

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

4th – 6th January 2023

Tour report by Matt Collis



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Tour participants: Matt Collis and Simon Woolley (Leaders) with 14 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, Merlin, Marsh Harrier, Great Egret, Bittern and a whole host of other sightings.

Day One

Wednesday 4th January

The tour began in the Exmoor Room of the wonderful Swan Hotel, set within the picturesque English town of Wells. It was here that trip leaders, Matt and Simon, 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 5th January

Following breakfast, we headed down to the very southern end of the Levels to visit RSPB Swell Wood. We found the car park alive with birds and proceeded to get close views of Nuthatch, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Coal Tit and the more elusive Marsh Tit of which we saw several. Further into the wood we stumbled across small groups of Goldcrest, frantically chasing each other, and a nice view of a Treecreeper which was one of several in full song. At the viewpoint we stopped to take in the breath-taking landscape of West Sedgemoor and attempted to spot Eurasian Crane. The area was incredibly flooded and small groups of Wigeon, Lapwing and Canada Geese could be seen on the water. Distant Marsh Harrier and small numbers of Roe Deer were also spotted and then, finally, two pairs of Eurasian Crane seen calling to each other. Lastly, before returning to the car park, we were treated to excellent views of two Sparrowhawks seemingly displaying to one another – a fantastic start

A quick loo stop and before heading to Burrow Mump for a scan of the nearby fields. Again, we were presented with a particularly flooded landscape and several flocks of Lapwing, Teal and a mix of other duck including a few Pintail and Wigeon. The main highlight here was two Eurasian Crane which flew in from distance and then passed over, landing in the adjacent fields. We also had some distant views of Redwing and Fieldfare, disturbed by a passing Merlin, both unfortunately lost behind a tall hedgerow.

Our final location of the morning was RSPB Greylake. Kestrels seemed to be perched everywhere with at least four seen during our visit. On the main reserve we had fantastic views of flocks of Common Snipe and from the hide we were treated to an incredible number of Wigeon, Teal, Shoveler and Lapwing. Fairly frequently this mass

of birds were flushed to the skies by a passing Marsh Harrier – a spectacular sight. These large flocks were joined by hundreds of Golden Plover which seemed to favour the drier grasslands to the sides.

After lunch we headed to our final stop of the day at RSPB Ham Wall. We took our time wandering up the main track, picking up a gorgeous pair of Bullfinch and a lone Redpoll in the same area of Silver Birch. Further up by the pools we had a very close encounter with a Great Egret and further close views of Common Snipe. The main pool at VP1 was particularly busy with large numbers of Lapwing and a recently formed flock of Black-tailed Godwit (40) in amongst them. We also had our first Tufted Duck, a lone male Pochard, Little Grebe and lots of Gadwall from a neighbouring pool. Marsh Harrier also showed particularly well here with several female and male birds seen across the reserve.

We finished our day attempting to get good views of the Starling roost and, hopefully, a murmuration. The Starling certainly didn't disappoint. An enormous flock formed in front of our eyes with numbers constantly increasing as flock after flock joined the swarm. The numbers swelled until a flock ~300,000 birds strong had gelled into a single ball of black across the sky. At the perfect moment, a Sparrowhawk appeared, pushing the birds in a twisting and contorted complex of shapes that wooed us all. After a few minutes, the whole flock plunged into the reeds, a process that took less than a minute and gave us further contorted shapes – it truly was magical. We lingered for a short time longer, enjoying the spectacle as a similar number of birds arrived but in split flocks and from all angles. We walked back down the main track and found another small roost had formed elsewhere, taking our total roost size to somewhere over 750,000 birds. A fantastic display to end our day.

Day Three

Friday 6th January

We spent most of our morning at one of the Levels oldest reserves, Westhay Moor, exploring the main droves and visiting a few hides. Small numbers of duck could be seen on the open pools including Mallard, Shoveler, Teal and Gadwall which we admired for some time through the scope. A lone Great Crested Grebe was found; a bird that has been particularly uncommon this winter so far. Cormorant, Greylag and Canada Geese were present in good numbers as were Marsh Harrier. A highlight was spotting a pair of Goosander on the main pool and a pair of Reed Bunting which showed gloriously from just a few metres. We had fleeting views of Kingfisher and Cetti's Warbler, and an even briefer view of a Bittern as it landed into a reedbed before slinking off out of sight.

After a quick loo stop, we decided to finish our morning with a whistle stop visit to Catcott Meadows where we had another excellent display of ducks, predominantly Wigeon, as well as more Teal and Shoveler. We also managed to focus in on two beautiful pairs of Pintail and enjoyed further excellent views of hunting Great Egret, Stonechat and another Marsh Harrier.

Once we refuelled at a local pub, we then headed off for a drive across Tealham Moor before heading to the Starlings. We had a fantastic experience with two Merlin, one male one female, both of which were perched close to the road and gave excellent views. The first flew off into a tall tree where we watched it through the scope, the other sat on a fence post for a short while before flying off across the fields. Finally, we attempted to find Cattle Egret which often frequent this area but alas (and very unusually) not a single bird was spotted.

We finished our day back at the Starling Murmuration but this time we'd gone to a new viewing point much closer to the main roost. It was an incredible display with hundreds of thousands of birds swarming the air above us

before crashing down into the reedbed directly in front. The aerial part of the display was notably much shorter than our previous visit but the intimacy, noise and three-sixty nature of the experience was simply sensational. The drama didn't stop there as several Sparrowhawk attempted to hunt the flock, causing tight swirling ripples as the Starling attempted to avoid them. One bird wasn't so lucky and, in a dramatic moment, a Sparrowhawk came hurtling right past us and landed a mere 15 metres beyond us at the edge of a ditch. We had fabulous views for about a minute before it took off, dead prey in talons.

It was a scintillating end to our trip and we all returned to the buses and then to the hotel with wide smiles and happy hearts. We ended by saying our goodbyes, thankful for 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	January 2023	
		5	6
Canada Goose - I	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</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>	3	4

Common name	Scientific name	January 2023	
		5	6
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	1	
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		2
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	H
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	6	
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	✓	✓
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	1	1
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	✓	
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	40	
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	✓
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</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>	✓	✓
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</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>	✓	✓
European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	✓	
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	1	2
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>	✓	

Common name	Scientific name	January 2023	
		5	6
Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	✓	
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
Bearded Reedling	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>		H
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</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>	✓	
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	✓	
Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	✓	H
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>	✓	✓
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	✓	✓
Lesser Redpoll	<i>Acanthis cabaret</i>	1	8
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		1
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓

Mammals

Pipistrelle Bat *Pipistrellus sp.*

Roe Deer *Capreolus capreolus*