

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

11 - 13 December 2019

Report by Matt Collis



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Tour participants: Matt Collis and Chris Griffin (Leaders) with 14 Naturetrek clients

Summary

This tour around the Somerset Levels in winter was a fantastic opportunity to witness two major British wildlife spectacles: the largest roost of Starlings in the country and the massive concentration of waterfowl and other wetland species that winter in the area. With mainland Europe still yet to experience its first colder temperatures, it quickly became apparent that many wintering waterfowl, notably duck, were yet to make their way into the UK. Despite this we still had excellent opportunities to gain close views of all the expected winter wildfowl of the Levels, as well as encountering a few rarities including a large flock of Common Crane and a Siberian Chiffchaff. The Starlings' roost display just got better and better giving us an unbelievable spectacle. Featuring around half a million birds, it often appeared the birds completely filled the skies around us – we couldn't have asked for much more.

Day 1

Wednesday 11th December

The tour began with us gathering in the lounge of the wonderful Swan Hotel, set in the picturesque English town of Wells. It was here that Matt introduced himself to each member of the group before taking them into the dining area where a hearty three-course meal was ready and waiting for the group – the first of many excellent meals.

Straight after dinner, the group moved to the Exmoor Room where Matt asked each client to introduce themselves and share their wildlife hopes for the tour ahead. It quickly became clear we had a very encouraging mix of fresh wildlife watchers and more experienced birders, and while many had differing target species, they all shared the same excitement for the Starling murmuration. To finish the evening, Matt gave a short talk explaining the history of the Somerset Levels, its uniqueness, and introduced the habitats and species which call it home. With the rough itinerary and vital information shared, everyone drifted off to bed, full of anticipation for the days to come.

Day 2

Thursday 12th December

The first part of the day involved exploring the southern-most end of the Somerset Levels, starting with a visit to RSPB Swell Woods. Arriving in the car park, the feeders were incredibly busy with birds and a flurry of activity saw us spot Coal Tit, Blue Tit, Great Tit and Marsh Tit within less than a minute! It wasn't much longer before Nuthatch, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Goldcrest and Treecreeper all showed incredibly well in the surrounding trees giving fantastic views – a super start. Visiting the viewpoint overlooking West Sedgemoor and the vast flooded fields of the southern levels, we scanned hopefully for birds but very little was seen on this occasion. Completing our woodland circuit, we dropped into the hide and enjoyed further views of Marsh Tit and a very conspicuous Wren.

From here we made our way down to RSPB West Sedgemoor and across the open fields towards the hide. Unlike just a week ago, the fields in front of the hide were teeming with birds; mostly Lapwing with the odd Mallard, Teal and Wigeon spotted. Whilst at the hide we were treated to quite the spectacle with several Marsh Harrier and a beautifully pale Buzzard regularly putting the many thousands of Lapwing and Golden Plover,

positioned further back, up into the air, filling the skies with birds. The highlight though was the arrival of a male Peregrine which actively hunted a small flock of Wigeon before just wheeling around in the sky surrounded by Lapwing and then dropping down onto a perch – spectacular. On the walk back we picked up a few other nice birds including Bullfinch, Redwing, Fieldfare and more Goldcrest hiding in the hedgerows.

Just when we thought our fantastic morning was over, we stopped to watch a field full of Common Cranes; feeding, fighting and jostling with one another seemingly deciding who belonged with whom for the following spring. A fortuitous experience nobody will forget, especially with this being many people's first experience of this bird.

After stopping in at the King Alfred Inn for a hearty lunch, we decided to make our way to RSPB Ham Wall for a chance to look around the reserve and get ourselves in position for the murmuration. After unsuccessfully trying to track down the Firecrest which had been seen previously in the car park, but picking out a lone Siberian Chiffchaff, we took a leisurely stroll through the reserve enjoying our first views of Gadwall, Tufted Duck, Little Grebe and Great Egret. Birding was especially good from VP1 with plenty of Lapwing and Wigeon, handfuls of Shoveler and Coot, and a couple of Pochard which dived around the middle.

With the light beginning to fade and the weather rather challenging, our attention switched to focusing on the murmuration with the first groups of Starlings just starting to arrive over the reeds. We watched on for around thirty minutes as wave after wave streamed over our head to join an every growing swarm of birds which hung in the air over the reeds for an incredibly long time. Just when we thought we'd seen the largest group, another came flowing in behind and stimulated more dancing, more twisting and turning to the great delight of an onlooking audience.

