

# The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

13th – 15th December 2023



Grey Heron



Common Snipe



Common Crane



Redwing

Tour report and photos by Richard Bashford



Naturetrek

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Tour participants: Richard Bashford (leader) with six Naturetrek clients

## Day 1

**Wednesday 13th December**

In excellent December weather (after some quite heavy rain across the UK), the group assembled at the Swan Hotel with the low sun lighting up Wells Cathedral opposite. We met as a group at 18:30 to grab a drink and have a welcome chat and introduce ourselves. Then it was dinner time – three courses and we were ready for the tour to start the next day.

## Day 2

**Thursday 14th December**

We met for breakfast at 07:30. The light drizzle was not forecast but this stopped about an hour later. Crucially, there was no wind and after a 20 minute drive south, we arrived at Shapwick Heath NNR where a walk in the wet woodland produced our first species with a few croaking Ravens, Siskins, Redpolls and various tits. Plenty of unseen Water Rails and Cetti's Warbler too. We reached Decoy Hide and noted a range of common wildfowl including Teal, Shoveler and Wigeon. The first of many Marsh Harriers was found perched at the back of the lake, conveniently close to the skyline feature of Glastonbury Tor. Our return walk was even better with Goldcrests, Redwings and a Jay. But better was just around the corner with another Goldcrest – wait, no, a Firecrest! What a performer. We enjoyed watching this tiny beast picking insects off of leaves, hovering occasionally and darting around the tree. After a few minutes, we noticed a very close Goldcrest and then a Chiffchaff and a Treecreeper. Wonderful.

Back at the minibus, we headed around the other side of the heath and walked in along the main track to Noah's Hide. A strange wet mist appeared at this point, thankfully nothing too serious and our views of perched and calling Marsh Harriers was pretty good through the telescopes. The sun peeked through just as a mixed flock of Siskins and Goldfinches fed over the main drain. Here too we spotted a Lesser Redpoll but best was a preening Redwing. On to the hide and another Naturetrek group – Oliver Smart was here leading his popular day trip! The hide offered a stunning view of hundreds of ducks – many of the species we had seen before but the real stars were the Pintail – so many of these elegant ducks fed and flew in front of us. A far too brief Kingfisher avoided most of us however – one for later we hoped. At one stage, a Great White Egret flew right in front of the hide – and I mean maybe five metres away, and landed in the reeds next to the hide.

Returning, we noted a pair of Stonechat and a few more Marsh Harriers.

Our next stop was a pub lunch in the Duck in nearby Burtle village. As instructed, the group identified the duck on the pub sign – actually as we were still driving – appropriately, it was a Pintail.

Much restraint was employed after a cooked breakfast and the forthcoming three course meal tonight – most opted for just a starter – substantial enough!

Well fed, we headed back to Ham Wall RSPB and a wander along the main track – indeed, the only track you could walk down after the flooding. A slow amble noting Marsh Harriers, very tame Robins and Great Tits (clearly used to being hand fed), more wildfowl and a harsh high pitched call – a Kingfisher perched long enough for us all to see. Plenty of squeaking and squealing Water Rails and exploding Cetti's Warblers were heard. As we reached the

second view point – currently the best place to witness the Starling murmuration, we joined 25 other people and Oliver's group again. Conditions were excellent with calm and clear weather. Around 16:05, we noticed the first small groups of Starlings appear overhead, then more, then more. Then we noticed the collective group over the reeds as they formed a single blob. For the next 30 minutes, more came and added to the mass, keeping low for the most part and creating dark patterns. Occasionally, more long streams of Starlings would appear and join them creating a swirling dark mass around the trees.

As the light faded and people started to drift back, we did the same, stopping to look at Jupiter through the telescope with four of its moons showing.

We drove back giving ourselves about an hour to freshen up before some of us met for the checklist – we opted for the bar with its open fire, rather than the garden room reserved for us by the hotel – far more cosy. All that remained to do was eat and discuss the plan for tomorrow.

## Day 3

## Friday 15th December

With the somewhat distant location of the roosting Starlings and the chance of early morning fog, we didn't attempt the dawn visit to see the birds leave. But an 08:00 breakfast was welcome, and we were on the road by 09:00 towards Cheddar. Here we had a short stop at the reservoir scanning the many birds – mainly Coot, but fair numbers of Great Crested Grebes, a few Pochards and after some scanning, a male Red-crested Pochard.

Then a short bit of tourism with a bit of birding – into Cheddar itself and a short walk along the river looking for Grey Wagtails and perhaps even Dipper – we were successful with the wagtail and had a close view of a feeding Little Egret – as well as a few of the Cheddar Goats keeping the brambles at bay in the gorge. On the return walk, the cider shop and the cheese shop were given a little bit of business from the group.

Onward and a drive to RSPB Grey Lake which was a very popular stop with a short walk to overlook the flooded fields teeming with wildfowl and waders – among the many Lapwings were a few Dunlins, but no visible Golden Plover unfortunately – especially promised by Richard.... We spied three Roe Deer here too. Into the hide and the point blank views of Snipe roosting and feeding were amazing, as were the close views of several species of duck including Teal. A telescope view of these species shows the astounding patterns in the feathers. On the way back, a group of waders flew in and thankfully, they were Golden Plover! A telescope view of these beauties and of another group coming in was welcome, as was the Black-tailed Godwit we found among them.

We had a date with a pub lunch a few minutes away so we returned to the car park and drove to the busy King Alfred – lots of people having Christmas meals – our pre booked table was waiting for us and another fine meal was consumed.

Our last scheduled stop was at Swell Woods – about twenty minutes down the road. We took Staithe Road as Richard had noted a large group of egrets here a couple of days before – sure enough, they were there again – around fifty. But careful scanning provided our third species of egret with at least four Cattle Egrets among them. Onward to Swell Wood which is an RSPB reserve – well known for its heronry. But we were here for the view. A short circular walk provided a few extra species including Nuthatch but from the view point over a very flooded

West Sedgemoor, we found our prize – two Common Cranes feeding in small rushy pools. More scanning revealed another three but about a mile away!

As it was now approaching 16:00, the sky was beginning to darken. We returned and drove our return route through Langport and Somerton and north into Street, Glastonbury and finally Wells.

With various travel plans being hatched, and four of the group staying an extra night, we simply grabbed our bags and said our goodbyes after an action packed couple of days. We all agreed it was an amazing part of the world – many nature reserves – we only visited some of them, and so much wonderful habitat. Somewhere to return to.

Many thanks to the group for their excellent company and also to Oliver Smart who was so helpful imparting his local knowledge before and during our trip.

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## Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	December 2023	
		14	15
Canada Goose - I	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	2	
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>	✓	
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	3	✓
Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>		1
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
Common Pheasant - I	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	h	
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</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>	h	h
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>		5
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	1 + h	
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓	✓
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		✓
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		✓
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓
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>		✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		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

Common name	Scientific name	December 2023	
		14	15
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>	✓	h
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</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>	✓	✓
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓
Coal Tit	<i>Pariparus ater</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	h	3 + h
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		1
Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	✓	
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	h
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>	✓	✓
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>	✓	1
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		✓
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	1	
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</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 – Roe Deer – 3 seen on 15<sup>th</sup> December