

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

7th – 9th December 2022



Marsh Harrier by Matt Collis



Bank Vole by Matt Collis



American Wigeon by Nick Bond



Whooper Swan by Nick Bond

Tour report by Matt Collis and Nick Bond



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Tour participants: Matt Collis & Nick Bond (leaders) with 13 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. The Starling roost - an estimated 700,000 birds - have been notably split across several areas over the last few weeks. Although not the whole flock, both our experiences involved fantastic displays as they streamed into the reed bed right in front and murmured on several occasions. As well as the large and diverse gatherings of ducks and plovers, other special encounters from this trip included Eurasian Crane (19), Firecrest, Kingfisher, Whooper Swan (3), Water Rail and an American Mink. We were also blessed with a two other rarities including an American Wigeon and a male Hen Harrier - the pinnacle of any birding trip and seen only very occasionally.

Day One

Wednesday 7th December

The tour began in the Exmoor Room of the wonderful Swan Hotel, set within the picturesque English town of Wells. It was here our trip leaders, Matt and Nick, introduced themselves to the group before each client also introduced themselves and shared their wildlife hopes for the tour. Although a number of differing target species were named, it was clear we all shared the same excitement for hopefully seeing the Starling murmuration.

Matt gave a brief talk on the history of the Somerset Levels, its uniqueness, and introduced some of the habitats and species we hoped to see. Once the rough itinerary and vital information was shared, we drifted over to the dining room where a hearty three course meal was ready and waiting, the first of many lovely meals. We also continued to get to know each other and mulled over the days to come, before retreating to individual rooms for the night.

Day Two

Thursday 8th December

Following breakfast, we headed down to the very southern end of the Levels to visit RSPB Swell Wood. The car park proved incredibly productive with unbeatable views of Nuthatch, Coal Tit and Marsh Tit coming to the feeders the moment we put food down. We also had incredible views of several Treecreeper, including one bird which came within a few metres exploring a log positioned on the ground. From the viewpoint we enjoyed breathtaking landscape views of West Sedgemoor and attempted to spot Eurasian Crane. Although we saw no Cranes, the large flocks of Lapwing and Golden Plover were stunning, especially when they all took to the air as a mystery raptor passed through.

A quick loo stop and we then walked along the edge of West Sedgemoor in the hope of encountering Cranes. We saw plenty of small birds in the hedgerows including a very elusive female Blackcap, but much showier Chiffchaff, as well as both Redwing and Fieldfare foraging in the fields. Scanning the more flooded areas, we picked out a large group of Black-tailed Godwit sat with Lapwing and Golden Plover and spotted out first Great Egret behind a mixed flock of Canada and Greylag geese. It wasn't until we were walking back that we finally spotted Cranes, a group of five flying perfectly in front of us, before spotting a second group of four feeding on the ground not far

from us. Before we left we saw two other groups in flight and another individual on the ground – a great series of sightings.

On route to lunch we had a lucky encounter with another group of Cranes and subsequently potted a Fox sat in a field which quickly slunk away. Same was unfortunately true when a Kingfisher was picked up perched on a low post by the road which sat lovely for a few second before heading off down the ditched.

After lunch we took a quick stroll up to Tower Hide on Shapwick Heath. Our visit started very well when a large female Sparrowhawk flew straight up the path in front of us giving great views. Arriving just outside the hide, we successfully managed to locate a long-staying male American Wigeon nestled in amongst the Eurasian Wigeon - a real bonus for this trip. There was also a great selection of other duck here including our first Pintail, Tufted and Pochard. On the walk back we had fantastic views of a pair of displaying Goldcrest and even managed to spot a Firecrest as it flew over our heads before feeding in some nearby willows allowing some secondary views.

The last part of our day was spent at RSPB Ham Wall where we hoped to enjoy a fantastic Starling murmuration. Given the recent very cold temperatures, the numbers had clearly swelled and from our position we watched as over 500,000 birds come in to roost but in numerous locations around us. Although we weren't fortunate enough to have any raptors arrive to cause the much-loved swirling patterns, we were treated to thousands of birds swarming the sky, both at distance and eventually landing in the reedbed directly next to us; the noise incredible. We stayed until the light had really dropped before returning back to the vehicle and then back to the hotel.

