

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

31 January - 2 February 2020



Gadwall



West Sedgemoor RSPB



Nuthatch



Great Egret

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 Chris Griffin (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 spread across a large area prior to our visit but to our delight came together on the second night giving us one of the most spectacular displays of the season with an estimated 600,000 birds putting on a show. As well as the large and diverse gatherings of ducks and plovers which always inspire, other special encounters from this trip included epic encounters with raptors (notably one involving two Sparrowhawks on the last day), several groups of Common Crane and two Whooper Swans.

Day 1

Friday 31st 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 Chris, 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 1st February

Our first stop of the tour was at RSPB Swell Woods where we spent a short time watching the bird feeders in the car park. After spreading out some peanuts, we were soon overwhelmed by Coal Tit, Blue Tit, Great Tit, several Nuthatch as well as the odd Marsh Tit and Chaffinch nearby. After this we made our way to the viewing point looking over West Sedgemoor where after a short while scanning, we managed to pick out a group of four Common Crane and a further two feeding in a neighbouring field. We also enjoyed when several large groups of Golden Plover and Lapwing took to the sky shimmering white, gold and black, presumably disturbed by an unseen raptor. Other notable birds seen within the wood included some excellent views of Treecreeper, Goldcrest and several Great Spotted Woodpecker drumming. Green Woodpecker was also heard but not seen. 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 and several already sitting on nests.

On route to our second location we dropped in to use the facilities at West Sedgemoor; lucky we did as we achieved excellent views of two Cranes and had Marsh Tit in the hedges. Arriving at Stathe, we took a walk along the River Parrett towards Aller Moor where winter thrushes were particularly abundant with Fieldfare, Redwing and numerous Mistle Thrush which proved a comical challenge to spot hidden in the orchard trees. We had

close views of both Stonechats and Meadow Pipit as well as brief views of a male Blackcap and a Chiffchaff was heard. Other birds of note included a large flock of Little Egrets and a group of Black-headed Gulls and Herring Gull mixed in with Starlings.

Following a lunchtime stop at the King Alfred Inn, we headed on to RSPB Ham Wall for a short walk up to VP1. Along the way we attempted to find the Firecrest but no luck; however, we did get some great views of Great Crested Grebe, Pochard and Tufted Ducks which occupied the deeper pools. Lapwing, Gadwall and Wigeon occupied the shallower areas and we were particularly pleased to spot three Snipe hiding in some cut reeds. Our other notable viewing was Water Rail which dashed between reed beds just as we were all looking – perfect timing!

With the day coming to an end we headed towards Shapwick Heath walking along the central path and through the main reserve. Our walk was very productive, picking up 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 and Gadwall. The appearance of two Whooper Swans not too far from the path en route to the Starlings was a particularly enjoyable moment and perfect light only added to the moment.

Arriving just before dusk we took up our position at the far end of Shapwick Heath to watch the Starling murmuration with the most gorgeous sunset as a backdrop. After a bit of a tense wait, the first flocks began to arrive gathering out of view in a distant woodland, before suddenly large numbers began to appear and soon gathered together fast. For the majority of our display, the birds remained a single clumped mass which moved in unison over the reeds beds before dramatically dropping in a spiral into the reed bed close by. The arrival of numerous raptors including a couple of Sparrowhawks, a Peregrine and many Marsh Harrier meant we got a few moments of aerial dancing but before long most the birds were safely in for the night and our display was over. Pleased with our day's birding, we walk back to the bus before heading back to the hotel for a rest and some dinner – a fantastic end to a wonderful day.

Day 3

Sunday 2nd February

With the weather looking good for the morning, a selection of the group set off before dawn to catch the morning Starling eruption. We took our place in the reeds just as first light began to break and with the Starlings already chattering away. After a short time, the Starlings began to stir, small plumes at first, but then larger flocks lifting into the sky before slowly streaming out of the reeds. The noise was phenomenal: like rolling ocean waves or the launching of a jet. We ended up with one of the best displays of the season with a large proportion of the flock opting to fly straight over our heads in systematic and continuous fashion for about five minutes - a jaw-dropping experience. The experience was enhanced by the sounds of many Water Rails, Cetti's Warbler and the odd booming Bittern – some of the earliest of the year.

After breakfast we headed down to RSPB West Sedgemoor to spent the morning at the barn hide. The action was instant with a Peregrine Falcon, Kestrel and Common Crane all spotted on the walk over to the hide. The action didn't stop when we arrived at the hide either. Almost everything which was settled on the marsh took to the air; huge numbers of Golden Plover and Lapwing and a diverse mix of ducks including Mallard, Pintail, Gadwall, Wigeon and Teal. It was a sure sign of a Peregrine and after a short while we spotted a male actively

hunting a small flock of Teal. Having little joy, it eventually gave up and perching on a fence alongside a female – epic! Marsh Harrier and Buzzard were also present patrolling the site as were several groups of Common Crane, including a family of four with two juveniles of last year, who remained visible throughout our visit. Other sightings of note here included Egyptian Goose, Little Egret, Great Egret and three Roe Deer resting on the hillside. Just as we thought all the action was done, the male Peregrine took to the sky once more for another dramatic chase. We watched breathlessly as it came so close on several occasions but eventually the result was the same as before and it returned to its perch.

After a fantastic morning we retired to a local pub for lunch before taking the long route to RSPB Greylake via Tealham Moor and Westhay Moor to look for Cattle Egret. No joy on this occasion except for sightings of Stonechat, ducks and several large groups of Mute Swan. Arriving at Greylake we made our way to the hide where we enjoyed fantastic views of the many ducks here including Wigeon, Teal, Gadwall, Shoveler and Pintail all positioned right in front of the hide. Snipe were also present in good numbers and proved an enjoyable challenge for people to spot as was a beautiful male Kestrel sat on top of the fencing. Our final birds of the visit were seen around the feeders; groups of Starling, Chaffinch, Dunnock and Reed Bunting mixed in with the resident House Sparrows.

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 lovely views of Great Egret coming in to roost and the first of many Sparrowhawks. The first Starlings began to appear not too long after, circling over the reeds before drifting off to gather in the open fields behind the reserve. Numbers slowly swelled, greater and greater, before eventually it was just one enormous super flock which moved as one, filling the sky with darkness. We were positioned perfectly to enjoy this spectacle, having the entire flock drifting slow and low over our heads in the most awe-inspiring way.

It was at this point the Sparrowhawks made their entrance, continually stopping the flock from landing and causing the flock to twist and swirl to avoid predation. It made for a fantastic display and gave us the aerial display we so desired but hadn't quite got yesterday. To top the display off, the flock decided to drop in very close to us in the neighbouring reedbed and so we scurried up to get closer views. It was here we had our second epic encounter with two Sparrowhawks making their way through the woods carrying Starlings in their talons. The first stopped to drown its prey in a puddle just 20 metres in front of us. The other, spooked by our presence, attempted to perch but in doing so lost its grip on its prey which quickly made its way back to the flock – simply an incredible encounter.

With the display at an end and the Starlings now in roost, all that was left was to make our way to the vehicles and back towards the hotel. We'd had some of the best Starling displays and encounters of the season all squeezed into this short but magical tour. 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.

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Species Lists

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

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

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			1	2
48	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
49	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	
50	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓	H
51	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	✓	✓
52	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
53	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
54	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	H	H
55	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
56	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	H	
57	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	
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	Duncock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
72	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓
73	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	
74	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
75	Lesser Redpoll	<i>Acanthis cabaret</i>	✓	
76	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
77	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		✓

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