

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

13th – 15th January 2023

Tour report by Matt Collis



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: Matt Collis (Leader) with eight 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 – 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, American Wigeon, Garganey, Hen Harrier, Peregrine, Goosander and a whole host of other sightings.

Day One

Friday 13th January

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

Saturday 14th January

Following breakfast, we headed down to the very southern end of the Levels to visit RSPB Swell Wood. On arrival, no sooner had we put some bird seed down in the car park, it came alive with birds and we proceeded to get wonderful views of Nuthatch, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Coal Tit and Chaffinch. We then went to the viewpoint, taking in the breath-taking landscape of West Sedgemoor and attempted to spot Eurasian Crane. The area was incredibly flooded with barely a blade of grass uncovered, with small groups of Lapwing the only birds present in any numbers. Marsh Harrier, Great Egret and small numbers of Roe Deer were also spotted and then finally, Eurasian Crane. Initially we just had a fly past but then two pairs were spotted calling to each other and they proceeded to strut around giving brilliant views.

On returning to the car park, we dropped in to see Heronry which, despite being empty, was fascinating as the nests are so clear at this time. We even saw one Grey Heron make a flyby, seemingly checking in ready for the breeding season to begin. Our final treat here was finally spotting the more elusive Marsh Tit. It took some time but eventually one stayed long enough for everyone to get excellent view.

A quick loo stop allowed us to pick up a small flock of Greenfinch, a rarely seen bird on this tour, mixed in with Goldfinch and House Sparrow. It was then onto RSPB Greylake for the last stop of the morning. A Buzzard hunting worms close to the car park was an excellent start, soon followed up by Kestrel, Skylark (3) and a large but distant super flock of finches, presumably Chaffinch. On the main reserve we had fantastic views of many

Common Snipe, a small flock of Redwing, Stonechat, Cetti's Warbler and a lovely male Reed Bunting. From the hide we were treated to an incredible number of Wigeon, Teal, Shoveler and Lapwing, all being flushed to the skies by passing Marsh Harrier; a spectacular sight. To our utter delight there was a very persistent immature female Peregrine who repeatedly attempted to pick up a prey item just out of view. As a result, we got to watch this bird go back and forth through the sky for over ten minutes, eventually seeing it give up and sit on a bank. Finally, as we headed back to the van, a large flock of Lapwing were joined by hundreds of Golden Plover and swirled high in the air together at the very back of the reserve.

After lunch we headed to our final stop of the day at RSPB Ham Wall. We started with a quick detour to Shapwick Heath in search of a long-staying rarity, an American Wigeon. We got very lucky and located the bird very fast snoozing on the banks of a pool. It also allowed us to pick up some great views of Gadwall, Tufted Duck, Pochard and large number of Eurasian Wigeon – perfect for comparing to our American bird. We then return to RSPB Ham Wall and took our time wandering up the main track towards VP2. In general, small birds were thin on the ground but we then hit a roving mixed flock containing Chiffchaff, Goldcrest, Long-tailed Tit and Blue Tit. We also picked up a small number of Redpoll which, to our great disappointment, soon flew off. Further along we had a very nice encounter with a Great Egret and picked up our first Great Crested Grebe of the trip. Arriving at VP2, we were also treated to the holy grail rarity of this trip, a male Hen Harrier, which quartered over the reeds for several minutes before seemingly disappearing behind a Willow coppice – what a treat!

Our final event of the day was 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 Peregrine appeared, an immature female and potentially the same bird we'd seen earlier in the day. Her appearance pushed the birds in a twisting and contorted complex of shapes that audibly wowed the crowd. This went on for several minutes, and not long after a Sparrowhawk came and joined the frenzy, keeping the birds in the air even longer. In fact, the event went on for so long that it began to get dark and, due to the panic, the Starling landed in a completely new roost. We didn't see this but taking a short walk down towards the area, we could then see and hear the enormous roost of birds sat on the reedbeds and very unsettled. We lingered for a short time longer, enjoying as more birds arrived but split with small flocks seemingly heading towards the old roost site. It was a fascinating display, involving somewhere around 700,000 birds and was a fantastic end our day.