Day Three

Friday 9th December

Following breakfast, we headed to one of the Levels oldest reserves, Westhay Moor. On route, we got very lucky and spotted a large congregation of Cattle Egret in one of the fields by the road. We pulled over and had a good look at the ~60 egrets, mixed in with small numbers of Black-headed Gull, and picked up Grey Wagtail as it flew overhead.

Arriving at the reserve, we decided to walk up and down the main droves and drop in on a few of the hides on route. Much of the open water was frozen so duck numbers were quite low and limited to areas where small sections of water was open. Gadwall, Wigeon, Teal and Shoveler were all spotted and, on several occasions, flushed by a passing Marsh Harrier, male and female, each perching up in trees giving brilliant scope views. We also managed to pick up a couple of Snipe huddled out on the ice near the reed edges and most of the group got views of one of the three Water Rails seen as they searched around in the undergrowth. Arguably the best bird seen here was a Bittern which took off almost as soon as it was spotted and glided majestically over the frozen pond out of view – a brief encounter but one we all felt lucky to get.

The second part of our day was spent around Tealham Moor where we scanned the open flooded fields for any geese or raptors present. After a short search we got lucky and found a Peregrine Falcon sat on the ground which may have explained why very few other birds were present on this occasion. It was, however, also a fantastic chance to see both Redwing and Fieldfare close up and they foraged in the grass less than 20m from the bus. Our second Kingfisher of the trip was also seen sat up on a post, fishing in the little open water it could find.

We carried on to Catcott Meadows and were immediately delighted when we spotted three Whooper Swans directly in front of us mixed in with Mute Swan for a bit of a challenge. Another Marsh Harrier appeared, as did Great Egret and a large flock of Wigeon, Teal, Shoveler and a lone Pintail. Although not great views, a small flock of Meadow Pipit were around and the distinct call of Water Pipit was heard as they passed over our heads, settling into long grass making a visual ID impossible.

Our last stop of the day was back at RSPB Ham Wall where we returned to last night's viewing point for the Starling Murmuration. The experience was very different from our previous with notably less time with the birds in the air but better displays of mini-murmurations as both a Sparrowhawk and Peregrine Falcon made an appearance, the former deciding to sit ominously in a tree immediately next to where the Starlings were roosting. Numbers were still incredibly high and may even have been a record breaking roost for the year with an estimated 700,000 birds. Just as we thought we'd had everything from this trip, we had one last moment of magic when a male Hen Harrier appeared, the trips unicorn bird, courting over the reeds for almost ten minutes before heading off, seemingly to roost in another location. It was the best ending we could have hoped for and a real coo for all those present.

We returned to the buses and then to the hotel to say our goodbyes after a fabulous trip with memorable birds, lots of laughs and some good stories to take home.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

| Common name | Scientific name | December 2022 | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------|---|
| | | 8 | 9 |
| Canada Goose - I | <i>Branta canadensis</i> | ✓ | |
| Greylag Goose | <i>Anser anser</i> | ✓ | |
| Mute Swan | <i>Cygnus olor</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Whooper Swan | <i>Cygnus cygnus</i> | | 3 |
| Northern Shoveler | <i>Spatula clypeata</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Gadwall | <i>Mareca strepera</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Eurasian Wigeon | <i>Mareca penelope</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| American Wigeon | <i>Mareca americana</i> | 1 | |
| Mallard | <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Northern Pintail | <i>Anas acuta</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Eurasian Teal | <i>Anas crecca</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Common Pochard | <i>Aythya ferina</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Tufted Duck | <i>Aythya fuligula</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Common Pheasant - I | <i>Phasianus colchicus</i> | ✓ | |
| Rock Dove | <i>Columba livia</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Stock Dove | <i>Columba oenas</i> | ✓ | |
| Common Wood Pigeon | <i>Columba palumbus</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Eurasian Collared Dove | <i>Streptopelia decaocto</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Water Rail | <i>Rallus aquaticus</i> | H | ✓ |
| Common Moorhen | <i>Gallinula chloropus</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Eurasian Coot | <i>Fulica atra</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Common Crane | <i>Grus grus</i> | 19 | |
| Little Grebe | <i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i> | | ✓ |
| Northern Lapwing | <i>Vanellus vanellus</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| European Golden Plover | <i>Pluvialis apricaria</i> | ✓ | |
| Black-tailed Godwit | <i>Limosa limosa</i> | ✓ | |
| Common Snipe | <i>Gallinago gallinago</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Black-headed Gull | <i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Great Black-backed Gull | <i>Larus marinus</i> | | ✓ |
| European Herring Gull | <i>Larus argentatus</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Great Cormorant | <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Eurasian Bittern | <i>Botaurus stellaris</i> | | ✓ |
| Western Cattle Egret | <i>Bubulcus ibis</i> | | 1 |
| Grey Heron | <i>Ardea cinerea</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Great Egret | <i>Ardea alba</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Little Egret | <i>Egretta garzetta</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Eurasian Sparrowhawk | <i>Accipiter nisus</i> | ✓ | ✓ |

