

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

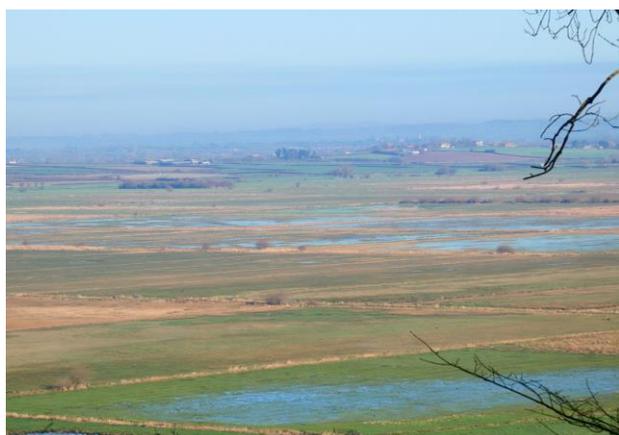
5 - 7 February 2020



Great Egret



Great Spotted Woodpecker



West Sedgemoor RSPB



Cattle Egret

Report & Images by Matt Collis



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Tour participants: Matt Collis and Matt Eade (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 being unseasonably mild, the diversity and density of birds (particularly waders) have been lower than normal but each trip is still an awe-inspiring experience nonetheless. The Starlings also proved unusually tricky on this trip as our visit fell on one of those rare unfortunate occasions when the Starlings changed roost. We did, however, on the second night manage to locate the roost and enjoyed an estimated 500,000 birds come into the reeds. As well the large and diverse gatherings of ducks and plovers which always inspire, other special encounters from this trip included Common Crane, Cattle Egret, Red Crossbill and a Firecrest.

Day 1

Wednesday 5th February

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 C 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

Thursday 6th February

Starting at RSPB Swell Woods, we spent the first part of the morning watching some bird feeders. The peanuts had barely touched the floor before Coal Tit, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Chaffinch and numerous Nuthatch were all surrounding us. For the first time this season, Marsh Tit remained elusive and didn't visit the feeder; however, for the first time a Great Spotted Woodpecker came in, giving us excellent views. Leaving the car park, we made our way to the viewing point to look over West Sedgemoor where we immediately spotted two Common Crane feeding in the fields directly below us. Further scanning revealed five more Common Cranes and many large groups of Golden Plover and Lapwing sitting in the flooded fields. Other notable birds seen within the wood included Green Woodpecker, Treecreeper and a surprise group of flyover Red Crossbill. We finished our visit by viewing the Heronry from the main path where we could see some of first Grey Herons sitting on their nests while others flew in over the trees – gorgeous!

Our next stop was just down the road at RSPB West Sedgemoor where we spent the rest of the morning at the barn hide. Action was fairly slow to start but gave us time to scan and pick out some star birds including two Peregrine Falcon sitting on posts, more Common Crane and numerous Marsh Harrier hunting over the ducks. The diversity of ducks was impressive with Mallard, Pintail, Gadwall, Wigeon, Teal and a surprise group of

Shelduck all seen - an unusual sighting for this tour. We also got our first views of Greylag, Canada Geese, Great Egret and Little Egret as well as a few additional raptors including Buzzard and a Sparrowhawk. It wasn't until the final moments that we got widespread activity when a male Peregrine put up all the waders including Golden Plover, Lapwing and small flocks of Curlew, Dunlin and Snipe – a good array given waders have been scarce this season.

Following our lunchtime stop at the King Alfred Inn, we headed on to Shapwick Heath to walk along the central path and through the main reserve. Here we saw more 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 when we visited Noah's Lake. Here we spent some time picking out species like Shoveler, Wigeon, Pochard and Gadwall. The appearance of two Raven and a small group Bullfinch eating fresh willow buds were two particularly enjoyable additional encounters.

Arriving at the far end of Shapwick Heath, we had a stunning sunset in motion and stopped here to attempt to watch the Starling murmuration. After a short wait, the first flocks arrived, gathering out of view on the distant hill side. Before long, large numbers began to appear overhead as they made their way over the reed beds in front of us but then continued out the other side of the reserve. After the same pattern of behaviour repeated itself over the course of the next 10 minutes, it soon became clear that this was one of those unlucky occasions when the birds had chosen to switch roosts and were gathering somewhere else tonight. Despite this, we still managed to enjoy some wonderful close encounters as flocks of starlings streamed over us and a couple of Sparrowhawks made brief appearances – a good end to a wonderful day and left us with a challenge for tomorrow.

