	✓
16	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	✓	✓
17	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	✓	✓
18	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
19	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1	
20	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	.	1
21	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
22	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓
23	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	2	1
24	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓
25	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	11	1
26	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	2	✓
27	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
28	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
29	Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	✓	✓
30	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
31	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	✓
32	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	1	1
33	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	1	
34	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
35	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	1	
36	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
37	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	✓	✓
38	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
39	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓
40	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			2	3
41	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	✓
42	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	h	
43	Eurasian Sky Lark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	200+	✓
44	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓
45	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	
46	Northern Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	.
47	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
48	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	✓	✓
49	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓
50	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓
51	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	✓
52	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
53	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
54	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	✓
55	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	h	h
56	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
57	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓	✓
58	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
59	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
60	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	✓	.
61	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	✓	.
62	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		1
63	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
64	Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓
65	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
66	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
67	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	.	1
68	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
69	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
70	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
71	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	.	✓
72	Lesser Redpoll	<i>Carduelis cabaret</i>	6	h
73	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>	.	h
74	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
75	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓

Mammals

1	Brown Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>		1
2	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	4+	8
3	European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓	✓
4	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>		1
5	Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>	✓	.