

# The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

5 - 7 May 2017

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Report compiled by Dave Nevitt



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Tour participants: Dave Nevitt & Simon Breeze (leaders) together with 16 Naturetrek clients

## Introduction

This tour around the Somerset Levels in spring was a fantastic opportunity to witness the wildlife in one of Britain's prime wetland areas. A home in winter to massive concentrations of waders, wildfowl and the country's largest roost of millions of Starlings, in spring the area comes alive with the many species which come here to breed. A host of warbler species, the broadest range of breeding heron species in the country and many specialists of reedbeds and wet grassland habitats combine to make this a unique area. Sought-after species include the largest concentration of breeding Bitterns in the country, the only site in Britain where the Great White Egret breeds, the Cranes which have been reintroduced here after an absence of over 400 years, and Hobbies which congregate to feed on the plethora of Odonata in the rhynes. The stage was set for a fantastic feast of wildlife.

## Day 1

Friday 5th May

The group assembled in Wells on a chilly day with a strong north-easterly wind that had been blowing for most of the week. In the cosy setting of the Swan Hotel with Wells Cathedral glowing in floodlight opposite, expectations were high as Dave and Simon introduced themselves and whet the group's appetite with the plan for the days ahead. Group members introduced themselves and said what they particularly wanted to see and shared their level of experience to assist the leaders.

Then we adjourned to sample our first of several delicious Swan Hotel meals before moving to the Exmoor Room where Dave gave a short talk by way of an introduction to how the Levels were formed and the special species that now call it home.

Some having spent much of the day travelling and with an early start scheduled for tomorrow, all took a welcome early night.

## Day 2

Saturday 6th May

Almost all the group emerged in the early dawn light at 5am to be welcomed by Simon and Dave. Loading up into the buses, we were soon on our way across the marshy fields of the Levels, headed for Ashcott Corner. Arriving in the car park at 5.20am, the weather was overcast and a little chilly but this didn't stop the wealth of birdlife from making their presence known. A Bittern boomed in the distance, giving us an immediate indication of how good this area is, and was soon joined by Blackcap, Chiffchaff, Wren, Song Thrush and Great Tit. Moving on from the car park down the old railway line, a Cuckoo called in the distance as we learned the differences between the songs of Blackcap and Garden Warbler. A very obliging Blackcap then showed itself whilst singing to reinforce our learnings. Further on a Garden Warbler sang well but kept hidden in the trees. A Kingfisher called as it flew by, and then conveniently perched up for all to see before heading off on its way. A Whitethroat sang from the low scrub and Willow Warblers sang from thickets of trees. Cetti's Warbler added to the dawn chorus and we heard our first Reed Warblers as we approached the reedbeds. An early rising Hobby had us spinning as it flew right over us and all around were Pochard and Tufted Ducks whizzing by. Four Shelducks were unexpected in this habitat, but more expected were our first Great White Egrets as they lazily

sauntered along. Such has been their meteoric rise here that it wasn't long before it was "just another Great White"! Little Egrets popped up occasionally just to keep us on our toes and as we came to open water, we saw Great Crested Grebes as well as Little Grebes at the reed edges. There were hirundines feeding over the reeds and we again swatted up on our identification skills to then spot many Sand Martins, with Swallows and House Martins in amongst them. Swifts seemed to be above all that, as they cruised about higher up. From the lookout, we saw several superb Marsh Harriers quartering the reeds in search of a meal – what beautiful birds they are.

We then walked out to the new Avalon hide in the middle of the reed bed. On the way we had several more Garden Warblers (by now the group was getting pretty good at identifying these) and our first Whitethroat sang by the path, followed by our first Sedge Warbler. But the best bird was our first Bittern that flew for quite some distance, enabling all of us see this iconic reed bed dweller.

From the hide, we were soon picking out Shoveler on the pool in front of us, Reed Warblers were darting across the rhynes and Marsh Harriers patrolled their patch. We were just watching another Bittern flying when it came close to a pair of Marsh Harriers who both detoured to have a go at the Bittern! We were treated to one of those special moments that you only see once in your life as the Harriers pestered the Bittern, using their talons to drive it down into the reeds. They continued to hassle it after it had perched, then drove it into flight again, whereupon the Bittern hovered in mid-air, erecting all its head, neck and breast feathers in a threat posture before jabbing its bill upwards at the Harrier. As the Bittern flew on and disappeared into the reeds we were left amazed at what we had just witnessed. It couldn't get any better than what we had just witnessed with two of the iconic birds of the area interacting in such a stunning display! So, we adjourned in triumph and headed back to the buses, seeing another Bittern on the way!

All agreed that it had been a fantastic morning and well worth getting up early.

We were soon back at the Swan enjoying a nice cooked breakfast that we all felt we had thoroughly earned because we were up so early. After a rest, we headed out again, this time to the Parrett valley in the south of the Levels. First stop was the RSPB Greylake reserve. From the car park we saw Linnets, then in the main reed bed we heard a monotonous out of tune song – a fine male Reed Bunting sat atop a reed for all to admire.

