

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

23 - 25 February 2014



Grey Heron



Starlings with Mendips backdrop



Male Reed Bunting



Wigeon

Report and photos compiled by Ed Drewitt



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Introduction

Despite the county's reputation for its recent and remarkable floods, most of the areas we wanted to visit were 'open for business', and over the next two days everyone was able to experience the Somerset Levels at its best. The southern parts of the levels, despite the extensive floods, were busy with a variety of ducks and provided at great chance to see over 30 Common Cranes feeding by the water's edge. Grey Herons were busy at their nests at Swell Wood, while woodland birds were moving up a gear with regards their spring songs and marking out of territories. The northern parts of the levels were full of wildlife with hundreds of ducks including Wigeon, Shoveler, Gadwall, Mallard, Teal, and Pintail seen across many different reserves. The Starlings didn't disappoint and provided an incredible display across the RSPB's Ham Wall reserve, giving everyone the chance to see the largest murmuration of Starlings in the country. The final day was celebrated with the close views of a male Bearded Tit, a brief flying Bittern, and at least three startling Kingfishers.

Day 1

Sunday 23rd February

With excitement and anticipation, our group met for a pre-dinner gathering in the warmth of the lounge at the Swan Hotel to mingle and learn of the plan for the next few days. Just outside, the glow of Wells Cathedral provided a beautiful setting. After a delicious dinner Ed introduced some of the common species of birds we expected to see over the next few days including ducks such as Shoveler, Gadwall and Teal, and of course millions of Starlings! Charles followed with more background on the history of the Somerset Levels including the landscape and the nature reserves. We retired around 9pm, ready for a full day ahead.

Day 2

Monday 24th February

After a delicious cooked breakfast, cereal and toast, we set off to the RSPB's Swell Wood reserve near Curry Rivel. The floods meant we took a slight detour through Somerton but it gave everyone a chance to see the beautiful landscape and to see where the flooded land began. As we neared our destination we passed the tall, limestone tower known as Burton Pynsen Monument, built in 1757. It is made out of Portland Stone and was restored in the 1990s.

At Swell Wood Chaffinches were singing away around the car park, and within minutes a Nuthatch, Coal Tit, Blue Tits, Great Tits, and Chaffinches coming down to feed on seed. In the background Grey Herons were gurgling and displaying in the woods. From the hide we watched as pairs were courting, delivering nest material, and elegantly meandering their way through the trees and branches to reach their nests. One pair was even mating. Through the woods we walked to a viewpoint looking out across West Sedgemoor – an open flat landscape which is cow fields during the summer, and a flooded landscape during the winter. Today the fields were definitely more flooded than normal and as a result we spotted various ducks including Wigeon, Tufted Duck, Shoveler, and Coots. In the background we could hear the spluttery, varied songs of Redwings while a few Goldcrests were singing their very squeaky notes. Back at the car park we watched the tits and finches again and were rewarded with a Marsh Tit that showed briefly, as did a Great Spotted Woodpecker.

Our next stop was a comfort stop at the RSPB's headquarters at Dewlands Farm where we got some up-to-date information on the whereabouts of the Common Cranes that have been re-introduced to the Somerset Levels (www.thegreatcraneproject.org.uk). We headed off to Aller and along a road which was closed to general traffic due to the floods. With no traffic we were able to pull over and look out across the open farmland, much of which was flooded. While a farmer was re-organising his bales of hay we watched up to 34 cranes feeding, washing, and displaying on the edge of the water. We could see their red-head patches, trailing wing feathers, and colour rings which denotes each individual as part of the re-introduction and research project. Everyone was delighted to see these birds, the first resident cranes on the Levels since the 17th Century. Buzzards wheeled behind us in territorial disputes, while a Blackbird quietly sang. A Stock Dove, unfamiliar to most, gave lovely views in a nearby tree. They are more blue-grey than a Woodpigeon; sligher and lack the white neck and wing patches. It was sunny, warm and very pleasant – behind us some cows, put out to the field early, came to say hello.

