

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

18th – 20th 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 and Simon Dicks (Leaders) with 11 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 600,000 birds – was stunning and we had two brilliant displays thanks to particularly cold temperatures and the close positioning of the roost. As well as the large and diverse gatherings of ducks and plovers, other special encounters from this trip included Eurasian Crane (4), Lesser Scaup, American Wigeon, Bittern, Cattle Egret, Great Egret, White-fronted Goose and excellent views of Firecrest.

Day 1

Wednesday 18th January

The tour began in the Exmoor Room of the wonderful Swan Hotel, set within the picturesque English city of Wells. It was here trip leader Matt introduced himself and Simon 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 several 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 19th January

Following breakfast, we headed down to the very southern end of the Levels to visit RSPB Swell Wood. On arrival, we headed straight to watch the feeders and 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 almost completely flooded and subsequently frozen over, resulting in particularly few birds seen from here except a distant Great Egret, plus small numbers of Roe Deer. On returning to the car park, we dropped in to see the heronry which, despite being empty, was fascinating as the nests were clear to see in the leafless trees. We tried one final time for the elusive Marsh Tit and, after a few short minutes, we got lucky with two birds repeatedly coming in allowing everyone excellent views.

We took a quick loo stop, picking up a small flock of Greenfinch, a rarely seen bird on this tour, mixed in with Goldfinch and House Sparrow. It was then onto Burrow Mump from which we once again had incredible views across the flooded and frozen landscape. Teal, Wigeon, Lapwing, Canada Geese, Kestrel and a sleeping Red Fox were some of the very few things spotted here, again, thanks to the frozen ground. We moved on to RSPB Greylake and had a few lovely sightings including a perched Kingfisher, Great Egret, Fieldfare, Buzzard and a Merlin chasing a Marsh Harrier. The main reserve itself was, once again,

fairly quiet with the large groups of ducks and waders seemingly gone from the ice-locked landscape. Fortunately, large numbers of Common Snipe had decided to stick it out giving fabulous views. We also picked out Stonechat, Reed Bunting and Redwing from the hide but by far the best bird was a male Sparrowhawk which perched on a post 30 metres away before proceeding to chase a flock of Meadow Pipits – incredible!

After lunch we headed to our final stop of the day at RSPB Ham Wall. We took our time wandering up the main track towards VP2 on the lookout for a Garganey seen a few days before, however, as we'd come to expect, most of the pools were frozen and held little to no birds. Our best sightings were our first Pochard, Tufted Duck and Great Crested Grebe of the trip followed by excellent close views of a Great Egret. We also admired a fantastic gathering of Coot and Gadwall which were actively feeding together harvesting the pond weed.

Our final event of the day was attempting to get good views of the Starling roost and, hopefully, a murmuration. We got off to a flying start with an enormous flock forming right in front of us over the reedbed. Numbers constantly increased as flock after flock came from all directions and slowly began to swarm as one. A brief attack by a Sparrowhawk sent the whole flock into a tumbling black ribbon of birds, as if caught by a strong wind, before returning to a more relaxed mass filling the sky. At around ~300,000 birds, the first began to enter the reeds, causing a chain reaction that saw a constant but steady stream of birds enter the reedbed. A black blanket lay over the golden fronds as the Starlings overwhelmed the individual stems. We could now hear the enormous roost of birds, continuously joined by more large flocks taking overall numbers to around 600,000 with another 150,000 appearing to roost elsewhere. We lingered for a short time longer, enjoying the spectacle, before it was time to return to hotel at the end of our first day.

Day Three

Friday 20th January

We started our day with a round robin explore of some less known areas of the Somerset Levels in search of some local rarities. We got off to a good start, successfully locating a Lesser Scaup in amongst a busy flock of Tufted, Pochard and Gadwall. It played hard to get, diving frequently and positioned at the back of a large pond, but eventually most had successfully spotted it. Arguably, the Bittern which flew straight across the centre of the pond was more impressive and much easier to see!

We then made our way to another viewing point to search through a mixed flock of Canada Geese and Greylag. It didn't take us long to pick out the lone White-fronted Goose although it seemed to enjoy playing hide and seek behind a small cluster of Greylags. Our next stop was at Shapwick Heath where we headed straight to the first pond to search through the ducks huddled around the small ice-free opening in the water. A few minutes later and we spotted the American Wigeon, this time settled amongst the Eurasian Wigeon giving excellent comparison views. We also spotted more Pochard, Tufted Duck, Gadwall, and a Marsh Harrier which seemed intent on creating havoc with our viewing. Strolling back to the car park, we had a couple more fantastic encounters with incredible close views of Reed Bunting feeding on seed heads, male Bullfinch, Goldcrest and a Firecrest which showed to within a few metres – what a morning!

Our last stop before lunch was a short walk at one of the Levels oldest reserves, Westhay Moor, exploring the main droves and visiting a few hides. Once again, the freezing temperatures had all but dispersed all the birds at this site and so we had very few good sightings here and no sign of Bearded Tit despite a concerted effort. Our only consolation was a small group of Cattle Egret (4) seen with some of the cattle just outside a local village. Not only did they show nicely, but a Little and Great Egret were close by for perfect comparison views.

Not long after filling our bellies with a hearty pub lunch, we were back on the birding, starting with close views of Redwing, Fieldfare and Lapwing right next to the pub car park. We then made our way back down to the southern half of the levels to re-attempt seeing Eurasian Crane after our blank yesterday. A new day, new luck, and our good fortune continued as four birds were spotted on the edges of a frozen flooded field. The viewing was distant and sometimes challenging with the birds drifting behind the hedges. Fortunately, the birds were very unsettled and on multiple occasions they took to the air, making long looping flights across the landscape, calling as they flew, affording prime views that everyone got to enjoy – magic!

We finished our day back with the Starling Murmuration and were once again faced with a wonderful display as thousands of birds flew directly overhead, amassing into an enormous block of black that drifted widely over the reeds. No raptors made an appearance and so no eruptive dancing on this occasion. As the light faded away, we slowly strolled back towards the car park ready to head back to the hotel, but not before one more new bird for our trip, a Woodcock, was spotted flying over our heads in a starlit sky.

We jumped into the bus and returned to the hotel with wide smiles after a red-letter day's birding. We wrapped up our trip with a few goodbyes, thankful for a fabulous few days with memorable birds, lots of laughs and some wonderful stories to take home.

Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk to sign up.

Social Media

We're social! Follow us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and be the first to hear about the launch of new tours, offers and exciting sightings and photos from our recently returned holidays.



www.facebook.com/naturetrekwildlifeholidays



www.twitter.com/naturetrektours



www.instagram.com/naturetrek_wildlife_holidays

Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	January 2023	
		19	20
Canada Goose - I	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	
White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>		1
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓	✓
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓	✓
American Wigeon	<i>Mareca americana</i>		1(M)
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	✓	✓
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
Lesser Scaup	<i>Aythya affinis</i>		1(F)
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>		6
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	H	✓
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓	✓
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		30+
Eurasian Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>		1
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>	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>		1
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		30+
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓	✓

Common name	Scientific name	January 2023	
		19	20
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>	✓	✓
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	1
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>	✓	✓
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>		H
Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>		1
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>	✓	✓
Duncock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	✓	✓

Common name	Scientific name	January 2023	
		19	20
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		✓
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓	
Lesser Redpoll	<i>Acanthis cabaret</i>		✓
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓

Mammals

Roe Deer – *Capreolus capreolus*

Red Fox – *Vulpes vulpes*

Grey Squirrel – *Sciurus carolinensis*