We followed the boardwalk into the realm of the Reed Warbler. We were soon surrounded by their songs, some only metres from us. We had another lesson, this time on separating the songs of Reed and Sedge Warblers – this pair were to trouble the group for the next two days! Approaching the open grassland, we started to hear Skylarks singing above us as Lapwings flew up to hassle a Crow as it went by.

We then encountered the biggest surprise of the day – a summer plumaged Bar-tailed Godwit feeding in the grassland not 30 metres from us! Presumably it had come inland with a migrating flock of Whimbrels and come down to feed here, out of its normal habitat.

Then it was onwards to the hides where we heard a Yellow Wagtail and tried unsuccessfully to find it in the long grass. Another Bar-tailed Godwit was feeding in front of us, accompanied by many breeding Lapwings, several of which had chicks. Noisy Redshanks gave alarm calls every time a Crow flew over and distant Little and Great White Egrets added variety. A Marsh Harrier kept everything on their toes and a Hobby darted in front of us after its dragonfly prey. Ducks were well represented and we spent some time identifying the Teal, Wigeon and

Gadwall present, enjoying excellent views of their finely barred feathers through the telescopes as a Cuckoo called in the distance.

It was time to move on so we headed back towards the buses. One the way, we heard more Reed and Sedge Warblers. It was time for lunch so we journeyed up the road to the King Alfred pub in Burrowbridge, the hub of much of the relief effort during the 2013/14 winter's flooding. As well as the local ciders, we had a lovely lunch, including the famed "Somerset Smokie" for some. Most settled for a small lunch after our late breakfast!

We then headed off to Aller Moor. This is the site where the Cranes have their feeding station in the winter, but sadly they were elsewhere today. Whilst searching for them we did see a beautiful Red Kite soaring right above our heads, a pair of Stonechats and three Hobbies that were hunting further along the river bank. We also had a Stock Dove flying by and our first spotty juvenile Robin in a garden.

Moving on to Oath railway bridge, we scoped the low-lying wet fields. A Lesser Whitethroat sang behind us and we lined up to try to see it. Then the cry of "There they are!" meant that we had found our quarry – the Cranes! As always with Cranes, they weren't too close but through the telescopes we were all able to see their distinctive head markings and their immense size. What a great result!

Buoyed by our success we went on to Swell Wood, another RSPB reserve nearby. From the car park, we put down some seed and were soon watching a variety of Great, Blue and Coal Tits plus Nuthatch. A quick imitation and a Treecreeper flew out of its hiding in the foliage for all to see this special but rarely seen bird.

We went to the new 'next generation' open hide overlooking the heronry, from which we saw many Grey Heron nests plus large chicks, and also a couple of Little Egret nests. A bit of pishing soon brought in a couple of lovely Goldcrests right in from of us. Excellent!

We walked down to the viewpoint, adding a couple more Goldcrests, another Treecreeper and Great Spotted Woodpecker. A lucky few also saw a Marsh Tit.

By now our early morning was beginning to take its toll. A quick vote was taken on whether to walk down the lane or to call it a day and head back to the hotel. A unanimous verdict had us soon back in the buses and heading back to Wells.

After some time to relax and spruce ourselves up, we enjoyed another delicious dinner. We then caught up with our checklists for the day and reflected on a long but extremely varied and productive day. We retired to dream of our individual highlights of the day.

## Day 3

Sunday 7th May

After another satisfying breakfast, we left Wells to explore the more northerly valleys of the Levels.

We returned to Ashcott Corner car park where we had been at dawn yesterday. On arrival, we paused to listen and, despite there still being many birds singing, we commented how much quieter it was than at dawn yesterday. It certainly had been worthwhile getting up early yesterday!

For a change we headed west this time, to the Natural England Shapwick Heath reserve. The weather was thankfully less windy than yesterday – it was still, and even the sun was poking out occasionally. A Cuckoo welcomed our arrival with its distant song. Three egrets flew over us as we got our rucksacks ready – to our glee they were Cattle Egrets! This species bred near here a few years ago but only once, unlike its two larger cousins. After a major influx of birds into Britain this winter, hopes are high that some may choose to stay on and breed again. A bit of pishing successfully brought out the calling Goldcrest in the Alder trees.

As we got to the more open area, we spotted a Marsh Harrier quartering the reeds. A warbler chuntering away in a large Willow was successfully identified by the group as a Garden Warbler and it even showed itself to most of us. Sedge and Reed Warblers sang nearby as well as the loud Cetti's Warbler. A Raven and two Stock Doves flew over.

At the lagoon which had been drained we saw a flock of 19 Black-tailed Godwits, most resplendent in their summer plumage. Gadwall and Mallard adorned the open water in the company of two Wigeon.

