

# The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

10th – 12th January 2024

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Tour report by Simon Woolley

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Tour participants: Simon Woolley (leader) with six Naturetrek Clients.

## Summary

This was a typically excellent short winter break on the fabulous Somerset Levels, a sprawling area of wetlands, meadows, alder/willow carr woodland and other habitats to the south-west of our base in Wells, itself a lovely cathedral city. We explored the area thoroughly in the short time available to us, racking up a really excellent range of wildfowl, wetland birds such as herons (four species), raptors, some scarcer passerines and even a couple of local rarities. The key feature was large *numbers* of birds: flocks of Lapwings and Golden Plovers, dense concentrations of dabbling and diving ducks, and of course the key attraction, the titanic Starling roost which famously gathers on the Levels every night during the winter. Add in great company and good food, and it's fair to say that an excellent trip was had by all.

### Day 1

Wednesday 10th January

The group successfully met up at the delightful Swan Hotel in Wells, where we made introductions, shared plans and aspirations for the tour, and enjoyed a delicious dinner together.

### Day 2

Thursday 11th January

With cold, dry conditions and a settled forecast for the whole day, we set off at 8.45am, and headed first for RSPB Greylake, in the heart of Kings Sedgemoor. Here, we quickly had glimpses of and heard several singing Cetti's Warblers, and numerous Water Rails were calling unseen in the reeds. From the two hides, we had exquisite views of large numbers of wildfowl (overwhelmingly Wigeon and Teal, with a few Shoveler and a single, very smart drake Pintail. A couple of Marsh Harriers cruised about, occasionally flushing the ducks. About a dozen Snipe showed extremely well on the muddy bunds right in front of us, and our first Great Egret showed up too. The special highlights actually came in the reeds on the 'landward' side of the hides: most of the group had a decent view of two Water Rails, and even better, a pair of Bearded Reedlings gave prolonged, point-blank views. Excellent!

We headed south to Burrowbridge (and some lovely flocks of Fieldfares in some old orchards), but had to take a detour as our planned route across the Moor was flooded. But we soon arrived at RSPB Swell Wood, where a quick check of the feeders quickly produced the hoped-for Marsh Tit at close range, plus Coal, Blue and Great Tits and other common woodland birds. A Goldcrest put on a good show, and rather unusually a Raven perched up and 'cronked' in a large oak tree. From the viewpoint, the extent of the flooding was clear – only a few patches of grass were visible, and thus there was little habitat for our target species.... But we needn't have worried: a scan revealed not one but a family party of four Common Cranes really close to the escarpment, and they gave us extended and excellent views.

By now lunch was beckoning, and after a half-hour drive we refreshed ourselves at the Avalon Marshes Centre's new cafe. At about 2pm, we nipped over towards Sharpham and explored some back roads, and found a nice mixed flock of geese: Greylags, Canadas and a surprise in the form of six Barnacle Geese (of perhaps slightly dubious origin – but they behaved wild!). Our first Little Egret tried to trick us by wandering about in the open in a grassy field, and we saw several more Great Egrets too. A shallow lake by a peat works produced a Great Crested Grebe and three new duck species for the trip: Tufted Duck, Pochard and a minor rarity in the form of a male Greater Scaup.

It was now time to get in position for the Starling roost, and we parked at RSPB Ham Wall, but walked west across the road to Shapwick Heath NNR. A short walk on the boardwalk by the car-park turned up the goods in the form of a fine Firecrest, seen well by all, and our sixth corvid of the day, a pair of Jays. From the main track, we saw several Gadwall in the last of the light, plus more Great Egrets, Marsh Harriers, at least three wintering Chiffchaffs and a couple of Stonechats.

As if by magic, the first flocks of Starlings began to appear, and we quickly adjusted our position to get into the best spot. An accurate estimate of numbers is simply impossible, but certainly north of a quarter of a million Starlings soon gathered, and began to 'murmure' over the reedbeds to the north, in a wholly inaccessible part of the reserve. Harrassed briefly by a Peregrine, they put on a more than decent show, with full 'black blizzard' conditions for a time, and lovely pulsating shapes flowing through the flock. They poured down into the reeds like water down a plughole, and even from almost a mile away, we could hear them fluttering and chattering as they prepared to rest for the night. It was a magical way to end a busy, bird-packed day in the field!

