

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

17 - 19 January 2020



Common Cranes



Common Starlings



Common Reed Bunting



Common Snipe

Report & Images by Matt Collis



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Tour participants: Matt Collis and Matt Eade (leaders) with 11 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 the UK and mainland Europe still unseasonably mild, the diversity and density of birds (particularly waders) have been slightly lower than normal but still an awe-inspiring spectacle, nonetheless. With this weekend being the first with multiple frosts, we were also able to enjoy some spectacular winter scenery as well as one of the largest and best Starling roosts of the season so far featuring an estimated 650,000 birds. Other special encounters from this trip included Merlin, Hen Harrier, Eurasian Crane and a Scaup.

Day 1

Friday 17th January

The tour began in the lounge of the wonderful Swan Hotel, set within the picturesque English town of Wells. It was here our trip leaders, Matt C and Matt E, introduced themselves to the group before taking them into the dining area where a hearty three course meal was ready and waiting – the first of many excellent meals.

Straight after dinner, the group moved to the Exmoor Room where each client introduced themselves and shared their wildlife hopes for the tour. It quickly became clear that 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 on 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 their way to bed, full of anticipation for the days to come.

Day 2

Saturday 18th January

Our day began at RSPB Swell Woods with some incredibly busy bird feeders in the car park. Following a cold snap in the weather, there were lots of birds to enjoy including great views of Coal Tit, Great Tit, Blue Tit, Nuthatch, Goldcrest as well as several Marsh Tits which are sometimes more scarce. From the viewing point looking over West Sedgemoor we could see large groups of both Lapwing and smaller groups of Golden Plover and, although distant, we were delighted to see three Eurasian Cranes with two birds appearing to court one another in an erratic dance. Other notable birds seen here included a group of Stock Dove, two Great Egrets and a Stonechat.

Our second stop was at Aller Moor near Stathe where we walked the river pathway. From here we could see lots of Starlings, Fieldfares and the odd Redwing feeding in the fields and had Mistle Thrush and Song Thrush feeding in the orchard trees. Stonechat, Reed Bunting and Chiffchaff frequented the old grass stems and Meadow Pipits frequently flew overhead as did a few flocks of Golden Plover. Little Egrets were seen on the riverbank and interestingly, our most unusual sighting was a Lesser black-backed gull - a bird we see very rarely on the Levels.

Following a chance encounter with three Roe Deer and a Fox, we stopped at the King Alfred Inn for lunch before heading on to Shapwick Heath for a wander around the reserve. Our exploration was very productive, picking up some excellent species including Great Crested Grebe, Great Egret, Marsh Harrier and both Cetti's Warbler and a Water Rail heard calling. We also got our first look at some of the many thousands of duck which gather across the Levels; picking out species like Mallard, Shoveler, Wigeon, Teal, Gadwall and Pintail all from Noah's hide. The appearance of a female Scaup not too far from the hide was an added bonus and another rare encounter for the Levels.

Our final stop of the day was to watch the Starling murmuration which took place on Shapwick Heath. Although the birds decided to roost at the back of the reserve, we were treated to an awesome encounter with a huge flock spending a full fifteen minutes softly flying directly over our heads and slowly gathering in number. By the time the main flock dropped into the reeds, the air was filled with hundreds of thousands of Starlings, all swirling in one mega flock. We didn't see any twist and swirls on this occasion but the experience was breath-taking nonetheless. The experience was further enhanced with the appearance of a Hen Harrier, a female who courted low over the reeds before twisting up into the air and dropping down out of view, and a rare sighting of a Bittern which flew up from the reeds on the walk back to the bus – a fantastic end to a wonderful day.

