

# The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

14th – 16th December 2022

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Water Rail



Common Buzzard



Great White Egret



American Mink

Tour report and images by Matt Collis

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Tour participants: Matt Collis (leader) with six 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 750,000 birds – was unbelievable and we had two unforgettable displays thanks to frozen water and arctic temperatures. As well as the large and diverse gatherings of ducks and plovers, other special encounters from this trip included Eurasian Crane (21), two good views of Bittern, Water Rail at point blank range and a whole host of other sightings.

## Day One

**Wednesday 14th December**

The tour began in the Exmoor Room of the wonderful Swan Hotel, set within the picturesque English town of Wells. It was here trip leader, Matt, introduced himself 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 15th December**

Following breakfast, we headed down to the very southern end of the Levels to visit RSPB Swell Wood. The car park proved to be the hotspot for birds here with great views of Nuthatch, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Coal Tit and Marsh Tit coming to the feeders we'd filled. From the viewpoint we enjoyed breath-taking landscape views of West Sedgemoor and attempted to spot Eurasian Crane. With temperatures at -2 the frozen pools and field offered little in the way of birds except one very distant Marsh Harrier. Returning to the carpark we had one more treat which was views of several Treecreeper as they scrambled around the tops of the Oaks.

A quick loo stop and we then walked along the edge of West Sedgemoor in the hope of spotting the Cranes. We saw a few small birds in the hedgerows including Dunnock and Wren, before having a very showy Fieldfare sit up on a fence close by as we watched a Roe Deer. Scanning the reserve, we picked out a large group of Lapwing and had several Marsh Harrier perched in various locations. Still no Cranes. We tried one more location, our last hope, and our prayers were answered with 22 Eurasian Crane stood close together, looking very alert and poised to fly. Whilst some of the group settled back to feeding, others took to the air and gave us wonderful views as they off bugling as they went – perfect!

On route to our final location of the morning, RSPB Greylake, we had a surprise encounter with a Sparrowhawk which flew across the front of the bus and down the road. Arriving at RSPB Greylake, we were immediately rewarded with point blank views of a Water Rail, one of several seen here and throughout the day, no doubt made

more brazen by the cold. We had a brief view of both Reed Bunting and Cetti's Warbler but otherwise the reserve was quiet, particularly in front of the hides where not a single duck could be found.

After lunch we took the long route to RSPB Ham Wall, thwarted by two unexpected road closures. It resulted in us picking up a nice flock of Wigeon feeding in a field and a whole mix of other birds including Coot, Gadwall, Shoveler, Greylag and Great Egret. Our delay also meant we arrived at the reserve at the perfect moment to encounter a Mink running down Southern Drain along the ice. It gave incredible views, running right out into the open less than 5m away and stopping several times to check us out. With the pools still frozen, duck numbers were limited to small congregations around the smallest 'watering holes' but it gave us chance to go through each species one by one and pick up both Pintail and Little Grebe.

We finished our day attempting to get good views of the Starling roost and, hopefully, a murmuration. The sky was crystal clear and so we waited while watching the most beautiful sunset. A combination of the cold and clear skies seemed to delay the arrival of the birds but when they did arrive, they were in incredible numbers. After repositioning ourselves, we watched as over 750,000 birds dropped into the reed beds, covering the reeds in a black blanket so thick you couldn't see the ground. We repositioned again and enjoyed a steady stream of Starlings coming in directly over our heads and into the reeds straight in front, the noise incredible. In the final stages of the gathering, a juvenile Peregrine made a few attempts to pick off any stragglers, swooping up and down at the fringes of the group, but alas no luck and it headed off. We stayed until the light had really dropped at which point a roost of 30+ Great Egret had gathered on the opposite reed bed – an unusual event to see. Thoroughly cold, we headed back to the vehicle and then back to the hotel for a warm drink and well earned dinner.

## Day Three

## Friday 16th December

We awoke early and set off in the dark, heading towards RSPB Ham Wall for a pre-breakfast walk in the hope of seeing the Starlings leave their overnight roost. Our arrival was perfect with the Starling chatter loud and birds restless. They began shuffling the moment we arrived and the first group lifting off high into the air, dispersing in all directions like a firework. This repeated for the next ten minutes with enormous plumes of birds roaring into the air before then thinning out across the sky over our heads. It was ice cold so we didn't stay long after but did also see lots of Great Egret, some flyover Lesser Redpoll and a brief view of Kingfisher. It was magical and a great start to the day.

Following breakfast, we headed to one of the Levels oldest reserves, Westhay Moor. On route, we stopped to view a couple of Cattle Egret in some fields by the road and watched both a Buzzard and Kestrel perched on posts right next to the van. Once at the reserve, we decided to walk up and down the main drives and drop in on a few of the hides on route. Much of the open water was frozen so ducks numbers were low except for one area where a congregation of ducks had formed around an opening in the water. Gadwall, Wigeon, Teal and Shoveler were all spotted and, on several occasions, flushed by a passing Marsh Harrier, both a male and female. We also managed to pick up a couple of Snipe, had some excellent views of Reed Bunting feeding on reed heads and laughed when confronted with a small army of Coot thirty strong walked up one of the paths. Arguably the best birding moment here was seeing two Bittern, both of which took off from reed beds close to us and then flew majestically before flying out of view – all too brief but encounters we all felt lucky to get.

After warming up in a local pub, we decided to visit Catcott Meadows where, due to a solid sheet of ice, many of the normal gathering of birds was absent. A couple of Mute Swan, a group of Teal and some distant Wigeon and Shoveler were the only birds braving the ice. Despite this, we still had amazing close views of Stonechat, Starling and a Snipe which walked across the front of our viewing point showing amazingly well.

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. It was one of the most unusual and fantastic displays you could hope for, with numbers incredibly startlingly high and relentless aerial displays. With much of the reed bed locked in by ice, it became obvious the Starlings were favouring, and desperately searching for, anywhere with an opening so they could wash. We'd positioned ourselves directly in front of one such opening, potentially one of the only places on the reserve, and so swarm after swarm of Starlings attempted to squeeze into just a single stretch of ~20m of reed bed. The result was beautiful chaos with endless swirling patterns, a sky full of birds and numerous murmurations caused by multiple Sparrowhawk attacks – stunning! Counting the birds proved particularly difficult but a million birds didn't feel impossible.

It was the best ending we could have hoped for and we all returned to the buses and then to the hotel with the biggest grins. It was time to say our goodbyes after a fabulous trip with memorable birds, lots of laughs and some wonderful stories to take home.

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## Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	December 2022	
		15	16
Canada Goose - I	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	H
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
Egyptian Goose - I	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>		✓
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓	✓
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓	✓
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</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>	3	✓
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	21	
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	✓	✓
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓	
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	1	
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		✓
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>		2
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	1	4
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓	✓
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1	✓
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓	✓
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓

Common name	Scientific name	December 2022	
		15	16
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	H	✓
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	✓
European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>		H
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>	✓	✓
Coal Tit	<i>Periparus 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>	✓	✓
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</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>	✓	✓
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		✓
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	H	H
Lesser Redpoll	<i>Acanthis cabaret</i>		✓
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		✓

		December 2022	
Common name	Scientific name	15	16
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓

American Mink and Roe Deer seen on 15th December.