## Day 3

## Friday 12th January

This morning, after breakfast and a 9am start, we headed first to the area around Westhay NNR. We explored a productive area of flooded fields where we found several species which had eluded us yesterday, most notably a large concentration of Cattle Egrets (a minimum of 90 were in the area), some decent if rather distant flocks of Golden Plover, and Meadow Pipit, which was surprisingly scarce on this tour. The fields were also stuffed full with Redwings, Fieldfares and feeding flocks of Starlings. But the icing on the cake came in the form exceptional views of a group of three Glossy Ibises. They were located by the (self-confessed) least experienced birder in the group! Along with the various egret species, this is yet another wetland bird whose status has changed drastically in Britain in recent years, and is now an expected, if still rare visitor, perhaps on the verge of colonisation. We had (frankly) absurdly good views of the ibises feeding in a muddy pool just a few metres from the road.

Westhay NNR itself produced great views of various duck species, several of them in active spring display, and all clients were signed up to the Gadwall Appreciation Society: such a subtle, understated, and beautiful bird! Marsh Harriers were quite frequent, and we also saw Buzzard, Sparrowhawk and a magnificent Red Kite here. Our second pair of Bearded Reedlings in two days gave a brief but superb performance, and we also heard and glimpsed Cetti's Warbler in the reeds, where Water Rails whined and squealed as ever.

Our final stop of the morning was at Catcott nature reserve to the east. Again, the key feature was large numbers of highly-habituated wildfowl, just metres from the viewing screen, and we enjoyed hundreds of Wigeon along with smaller numbers of Teal and Shoveler. Great Egrets were about as expected, along with yet more Marsh Harriers.

The Duck at Burtle was our venue for a slap-up pub lunch, and allowed us to get warm ahead of our final leg at RSPB Ham Wall/Shapwick Heath NNR. We explored along the canal and hides around Viewpoint 1, enjoying good views of now-familiar species (including Goldfinch, Great Crested Grebe and Chiffchaff) once again, and learning about the apparent kleptoparasitic feeding relationship between Coots and Gadwall.

As dusk approached, we crossed over the road to Shapwick (via a brief and rather obscured female Bullfinch). Given that it was cloudy today, the Starlings appeared earlier than yesterday, and put on an even better show for us. "Ooohs" and "aaahs" were distinctly heard from clients as the titanic flock assembled over the reeds.

Interestingly, the roost evidently split today. Only about 20% of the birds dropped in to the Shapwick reedbed, and the rest drifted further east, presumably to roost at their other favoured spot on RSPB Ham Wall.

In the gloaming, we happily trudged back to the car-park and set off back to Wells, where we said our goodbyes, after what had been an action-packed and bird-filled short break.

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## Species lists

Birds (h = Heard only, I = Introduced)

Common name	Scientific name	January 2024	
		11	12
Canada Goose - I	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	40	6
Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>	6	
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		60
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	50	100
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	20	120
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	500	600
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	20	20
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	1	6
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	500	150
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	150	20
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	100	30
Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>	1	
Common Pheasant - I	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	2	1
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓
Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	15	
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	2+h	h
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	h	10
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	20	40
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	4	
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	2	3
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		100
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	15	4
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	2	10
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		3
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	10	10
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	20	25
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>		3
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		90+
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	3	5
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	8	10
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	1	1
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		2
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	6	10
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>		1
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	2	3
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	h	h
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	1	

Common name	Scientific name	January 2024	
		11	12
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	1	
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	3	
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>	2	2
Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>	10	
Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	2	
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
Bearded Reedling	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>	2+h	2
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	12	
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	2+h	3+h
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	15	25
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	3+	1
Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	1	
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	1	
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	5	4
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	2	
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	400k	400k
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		5
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>	2	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	1	
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	1	10
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		3
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		1
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	2	10
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	h	

