

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

1st – 3rd February 2023

Tour report by Matt Collis



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Tour participants: Matt Collis and Nick Bond (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 500,000 birds – was stunning and we had two brilliant but very different displays. As well as the large and diverse gatherings of ducks and plovers, other special encounters from this trip included Eurasian Crane (4), two good views of Bittern, Hen Harrier, Merlin, Lesser Scaup, American Wigeon and a whole host of other sightings.

Day One

Wednesday 1st February

The tour began in the Indoor Garden Room of the wonderful Swan Hotel, set within the picturesque English town of Wells. It was here trip leader, Matt, introduced himself and Nick 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 2nd February

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. This area had been subject to extensive flooding which had now receded and had left the perfect conditions for wintering birds. Spectacular shimmering flocks of Lapwing and Golden Plover pushed into the sky, spooked by the occasional Marsh Harrier. Great Egret could be seen hunting in the ditches and a Buzzard perched in a nearby dead Oak. After a short time scanning, four Eurasian Cranes were spotted and gave great views through the scope. We took the long loop back to the car park, briefly dropping in to see the active Heronry with several birds sitting on visible nests in the leafless trees. We then tried one final time for the elusive Marsh Tit and, after a tantalising wait, we finally got lucky with two birds repeatedly coming in, allowing everyone excellent views.

We took a quick loo stop before dropping in at RSPB Greylake for the remainder of our morning. The internal section of the reserve was heavily disturbed due to active coppicing work, however, from the hides we could see a good number of Teal, Shoveler, Wigeon and Gadwall, and picked out several of the numerous Common Snipe hidden in amongst the ducks. Stonechat and Reed Bunting were also spotted and both Water Rail and Cetti's Warbler heard.

After lunch we headed to Shapwick Heath, walking up the central drove and viewing Noah's Lake from the hide. We had lovely views of both Siskin and Bullfinch within the trees on our walk up and then much briefer views of a Kingfisher and two Glossy Ibis; both flew past us on route to unknown locations. We successfully managed to find the long staying male American Wigeon, despite its best efforts to hide, and also got lucky with a Bittern in flight which stayed long enough in the air for everyone to connect with it before it dropped into the reeds. Noah's Lake was covered in duck, mostly Wigeon, but also plentiful Pintail which was the only new bird for us.

Our final event of the day was an attempt to view the Starling roost and, hopefully, a murmuration. Nerves were high as the flock had been very erratic in the last few days, but we got off to a good start with numerous big flocks heading our way. We repositioned once we'd worked out that the flock was mostly settling further up the reserve. Once in place we had a fantastic display with numbers constantly increasing as arriving flocks merged into one giant swarm. Several attacks by Sparrowhawk sent the flock twisting and tumbling, giving everyone the murmuration we'd hoped for and the flock stayed airborne for at least fifteen minutes before finally crashing downing into the reedbed; at least 350,000 birds. During the murmuration a female Hen Harrier was spotted circling around with a few Marsh Harrier before drifting off out of view. On the walk back to the van, the group spotted a Mustelid walking along the bank and then slipping down into the water. First thoughts were an Otter but after some consultation with the leaders it was deemed likely an American Mink. A great end to our first day.

Day Three

Friday 3rd February

We started our second day with an attempt to pick up a few local rarities which were located close to RSPB Ham Wall. We got off to a good start, successfully locating a Lesser Scaup in amongst a busy flock of Tufted Duck, Pochard and Gadwall. It initially proved hard to spot, diving frequently and moving a lot, but it eventually settled close to the reed edge and everyone connected. A bonus female Goldeneye was our other highlight here. We then made our way to view and search through a mixed flock of Canada Geese and Greylag. Despite our efforts, there was no sign of the lone White-fronted Goose seen on our previous trip.

We then spent the rest of the morning on RSPB Ham Wall. Birding was excellent with fabulous views of two Glossy Ibis sat amongst the Lapwing. We attempted to find the long staying male Garganey but had no luck, although another flying Bittern was good compensation. We also watched a perched male Sparrowhawk who'd landed on a small island of cut reeds directly in front of us – what a stunning bird! Great Egret also showed incredibly well here as did a small group of Pochard including several males. To end the morning, we took a short drive around Tealham Moor in search of raptors. After a short time, we managed to locate a very obliging female Merlin who showed fantastically well for our whole stay. Skylark, Meadow Pipit and small flocks of Starling were all present and potentially on the menu!

Following a hearty pub lunch, we decided to spend the end of the day exploring the far end of Shapwick Heath and have a walk through the stunning Alder carr woodland. Not too busy with birds, except for a lot of Goldcrest and a few Treecreeper, but an inspiring setting. We also returned to the same spot as the mystery Mustelid was seen the previous night, spotting an American Mink rushing into the water before disappearing down a burrow - no Otter though. The last part of our day was spent back with the Starlings, this time from a position closer to last night's roost site. The display was just as dramatic with an enormous flock forming directly in front of us. Waves of birds roared over our heads to join the cloud of birds forming, attracting the interest of four Sparrowhawks, the most seen by the guides attacking a flock simultaneously. It made for a chaotic display with the Starlings clearly

confused and nervous about landing. In the end, the entire flock disappeared and moved away from our location, seemingly heading in the direction of Ham Wall where we later confirmed they'd dropped into roost. A fascinating conclusion to our more intimate display.

With the trip coming to an end, all that was left was to return to the hotel and say our goodbyes. A fabulous two days full of great moments to share with family and friends. Until the next time.

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