Day 3

Sunday 19th January

Waking before dawn, a selection of the group set off early to catch the morning's Starling eruption. It was a stunning frosty winters morning with crystal clear skies and a warming pastel glow. We took our place in the reed bed in an attempt to get as close to the roost as possible. When we arrived the birds had already started moving with lots of chattering and birds already on the move. We arrived just in time to witness the whole group launch out of the roost and into the sky – what a spectacle! After this we visited a known site for Little Owl but had no joy except for greats view of a Great Spotted Woodpecker and three Roe Deer foraging right by the road.

After breakfast, we headed to RSPB West Sedgemoor for a morning at the barn hide. The scene was fairly still but soon we could see plumes of Golden Plover and Lapwing periodically lifting into the sky evading the various raptors. We had some incredible views of Marsh Harrier including one attempting to hunt a pair of Egyptian Geese and two birds get in an aerial tussle with one another. Both Buzzards and Peregrines were seen at distance and a Merlin was an added bonus when it briefly perched on a distant post before flying off low over the site. The only ducks seen were a small but diverse cluster, including Mallard, Pintail, Gadwall, Wigeon and Teal, spotted roosting behind some Canada geese. But it was the appearance of multiple groups of Cranes which were the highlight, totalling 16 individuals, which flew straight across the reserve with one group flying very close to the hide and another landing in full view.

After a fantastic morning and lunch we headed to RSPB Greylake to see the great gathering of ducks this hide so often provides. It didn't disappoint with Wigeon, Teal, Gadwall and Shoveler all positioned right in front of the hide as were a number of Snipe which proved an enjoyable challenge for people to spot. Waders remained elusive as they have on most tours this year but we did manage to pick out a lone Black-tailed Godwit feeding amongst the ducks and Snipe. Our final birds here were spotted in the car park with Chaffinch, Dunnock and Reed Bunting seen with the resident House Sparrows hanging around the feeders.

With the day drawing to an end we returned to Shapwick Heath and decided to view the murmuration from within the reedbed. The birds put on a superb display, flying in an ever growing group right over our heads filling every part of the sky before unbelievably dropping into the reeds right in front of us, a mere 20 meters away. The sounds were just deafening, simulating the roars of ocean waves, that left everyone with looks of awe. The experience was only enhanced by a plethora of Sparrowhawks, maybe four in total, constantly cutting through the group as they tried to land. The constant attacks forced the flock to take evasive action giving us picturesque twists and swirls as they danced just above the reeds. After about twenty minutes or so, almost all the birds had finally made it in to roost, an estimate of around 650,000; the highest total of the year with many more birds appearing to have come due to the below freezing conditions.

With the display at an end, all that was left was to make our to the vehicles and back towards the hotel. Here we said our goodbyes and although sad the trip had ended everyone appeared to have plenty of nature-filled stories they could wait to share with their various friends and family. It had been one of the best murmurations of the year so far and it was something none of us were likely to forget. Our trip was complete.

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Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	January	
			18	19
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 White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓	✓
8	Great Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>	1	
9	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
10	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓
11	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓
12	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓	✓
13	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	✓	✓
14	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓
15	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
16	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	✓	✓
17	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓	✓
18	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
19	Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>	1	
20	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓	✓
21	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	1	1
22	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	✓	✓
23	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
24	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓
25	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	✓	✓
26	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		1
27	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓
28	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	3	18
29	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	H	H
30	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
31	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
32	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	✓	✓
33	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
34	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	✓
35	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		1
36	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	
37	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
38	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	
39	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
40	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia domestica</i>	✓	✓
41	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	✓	✓
42	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
43	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
44	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		✓
45	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	✓
46	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	
47	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	January	
			18	19
48	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	✓	
49	Northern Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
50	Dunnoch	<i>Prunella modularis</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	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	
57	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	H	✓
58	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓
59	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	H
60	Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>		H
61	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
62	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	✓	✓
63	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>	✓	
64	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
65	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
66	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	✓	
67	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	✓	
68	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
69	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓
70	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
71	Carion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
72	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓
73	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
74	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
75	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
76	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
77	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	✓	✓
78	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