Day Three

Sunday 15th January

We started our day with a morning walk at one of the Levels oldest reserves, Westhay Moor, exploring the main droves and visiting a few hides. Our first sighting was Peregrine, spotted from the car park as it flew low overhead, similar in appearance to the immature female from yesterday. 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 year, and just a single Marsh Harrier. A highlight was spotting a pair of Goosander on the main pool and a Reed Bunting which showed gloriously from just a few metres feeding on a reed head. We also had long views of a Great Egret which was sunning itself on the bank. Fleeting views of both Treecreeper and Cetti's Warbler were achieved, and an even briefer view of a Kingfisher which flew from its perch soon after we had spotted it.

After a quick loo stop, we then headed for a drive across Tealham Moor on route to Catcott Meadows. We started with fantastic views of a Cattle Egret with a small group of Little Egret, perfect for comparing the two. We then picked up a couple of Stonechat by the road followed by a Kingfisher which flew parallel along the channel and out of view. A stunning male Kestrel was seen resting on a perch along the same channel and posed wonderfully allowing long views. Great Egret, Marsh Harrier and a pair of Raven feasting on a carcass could all be seen distantly. Once at Catcott Meadows, we only stayed briefly but had another excellent display of ducks, predominantly Wigeon, as well as more Teal and Shoveler. We also managed to focus in on four beautiful pairs of Pintail and enjoyed further excellent views of hunting Great Egret, Stonechat and another Marsh Harrier.

We stopped for a hearty pub lunch before squeezing one little 'twitch' into our day to see a male Garganey reported at Ham Wall. With limited time, we didn't pay too much close attention to the rest of the reserve but a flock of Siskin in the car park was notable as was our brief view of a longer staying female Garganey, who unfortunately swam into an unviewable channel. On arrival at the correct spot, it took less than five seconds to locate the male Garganey which was actually roosting with a couple of Mallard low on a tree branch next to the viewing screen! After a bit of guidance, everyone got onto it and enjoyed the stunning plumage of this wonderful and very rare winter duck.

We finished our day with the Starling Murmuration but this time we'd gone to a new viewing point much closer to the main roost. It was a dramatic display with thousands of birds flying in over our heads, amassing into an enormous block of black that drifted widely over the reeds. Two Sparrowhawk made an appearance, one perching directly above us giving great views. A Peregrine also flew past us, carrying a Starling in its talons, following a successful hunt. It then felt as if the main flock was moving away from us, potentially settling into a new roost following yesterday's disturbance. The light had faded and we were just about to give up when the air suddenly swarmed with Starlings headed towards us before crashing down into the reed bed directly in front. Although the aerial acrobatics were brief, they were super dramatic and the intimacy, noise and drama of the experience was simply sensational.

It was a scintillating end to our trip and we all returned to the bus and 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	
		14	15
Canada Goose - I	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓	✓
Garganey	<i>Spatula querquedula</i>		2(M&F)
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓	✓
American Wigeon	<i>Mareca americana</i>		1(M)
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>		8
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	12+	✓
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		2
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	H
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓

Common name	Scientific name	January 2023	
		14	15
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	6	
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	H	1
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	4	✓
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	✓	
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>	✓	✓
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>	✓	✓
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓	✓
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	1(M)	
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
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>	2	✓
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>Periparus ater</i>	✓	✓
Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	✓	
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	3	
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	✓	✓
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	1	✓
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	H	
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	✓	

Common name	Scientific name	January 2023	
		14	15
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>	✓	✓
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		✓
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓	
Lesser Redpoll	<i>Acanthis cabaret</i>	✓	
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		✓
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓

Mammals

Bank Vole (*Myodes glareolus*)

Roe Deer (*Capreolus capreolus*)