

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

21st – 23rd January 2022



Weasel (video-still by Matt Collis)

Tour report by Matt Collis



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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. The Starling roost - an estimated 750,000 birds - have been notably split across several areas over the last few weeks. Although not the whole flock, both our experiences involved around half the flock giving us a fantastic display as they streamed into the reed bed right in front. As well as the large and diverse gatherings of ducks and plovers, other special encounters from this trip included Eurasian Crane in flight, hunting Merlin and an especially notable encounter with three Weasels mobbed by Bearded Tit. We were also blessed with a two other rarities including a flock of Whooper Swans and a lone Tundra Bean Goose which gave us quite the run around.

Day 1

Friday 21st January

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. The Starling roost - an estimated 750,000 birds - have been notably split across several areas over the last few weeks. Although not the whole flock, both our experiences involved around half the flock giving us a fantastic display as they streamed into the reed bed right in front. As well as the large and diverse gatherings of ducks and plovers, other special encounters from this trip included Eurasian Crane in flight, hunting Merlin and an especially notable encounter with three Weasels mobbed by Bearded Tit. We were also blessed with a two other rarities including a flock of Whooper Swans and a lone Tundra Bean Goose which gave us quite the run around.

Day 2

Saturday 22nd January

Our day started at the furthest end of the Levels with a walk around RSPB Swell Woods. We took a wonderful stroll around the woodland and spent some time viewing back across RSPB West Sedgemoor which proved an excellent decision as we got our first views of Eurasian Crane, Great White Egret and Stock Dove as well as big flocks of Lapwing, Golden Plover and mixed ducks. Excitement also rose when two Peregrines flew directly overhead, one carrying a prey item, and shortly followed by a low flying Sparrowhawk which flashed through the woodland canopy. The woodland itself felt quite alive with bird song and added further enjoyment to our day when a beautiful Nuthatch posed silhouetted against the trunk of a mighty Oak, and a Goldcrest was spotted flitting between the branches. We finished our visit at the feeders which were a little quieter than usual and, just as we were about the move on, produced fantastic views of Marsh Tit.

On route to RSPB Greylake, we decided to stop for roadside views of a great mixed flock of Redwing and Fieldfare. Once at Greylake, our luck was in immediately, with unbelievably good views of a Water Rail feeding in the open for ten minutes or so. We also managed to get our first views of Cetti's Warbler, Marsh Harrier, Raven and a Buzzard perched no more than 20m away as it overlooked a flock of Lapwing and Golden Plover resting in the grass. From the hides we had excellent close views of many duck including thousands of Teal,

Wigeon and Shoveler. A lone Pintail could be seen distantly. The real challenge was picking out the Snipe; a funny moment when many clients realised three were sat just a mere five metres from the hide!

Following a lovely lunch, we climbed Burrow Mump to scan the area immediately around us and take in the fantastic views. As well as more flocks of Lapwing, we also managed to spot a small flock of Dunlin and three Ruff feeding in the shallow waters of the flooded grasslands. Overlooking those was a Merlin who was very distant and hard to see clearly from our vantage point. Comparatively, a flock of seven Whooper Swan were very distinct and kindly sat not too distantly from two Mute Swans giving excellent comparison views.

Our final stop of the day was to RSPB Ham Wall where we focused mostly on the Starling Murmuration given our fairly timely arrival to site. Upon waiting for the first birds to arrive, a male Sparrowhawk perched in a Willow tree was an added bonus sighting and added much hope for a good murmuring display from the Starlings. As it happened, as the first birds began to arrive, the Sparrowhawk seemed to disappear and the birds unaffected. The murmuration itself didn't disappoint and, although no great twisting flocks chased by raptors, we had a fantastic experience as ~350,000 Starling arrived in ever increasing flocks to land in the reedbed right in front of us. A times it felt like the stream of birds was endless as a black slick of Starling ran full length across the sky before swirling down into the reeds like water down a plughole. Once almost all the birds had arrived, there was barely a spare reed in sight and the loud chattering deafening.

With the light beginning to fade, we decided to make our way back to the buses and the hotel. A brilliant first day.