It was time for lunch and we didn't have to travel far to the Halfway House at Pitney for some super-sized bread slice sandwiches with a variety of local meat fillings, wholesome carrot and coriander soup, stilton and mushroom tart, and sausages! Alongside some local ales and ciders everyone was stocked up for the afternoon. We headed through High Ham and along Nythe Road where in places the water was lapping close to the road. Some fields were full of feeding Rooks, and in nearby trees there were tending to their nests. We stopped at the RSPB's Greylake reserve – once a potato field and now a reedbed! Normally we can walk to the hides but it was all flooded. However, we had super views of male and female Reed Buntings feeding on bird tables in the car park along with Chaffinches. A small group of Fieldfares stopped briefly in a tree while Teal, Wigeon and the odd Shoveler were seen out on the water along with a single Lapwing spotted by Jennifer. It was still beautiful sunshine and very relaxing for everyone. We stopped at the Avalon Marshes for a cuppa and cake where Goldfinches and a pair of Lesser Redpolls came to feed on a nearby niger seed feeder. Reed Buntings were also in the bushes, and as we left a Kestrel dashed past.

We finished the afternoon at the RSPB's Ham Wall Reserve – a huge reedbed planted up 15 years ago in the lagoons left behind after commercial peat diggings had moved on. As the wind got up we walked along the old railway line, stopping to admire three Snipe superbly camouflaged next to sleeping Teal. Out on the open water from the first viewing platform we got views of Shoveler, Gadwall, Tufted Ducks, and a Great Crested Grebe. We spent a little time at a new hide which is positioned in the middle of the reeds and water. From here we had lovely views of Grey Herons dropping down in the vegetation where they are nesting. Herons normally nest in trees but here four or five pairs have begun to nest in the reeds! Coots were being territorial and a few Little Grebes were calling and swimming around. Before we left two Marsh Harriers made an appearance, slightly longer-winged and tailed compared to a Buzzard, and flying low above the treeline with faster wing beats.

It was time to move on to the second viewing platform to be in place for the Starlings. At 5pm the first small groups began to appear. The wind was coming from the west, and most flocks were arriving from the east as a result. Over the next 45 minutes everyone 'ooed' and 'ahhhd' as flocks, some over one hundred thousand strong, moved across in front of the landscape as a dark cloud. As huge flocks moved across the sky, some darker, larger birds higher in the sky turned out to be Lapwings on migration. The Starlings gathered at the back of the reserve towards the B3151 and turned bare trees black. The trees looked as full of leaves as a nearby evergreen tree! The ground became a thick black carpet of birds too. At 4.45pm the million plus birds took off, split into two groups, and moved in various directions over the reedbeds in front of us. Gradually they filtered down in the reeds until suddenly there were none to be seen! As we walked back fast to warm up we saw a few straggler flocks dashing overhead to also roost – perhaps these had come from a further distance away. As Starling displays go this was definitely in the top ten! With a little time to relax and shower, we met for a lovely 3-course meal at 8pm. After, the group reflected on the tour's delights by running through the checklist.

Day 3

Tuesday 25th February

After breakfast and checking out, we left the hotel at 8.30am and headed for Natural England's Shapwick Heath, an area of pools and reedbeds. After overnight rain the morning brightened up and we enjoyed a few hours of sunshine exploring the reserve. As we walked along the river we experienced a medley of 'sharming' Water Rails (a screaming, drawn out call), and the abrupt, explosive songs of Cetti's Warblers. From the reedbeds Teal and Gadwall flew out, while on the open pool Tufted Ducks, Coots and Gadwall were feeding. In the background a pair of Marsh Harriers was flying above the reedbeds. We paused to listen to the variety of sounds – a Reed Bunting with its plaintive song was singing at the top of a birch. Ed suddenly heard distinctive 'pinging' calls. After some perseverance and getting everyone to cup their ears towards the reeds, the group was rewarded with the sighting of a splendid male Bearded Tit. He was only ten metres away and came out coming out onto a fallen tree. He revealed his stunning orange body, long tail, grey-blue head, and black moustache for a few minutes before suddenly blending back into the dense reeds as he moved on. This was the best view we had ever had of a Bearded Tit in five years of leading these trips on the Levels!

We headed on towards Noah's Hide – as we neared the reeds and pool a flock of 100 Shovelers flew overhead before whiffing down onto the water. A little later a large flock of Pintail did the same, although many splinter groups were reluctant to land and circled overhead several times before gaining the confidence to come down to the water.