| Common name | Scientific name | December 2022 | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------|---|
| | | 8 | 9 |
| Western Marsh Harrier | <i>Circus aeruginosus</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Hen Harrier | <i>Circus cyaneus</i> | | ✓ |
| Common Buzzard | <i>Buteo buteo</i> | ✓ | |
| Tawny Owl | <i>Strix aluco</i> | H | |
| Common Kingfisher | <i>Alcedo atthis</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Great Spotted Woodpecker | <i>Dendrocopos major</i> | ✓ | |
| Common Kestrel | <i>Falco tinnunculus</i> | ✓ | |
| Peregrine Falcon | <i>Falco peregrinus</i> | | ✓ |
| Eurasian Jay | <i>Garrulus glandarius</i> | ✓ | |
| Eurasian Magpie | <i>Pica pica</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Western Jackdaw | <i>Coloeus monedula</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Rook | <i>Corvus frugilegus</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Carrion Crow | <i>Corvus corone</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Northern Raven | <i>Corvus corax</i> | ✓ | |
| Coal Tit | <i>Parus ater</i> | ✓ | |
| Marsh Tit | <i>Poecile palustris</i> | ✓ | |
| Eurasian Blue Tit | <i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Great Tit | <i>Parus major</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Cetti's Warbler | <i>Cettia cetti</i> | H | ✓ |
| Long-tailed Tit | <i>Aegithalos caudatus</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Common Chiffchaff | <i>Phylloscopus collybita</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Eurasian Blackcap | <i>Sylvia atricapilla</i> | ✓ | |
| Common Firecrest | <i>Regulus ignicapilla</i> | ✓ | |
| Goldcrest | <i>Regulus regulus</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Eurasian Wren | <i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Eurasian Nuthatch | <i>Sitta europaea</i> | ✓ | |
| Eurasian Treecreeper | <i>Certhia familiaris</i> | ✓ | |
| Common Starling | <i>Sturnus vulgaris</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Song Thrush | <i>Turdus philomelos</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Mistle Thrush | <i>Turdus viscivorus</i> | ✓ | |
| Redwing | <i>Turdus iliacus</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Common Blackbird | <i>Turdus merula</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Fieldfare | <i>Turdus pilaris</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| European Robin | <i>Erithacus rubecula</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| European Stonechat | <i>Saxicola rubicola</i> | | ✓ |
| House Sparrow | <i>Passer domesticus</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Dunnock | <i>Prunella modularis</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| White Wagtail | <i>Motacilla alba</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Meadow Pipit | <i>Anthus pratensis</i> | | ✓ |
| Water Pipit | <i>Anthus spinoletta</i> | | H |

| Common name | Scientific name | December 2022 | |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|---------------|---|
| | | 8 | 9 |
| Common Chaffinch | <i>Fringilla coelebs</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Lesser Redpoll | <i>Acanthis cabaret</i> | H | |
| European Goldfinch | <i>Carduelis carduelis</i> | ✓ | ✓ |
| Eurasian Siskin | <i>Spinus spinus</i> | ✓ | |
| Common Reed Bunting | <i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i> | | ✓ |