Day 3

Sunday 23rd January

Our morning started early as we decided to head back to RSPB Ham Wall to watch the Starlings emerge from roost. Arriving in the dark, it was a bit of a walk back to the roost but a booming Bittern, first of the year, was an exciting bonus. The eruption of the Starlings was superb, as plumes of birds lifted off from the reeds and out into the open sky leaving us with just an eerie silence. The walk back was filled with just as much drama, the main highlight being a fantastic encounter with three Weasels along one of the side paths. The alarm call and atypical showiness of a Cetti's Warbler was the first clue which was swiftly followed by several other birds moving in to mob the Weasels including a Bearded Tit – unbelievable! Everyone had fantastic views.

After our breakfast it was straight out to check out a few road side stops in search of some select species. Our first was to see a flock of 27 Cattle Egret out in the middle of a field who gave great feeding and aerial views as they lumbered about. Our second was a drive past Tealham Moor, particularly targeting a Tundra Bean Goose which had been recorded in the area but which we failed to see – more on this later. Our final stop was Catcott Meadows where we enjoyed fabulous views of a great range of ducks; taking our time to look at each species through the scope, many less than five metres away. Marsh Harrier, Great White Egret and a Sparrowhawk were further birds of note here.

Following a fantastic lunch, we decided to head back to Tealham Moor to try our luck with the Tundra Bean Goose again. This time we were successful with everyone getting some excellent views. A hunting Merlin fairly close in here was an additional bonus and much improved on our views from the previous day. We then stopped in at the Avalon Marshes centre to try for Brambling but unfortunately didn't see any in amongst the Chaffinch

flock so headed towards Shapwick Heath for a short walk through the wet woodland and then back on to RSPB Ham Wall. We managed to track down both Siskin and Redpoll amongst a flock of Goldfinch and took some time to enjoy a pair of Great Crested Grebe in full courtship. Before heading to the murmuration, we dropped in to see if we could find the Ring-necked Duck but no luck except for wonderful views of Snipe and Little Grebe. We finished our day with the Starlings and what a difference a day makes. Whilst a similar number came in to join the roost, they approached almost stealth-like, low across the reeds and straight into the already crumpled reedbed. Whilst it wasn't the typical murmuration, our positioning right in front of the action made for a dramatic encounter with the noise and chatter overwhelming as 350,000+ Starlings washed and perched in preparation for an overnight stay.

We'd had some excellent birds this trip, including a fantastic selection of local and vagrant species as well as a very special mammal encounter. We had two very different but excellent Starling experiences alongside a whole list of other special encounters which made for a very happy goodbye. No sooner had we arrived at the hotel, everyone had gone their separate ways, ending a wonderful two days' wildlife watching.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	Jan 22	
			22	23
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>Egretta alba</i>	✓	✓
8	Eurasian Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>	•	✓
9	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
10	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	7	•
11	Tundra Bean Goose	<i>Anser serrirostris</i>		1
12	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓
13	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓
14	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓	✓
15	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	✓	✓
16	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓
17	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
18	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	✓	✓
19	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓	✓
20	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	✓	•
21	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
22	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓	✓
23	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	✓	✓
24	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
25	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓
26	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	✓	•
27	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	1	1
28	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓
29	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	2	•
30	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	✓	•
31	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
32	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
33	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	✓	•
34	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
35	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	✓
36	Dunlin	<i>Calidris aplina</i>	✓	•
37	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>	3	•

	Common name	Scientific name	Jan 22	
			22	23
38	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	.	✓
39	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
40	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
41	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia domestica</i>	✓	✓
42	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	✓	.
43	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
44	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
45	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	✓
46	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	.	✓
47	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓	.
48	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓
49	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓
50	Northern Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
51	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
52	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	.
53	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓
54	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
55	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	✓
56	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓
57	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
58	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	✓	✓
59	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	H	✓
60	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	.
61	Bearded Tit	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>	.	✓
62	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
63	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>	✓	.
64	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
65	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
66	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	✓	.
67	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	✓	
68	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	✓	.
69	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	.	✓
70	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
71	Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓
72	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
73	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
74	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	.
75	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
76	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
77	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	Jan 22	
			22	23
78	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
79	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>	·	✓
80	Lesser Redpoll	<i>Carduelis cabaret</i>	·	✓
81	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	·	✓