

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

24 - 26 January 2020



Fieldfare



Western Marsh Harrier



Common Starlings



Winter duck

Report & Images by Matt Collis



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: Matt Collis and David Tattersfield (leaders) with 16 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 experience nonetheless. The Starling roosts were anything but easy to predict this weekend but we had some spectacular displays with an estimated 400,000 birds putting on a show. As well the large and diverse gatherings of ducks and plovers, other special encounters from this trip included two Hen Harriers (including a stunning male), large group of Eurasian Crane and two Whooper Swan.

Day 1

Friday 24th 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 and David, 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 25th January

Our day began at RSPB Swell Woods with watching the bird feeders in the car park. We had lovely views of lots of Coal Tit, Blue Tit, a regular Nuthatch as well as several Marsh Tit and the odd Great Tit. We stopped to scan from the viewing point looking over West Sedgemoor but unfortunately viewing was difficult due to a significant amount of mist and low cloud. Other notable birds seen within the wood included some excellent views of Treecreeper and Goldcrest. We finished our visit by viewing the Heronry which had just started to become active with the first Grey Herons returning giving us lovely aerial displays as they flew over the trees.

Our second stop walk along the River Parrett towards Aller Moor. Gulls were very common here with Black-headed, Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gull all noted. Thrushes were abundant too with many Fieldfare and the odd Redwing flocking in the trees, alongside both Mistle Thrush and Song Thrush which were spotted in the orchard trees. We had close views of both Stonechats and Reed Buntings, the later particularly excellent, and both Chiffchaff and Blackcap were seen within the apple trees. Other birds of note included Meadow Pipits frequently flying overhead as did a few flocks of Golden Plover and Lapwing. Little Egrets and Great Egret were also seen but the highlight came right at the end of the walk when we finally got clear views of Common Crane; at least eight in flight and a group of three on the floor.

Following a lunchtime stop at the King Alfred Inn, we headed on to Shapwick Heath along the main path up through the main 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 two Whooper Swans not too far from the path en route to the Starlings was a particularly enjoyable moment from our visit.

Our final stop of the day was to watch the Starling murmuration which took place on Shapwick Heath. It turned out to be one of the longest displays the leaders had ever witnessed with the birds taking around 35 minutes to transition from swirling around in the air to settling into the reedbed. Large numbers gathered fast, hanging in the air in an ever-growing mass which spent most of the time drifting back and forth over the reed bed. The arrival of numerous Sparrowhawks, a Peregrine and plenty of Marsh Harrier meant we got some spectacular aerial dances with spiralling and twisting shapes filling the skies. The experience was further enhanced with the appearance of a Hen Harrier, a female who courted low over the reeds before disappearing out of view, and a Firecrest on the walk back to the bus – a fantastic end to a wonderful day.

Day 3

Sunday 26th January

To make the most of the good weather forecast, a selection of the group set off before dawn to catch the morning Starling eruption. We took our place in the reed bed just as first light began to break and we could hear that the Starlings were awake already chattering away. After a few minutes the Starlings began to rise, small plumes at first, but then enormous flocks lifted into the sky and streamed out of the reeds. The noise was phenomenal: like rolling ocean waves or the launching of a jet. Our display was relatively short due to the fact that the Starlings had split roost with the vast majority having moved to the other end of the reserve overnight – simple bad luck!

After breakfast we headed to RSPB West Sedgemoor for a morning at the barn hide. The weather was challenging with heavy rain and a growing wind but the view was brilliant. Plumes of Golden Plover and Lapwing periodically lifted into the sky, as did a diverse mix of ducks including Mallard, Pintail, Gadwall, Wigeon and Teal. Plenty of Marsh Harrier were seen as were Buzzards and two Peregrines which were perched on some distant posts before flying off low over the site. The two highlights of our visit came at the end of our stay when two Common Cranes flew straight across the reserve flying very close to the hide and when a male Hen Harrier, a super rare occurrence on the Levels, hunted across the reserve for a few minutes before disappearing out of view.

After a fantastic morning we retired to a local pub for lunch before heading to RSPB Greylake where the sun began to break through. From the car park we had fantastic views of both Redwing and Fieldfare as well as at least 2,000 Golden Plover sitting in the fields which were being keenly watched by two pale Buzzards. Once at the hide we enjoyed fantastic views of the many ducks including Wigeon, Teal, Gadwall and Shoveler all positioned right in front of the hide. Snipe were also present in great numbers and proved an enjoyable challenge for people to spot as was a single Roe Deer feeding in the margins. Our final birds of the site included Starling, Chaffinch, Dunnock and Reed Bunting which were 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 the end where the main group had taken off earlier in the morning. As we waited we were treated to some incredibly close view of a Peregrine Falcon and to several Great Egret perched close in the reeds at which point the first Starlings began to appear. Once the main groups had arrived, the birds put on a wonderful display, flying in an ever growing group right over our heads as they scanned over the whole reserve. After a long period of swarming, the birds began to drift off over towards the old roosting location where they put on the most incredible display of twists and pulses backlit by a stunning red sunset. After about 10 minutes the birds began to drop into the reeds and out of our view: an estimate of around 400,000.

With the display at an end, all that was left was to make our way to the vehicles and back towards the hotel. We'd had some wonderful Starling displays and some special encounters with some special birds. It made for a cheery goodbye 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.

Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk to sign up.

Social Media

We're social! Follow us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and be the first to hear about the launch of new tours, offers and exciting sightings and photos from our recently returned holidays.



www.facebook.com/naturetrekwildlifeholidays



www.twitter.com/naturetrektours



www.instagram.com/naturetrek_wildlife_holidays

Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	January	
			25	26
1	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓
2	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓
3	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓
4	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
5	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	2	
6	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓	✓
7	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	✓	✓
8	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓	✓
9	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
10	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓
11	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	✓	✓
12	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	1	
13	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
14	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia domestica</i>	✓	✓
15	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	✓	
16	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
17	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
18	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	H	H
19	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
20	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
21	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	11	2
22	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	✓	H
23	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓	✓
24	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
25	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	✓	✓
26	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		✓
27	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
28	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
29	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	
30	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓
34	Eurasian Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>		H
31	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓
33	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓	✓
32	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓
35	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	✓	✓
36	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓	✓
37	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	1	2
38	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
39	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	H	P
40	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	✓	✓
41	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	✓
42	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓
43	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	✓	✓
44	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
45	Western Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓
46	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
47	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	January	
			25	26
48	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓
49	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>	✓	
50	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	✓	
51	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
52	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
53	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	H	♂
54	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
55	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	H	
56	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	1	
57	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	H	
58	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	✓
59	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
60	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	✓	
61	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	✓	
62	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
63	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
64	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	✓
65	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓
66	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓
67	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	✓	
68	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
69	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓
70	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
71	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
72	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	✓	✓
73	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓
74	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	
75	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
76	Lesser Redpoll	<i>Acanthis cabaret</i>	✓	
77	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
78	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