From the hide we spotted hundreds of Wigeon alongside Pintail, Gadwall, Shoveler, Mallard, and Tufted Ducks. A Kingfisher flew past at least three times, and at the back of the lake up to four Great Egrets, a rare bird for the UK, were feeding and flapping around. Nearby an overwintering Chiffchaff was singing, and a Bittern was heard 'grunting'. As we walked back to the bridge a Treecreeper was singing.

We then walked to Meare Hide where we spent some time looking out across the reeds and being patient. Some of the group spotted a Bittern as it briefly flew across the reeds, and Charles heard another grunting. Mallards and Gadwall were resting on the edges of the reeds, and in the distance a Buzzard rested in a tree. Near the hide Clive spotted a Chiffchaff feeding in a birch tree – it wasn't alone. The tree was also busy with Long-tailed Tits, a Lesser Redpoll, and a male Siskin. In front of us another Kingfisher perched near an old artificial Otter holt before flying across the water. As we walked back we saw a number of opened Swan Mussels – signs that an Otter had been busy eating them. Just before we got back to the car park some caught a glimpse of a third Kingfisher perched at the base of an Alder Tree.

After an incredible morning we stopped at the Avalon Marshes Centre for a comfort stop and then headed out along the road bisecting Tadham and Tealham Moors. From the vehicles we spotted at least a dozen Grey Herons, a Buzzard, a Kestrel, and over 15 Little Egrets. Lunch was calling so we made our way towards Catcott passing a few Roe Deer near one of the last peat factories commercially digging peat. We enjoyed soups, jacket potatoes and ploughman's lunches at the Crown Inn, Catcott where House Sparrows were busy jousting for the best gutter/roof position above!

After lunch we spent an hour at the Somerset Wildlife Trust's Catcott Lows where we watched hundreds of Wigeon and plenty of Shoveler, Teal, and Pintail at relatively close view. Some grassy islands were busy with Lapwings and at least a dozen Snipe. At the back of the lake a Great Egret was foraging, while behind two or three Greylag Geese were hiding. A Kestrel flew across the lake causing many of the Wigeon to lift up and fly across the sky before landing again. In the nearby field a Meadow Pipit was squeaking away as the same Kestrel was hovering overhead.

We finished the afternoon at the Hawk and Owl Trust's new Shapwick Heath Moor. Owned by the trust since 2007, the reserve has been actively managed and is in the early stages of becoming a stunning place for wildlife and people. It was a chance to see what Ham Wall and other reserves first looked like when they were taken over by conservation bodies 15 years ago. A large flock of Starlings was gathering nearby, and a few Buzzards were drifting past. There were plenty of owl and Kestrel boxes to attract more raptors to the reserve. As a black cloud headed our way we got back to the vehicles just in time and made our way back to Wells.

We arrived back late afternoon and said our farewells after two days of fully seeing and sensing the Somerset Levels after a period of remarkable wet weather. Despite the floods, we still saw plenty of wildlife and were able to immerse ourselves in the unique habitats the levels provide in beautiful warm sunshine.

Species List

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

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			24	25
1	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	6	
2	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	2	
3	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓
4	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓
5	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	15+
6	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		5
7	Great Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>		1
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	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
18	Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		15
19	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	3	2
20	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
21	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	2	2
22	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	1	1
23	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	h	h
24	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	h	h
25	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
26	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
27	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	3	12+
28	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	2	✓
29	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	1	✓
30	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
31	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
32	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	4	
33	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓
34	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
35	Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		3
36	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	h	
37	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	2	1
38	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		1
39	Northern Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	h	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			24	25
40	Duncock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	1	h
41	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	1	h
42	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓
43	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	✓
44	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
45	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
46	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	h	h
47	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	h	h
48	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		4+
49	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	2	
50	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
51	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
52	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	1	
53	Bearded Tit	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>		1
54	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
55	Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓
56	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
57	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
58	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
59	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
60	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
61	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	✓	
62	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
63	Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	2	
64	Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>		2+
65	Lesser Redpoll	<i>Carduelis cabaret</i>	3+	6+
66	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓

Mammals

1	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	1	2
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