Day 3

Friday 7th February

Following the previous day's challenging murmuration, it meant the early morning Starling eruption experience would be challenging too. Despite knowing this, almost all the group joined us to set off before dawn in the hope of coming across the roost. We scouted out a few potential locations including Burtle and Westhay Moor but, with no sign of the birds, we settled on a lovely morning walk around Westhay Moor Nature Reserve instead. We enjoyed the beginnings of a dawn chorus with Song Thrush, Chaffinch and Blackbirds particularly notable singers and had lots of sightings of Gadwall, Greylag and Tufted duck which were making use of the ponds. The most special sighting came when a flock of 50 Mute Swan flew low over our heads moving out to feed in the fields – magic. By this point we had flocks of Starlings flying over us; a teasing reminder that the birds had now left the roost which must be nearby. Before returning back to the hotel, we attempted to find Bearded Tit at a local hotspot but had no luck on this occasion.

After breakfast we took an extended route to RSPB Ham Wall in search of Cattle Egret. This time our luck was in and we found two large flocks, around 70 birds, mixed in with a large flock of Mute Swan, Canada Geese and Greylag. We had a further surprise when a flock of four Egyptian Geese were spotted stood in the field and we also enjoyed an encounter with a Jay; a challenging bird to see on this tour. Once in the car park we focused on scanning the line of Alders in search of the Firecrest which had been lingering here for the last few weeks. In no time at all, we spotted it frantically feeding in the tree and had good views for a minute or so before it disappeared into the undergrowth. Other birds seen here included many tits, Chaffinch, Goldfinch and a lovely male Reed Bunting. The final part of the morning was spent walking to the Avalon Hide and back where we had good views of a number of species of duck as well as a large flocks of Lapwing, Great Crested Grebe and a small

group of Snipe huddled on a vegetated island. The only new bird to our trip was a Kingfisher which whizzed over the path but two great in flight views of Great Egret and Marsh Harrier were notable.

After a busy morning we retired to a local pub for lunch before heading off to RSPB Greylake. We made our way to the hide and enjoyed fantastic views of Wigeon, Teal, Gadwall, Shoveler and Pintail all positioned close in to the hide. Snipe showed in good numbers spread out across the reserve and proved an enjoyable challenge for people to spot. We took the opportunity to focus our scopes on each species at close distance and people were amazed by their intricate patterning; sounds of shock and awe common across the group. Our final birds of the stop were seen around the feeders; groups of Starling, Chaffinch, Dunnock and Reed Bunting were mixed in with the resident House Sparrows.

With the day drawing to an end, we returned to Shapwick to wait here to see if we could spot the likely new location of the roost or if they'd return to their historic site. It soon became clear they were gathering elsewhere and so, with a little bit of luck and little bit of local leader knowledge, we set off in pursuit. Our gamble paid off and we managed to catch up with the flock just as they began to drop into the reeds. A continuous flow of huge flocks piled into the roost, some 100 metres or so away, for about 15 minutes. Eventually, with so many birds now in such a concentrated spot, large plumes of birds lifted up into the sky like waves on a choppy sea with the noise just about audible. We watched from here for 20 minutes or so, before it was clear that the majority of the birds were now in the roost and left pretty pleased with ourselves given the difficulties we'd faced.

Back at the minibuses, all that was left was to make our way to the hotel to say our farewells after a memorable trip. We'd had a tough time with the Starlings but it was a good reminder that you can't predict nature and some of the joy has to be found in the chase. A reminder of our successes 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	
			6	7
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	Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>		4
7	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</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	H
21	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
22	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
23	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	7	
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	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	
29	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	✓	
30	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		✓
31	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
32	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
33	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	
34	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓
35	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓
36	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		70+
37	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓	✓
38	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓
39	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	✓	✓
40	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓	✓
41	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
42	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	H	✓
43	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	✓
44	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	✓	
45	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓
46	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	✓	✓
47	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		✓

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			6	7
48	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
49	Western Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓
50	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
51	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
52	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	
53	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓	✓
54	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	✓	
55	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
56	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
57	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	H	✓
58	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
59	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	H
60	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>		✓
61	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	✓
62	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
63	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	✓	
64	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	✓	
65	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
66	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
67	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	✓
68	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓
69	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓
70	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓
71	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
72	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓
73	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
74	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
75	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	H	
76	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓
77	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓
78	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
79	Common Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	✓	
80	Lesser Redpoll	<i>Acanthis cabaret</i>	✓	
81	Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>	H	
82	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
83	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