But it was the skies above which drew our attention as the Hobbies were starting to become more active with the rising temperature. We had several cruising up and down the woodland edges and the reedbeds, hoovering up the large dragonflies which had recently emerged, but they were frustratingly distant for some. Then we split into two groups to go to the Noah's and Meare Heath hides. Both groups were delighted to be entertained by groups of amazing Hobbies feeding away. A close Kingfisher was also a highlight.

It was getting towards lunch time so we retraced our steps. On the way back, Red-eyed Damselflies were an intriguing new species for most as we watched them sitting on the lily pads on the rhyne. The long grass by the rhyne was alive with recently emerged damselflies – Common Blue, Blue-tailed and Azure were identified with ease amongst the throngs. A fine full adult male Marsh Harrier gave excellent views to liven up the return route.

We headed to the Crown at Catcott where we all enjoyed a lovely carvery meal. We then went to Catcott Lows SWT reserve where the hide gave us views across the flooded grassy meadows. We enjoyed many Greylag Goose goslings, Reed Bunting and another Hobby. The pools held many Teal, but stars of the show were the spectacular Garganey sat on one of the pools. Two fine males and a female were certainly a highlight for the group, and another pair flew up briefly at the back pool. A lone Snipe hid in the vegetation and a couple of Yellow Wagtails called as they flew over unseen.

We then moved on to the Somerset Wildlife Trust Westhay Moor reserve, where we had the now familiar song of the Cetti's Warbler from the car park. Reed Warblers continued to confuse with their repetitive songs and a couple more Hobbies continued to delight. We elected to walk down the drive on the hunt for Bearded Reedlings (Tits). We paused every few metres to listen for their "pinging" calls. Reed Warblers were singing everywhere and we heard the squeal of Water Rails as they snuck about in the reeds.

At the screen, we stopped again. A Marsh Harrier was cruising over the reeds hunting and a Bittern boomed. Simon heard the call of a Bearded Tit and all rushed over to try to see it. But sadly, it was not to be today and instead we marvelled at what a wonderful reserve this is, a world apart from everyday life in a reedy wilderness.

It was then time to return as some of the group wished an early arrival at Wells; we made our way back to the buses and ventured back to Wells. We said our goodbyes and parted after what we hope all in the group found to be a hugely enjoyable and fulfilling few days.

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## Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	May	
			6	7
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	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		3
6	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	6	4
7	Great (White) Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	15	5
8	Great Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>	3S , 6H	6+H
9	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
10	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓
11	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓
12	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	4	
13	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	3	2
14	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	✓	✓
15	Garganey	<i>Spatula querquedula</i>		5
16	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	20	✓
17	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
18	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	6	
19	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	✓	✓
20	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
21	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	1	
22	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	6	7
23	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	3	3
24	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
25	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		1
26	Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>	5	18
27	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		1
28	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓
29	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	15	
30	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	H	H
31	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
32	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
33	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
34	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		1
35	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>	2	
36	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		19
37	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	10	
38	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
39	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓
40	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	H + 1S	2
41	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
42	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓
43	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
44	Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	1S , 1H	3H
45	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	✓	✓
46	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	2	

	Common name	Scientific name	May	
			6	7
47	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	2	1
48	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	H	
49	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓	✓
50	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓
51	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	✓	✓
52	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	300	✓
53	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓
54	Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>	H	2H
55	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
56	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
57	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	2	
58	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓
59	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
60	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
61	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	✓
62	Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>	4	3
63	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	✓	✓
64	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	4	✓
65	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	5	6
66	Common Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>	3	✓
67	Lesser Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia curruca</i>	3	
68	Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>	✓	✓
69	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>	2	✓
70	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	4	3
71	Bearded Reedling (Tit)	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>		H
72	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
73	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	1	
74	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓	
75	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
76	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
77	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	2	
78	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	2	
79	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		1
80	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
81	Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓
82	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
83	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
84	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		1
85	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
86	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
87	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
88	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
89	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	✓	✓
90	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓

### Mammals

1	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓	✓
2	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	✓	✓
3	Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>	✓	

	Common name	Scientific name	May	
			6	7

### Butterflies

1	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>	✓	✓
2	Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>	✓	✓
3	Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>	✓	✓
4	Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>	✓	✓
5	Orange Tip	<i>Anthocharis cardamines</i>	✓	✓
6	Peacock	<i>Inachis io</i>		✓
7	Small Tortoiseshell	<i>Aglais urticae</i>		✓
8	Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>		✓
9	Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>	✓	✓

### Dragonflies & Damselflies

1	Blue-tailed Damselfly	<i>Ischnura elegans</i>		✓
2	Common Blue Damselfly	<i>Enallagma cyathigerum</i>		✓
3	Red-eyed Damselfly	<i>Erythromma najas</i>		✓
4	Azure Damselfly	<i>Coenagrion puella</i>		✓
5	Large Red Damselfly	<i>Pyrrosoma nymphula</i>		✓
6	Hairy Dragonfly	<i>Brachytron pratense</i>		✓