With the last of the Starlings seeming to arrive, the birds began to drop into roost throwing a sudden blanket of black over the reed bed. It was at this point that we decided to make our exit but not before the arrival of the raptors; an opportunistic Sparrowhawk and sly Peregrine swooped in under the cover of darkness in an attempt to grab a late afternoon snack. From what we could see, neither were successful but it was a fabulous end to a drama and joy-filled day.

Day 3

Friday 13th December

Almost the entire group decided to join us for an early visit to RSPB Ham Wall for the Starling eruption. Arriving before dawn, we took our place out in the reed bed and waited patiently for the display to begin. With the first light just about allowing us views into the bed, the first Starlings began to move, as the sound of chatter increased. With increasing light, more and more birds started to move creating ripples of black over the reeds. At this point we saw our first Water Rail as it swam between two reedbeds. With the sun now breaking through, big plumes of birds shuffled back and forth seemingly trying to gather into the 'correct' group ready for takeoff. It was at this point, with no specific trigger identifiable, that thousands of birds began to take off and depart from all directions filling the sky. It was a magnificent sight and before you knew it, it was done! Every bird had left leaving only an eerie silence.

We returned to the hotel for breakfast, before gathering and making our way to RSPB Greylake for the later part of the morning. Ducks and waders dominate this reserve with fantastic opportunities for close views of Wigeon,

Teal and Shoveler positioned right in front of the hide. We also saw plenty of Snipe which proved an enjoyable challenge to spot as they hid in the long grass. Huge numbers of both Lapwing and Golden Plover were present towards the back and frequently took to the skies as did Marsh Harriers and Buzzards which hunted over the reserve. Both Little and Great Egret were seen as were a small group of Pintail and two Black-tailed Godwit which were hiding in amongst the ducks. On the walk back and searching in the car park we spotted Chaffinch, Dunnock, House Sparrows, Reed Bunting and Pied Wagtail. We also encountered a fantastic group of Fieldfare and Redwing feeding in the opposite fields and a magnificent light plumage Buzzard – a real stunner!

Following a wonderful lunch at The Duck, we dropped in at Catcott Meadows where more Wigeon, Pintail and Shoveler gave close views but with the hide very full and conditions quite windy we decided to move on pretty fast. Instead we headed towards RSPB Ham Wall but dropped in on Shapwick Heath for a quick stroll. Several Marsh Harrier, Great Egret and an enormous group of Gadwall were present. Two Sparrowhawks in quick succession also gave great views but it was the spectacular backdrop of fading light casting through the reeds which impressed most.

With the light fading we returned to our previous viewing point for the Starlings. The birds put on another incredible display, far better than our first, staying suspended in the air creating some dramatic twisting shapes. With the wind very strong, the birds seemed unsure of themselves and proceeded to settle in two very different parts of the reserve but not before looping around in one enormous flock right over everyone's heads leaving no jaw not dropped. Finishing with some epic spirals as they landed into the reedbed, our display was done as was our trip; a great way to end a fantastic few days exploring this wonderful part of the UK.

Returning to the minibuses, we headed back to the hotel for our goodbyes and although sad our trip had ended, it couldn't have finished in a better way and we all left knowing we had plenty of nature-filled stories to amaze friends and family. Until our next visit!

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Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	December	
			12	13
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	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓
7	Great Egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>	✓	✓
8	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
9	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓
10	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓
11	Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>	2	
12	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓	✓
13	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓	✓
14	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	✓	✓
15	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓
16	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
17	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>		✓
18	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	2	✓
19	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
20	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓	✓
21	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	✓	✓
22	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
23	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓
24	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	✓	✓
25	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓
26	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	80	
27	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>		✓
28	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
29	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
30	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	✓	✓
31	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
32	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	✓
33	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		✓
34	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓
35	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
36	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
37	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	1	
38	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia domestica</i>	✓	✓
39	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	✓	
40	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
41	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
42	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	H	
43	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	
44	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓	
45	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓
46	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓
47	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		✓

	Common name	Scientific name	December	
			12	13
48	Northern Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
49	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
50	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	✓	
51	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓
52	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
53	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus Pilaris</i>	✓	✓
54	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓
55	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
56	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		H
57	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓
58	Siberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita tristis</i>	✓	
59	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	✓
60	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
61	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	✓	
62	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓	
63	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
64	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
65	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	✓	
66	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	✓	
67	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		✓
68	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
69	Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓
70	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
71	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
72	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
73	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
74	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
75	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
76	Lesser Redpoll	<i>Acanthis cabaret</i>	✓	
77	Common Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	✓	✓
78	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