

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

31st January – 2nd February 2024



Starlings



Starlings



Common Snipe



Glossy Ibis

Tour report and images by Adrian Langdon



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

Group participants: Adrian Langdon & Chris Wilkinson (leaders) with 13 Naturetrek clients.

Summary

The Somerset Levels in winter provide an incredible backdrop to some very special wildlife spectacles. Firstly there is a huge concentration of wintering wildfowl scattered across an often flooded vista of lowland fields, marshes and peat ponds south of the Mendips and the Quantock hills. On this trip the floods had started to recede after the prolonged early winter storms and had left many fields and meadows with small pools of water which attracted many bird species as the mud replaced deep water. Farmers had started to get back into the fields and some ploughing and planting was taking place. The second major spectacle is that of the largest roost of Starlings in the country with an estimated 500,000 birds. We had great views of the starlings arriving en masse from many directions and watched them wiffle down into the reed beds. On both evenings we went to Shapwick Heath as the main roost had moved from Ham Wall. On the first evening we watched them come in near to the Meare hide, so on the second evening we watched from nearer the Shapwick end of the track and had great views of the birds coming in and their unsettled movements prior to roosting. Other highlights of the trip included great views of four Common Cranes, numerous Marsh Harriers, Hen Harrier, Merlin, Cattle Egrets and vast flocks of Teal and Wigeon on the water and in the air.

Day 1

Friday 31st January

Our tour began in the lounge of the beautiful Swan Hotel in the Somerset city of Wells in front of a blazing log fire. We then moved into the Garden Room where Adrian and Chris introduced themselves to our guests in a relaxed and informal manner and we all chatted about our hopes and aspirations for the coming few days. High up that list was “good weather” and so it proved to be.

Most people were keen to witness the “Starling experience” and others had certain species they were keen to see, notably those classic Somerset Levels birds, Bittern, Bearded Tit and Common Crane. We discussed the proposed itinerary and looked at maps so that we could all get an idea of the topography of the area and locate some of the reserves to prepare us for the following days.

We vacated the Garden Room and moved into the restaurant for the first of our delicious three-course meals. We soon got chatting and learnt a bit more about each other and our birdwatching history and talked more about the Somerset Levels and where we’d be visiting and what we expected to see.

While a few people retired to the lounge for a nightcap the majority drifted off to their rooms for the night.

Day 2

Saturday 1st February

This morning it was dry and cloudy with no rain on the forecast so after breakfast we split into two minibuses and headed south-west to RSPB Greylake reserve. The car park was really busy due to the fact that a rare Baikal Teal had been frequenting the reserve and the hides were also quite active as birders struggled to get their optics on to the teal. There were hundreds of birds in front of the two hides, mostly Teal, Wigeon and Lapwing and we had some amazingly close views. Common Snipe could be viewed very close to the hide as they probed their long bills into the soft mud for food. Cetti’s warblers were heard and occasionally spotted, while a Barn Owl was a treat to

watch, sat on a fencepost in the middle distance before hunting across the meadows. We got both our telescopes set up on the Owl and most of the group has superb views of it.

We left Greylake and headed to the small reserve of RSPB Swell Wood to find some woodland species and see if the Grey Herons had started to nest in the heronry in the wood. In the car park someone was photographing birds from their car and had put out food that was already attracting Great, Blue and Coal Tits, along with Robins and Nuthatch. Also at the Heron hide the area was alive with birds and it was great to look up into the leafless canopy and watch Herons sat on nests whilst others flew in with sticks to refurbish previous nests. There was a cacophony of sound coming from the birds as their early breeding got under way.

We then headed down to the overlook to view the vista over West Sedgemoor and hopefully to spot Common Cranes. We were not to be disappointed as we quickly had the telescopes on four Cranes feeding on our side of the valley. Each of us had fantastic views of these birds. On leaving the overlook we worked our way through the wood toward the car park and had sightings of several Goldcrests and a Treecreeper, while a Great Spotted Woodpecker drummed on a nearby branch.

Once again road closures had us checking our maps as to the best way to get to the King Alfred Inn at Burrowbridge. Adrian and Chris discussed the best route to get to the Inn that had been booked for our lunch and after a few diversions we travelled across the flat meadows of West Sedgemoor and arrived on time. The King Alfred Inn is a good old fashioned Somerset pub that offers traditional pub food using local meats, fish and vegetables. The staff were great and knew that we wanted to get back out into the wild as quickly as we could, so they opened an ante-room for us and both the food and the service were first class. The Inn is adjacent to the famous Burrow Mump with its unfinished church on the top and it was from that car park that we watched two Bewick's Swans feeding in a flooded field. We also found Redwing and Long-tailed Tits and got the telescope on a Roe Deer buck out in the marsh, so it was a good call by Chris to check out this site.

We then drove the short distance to RSPB Ham Wall to explore the reserve before the Starlings were due to come into roost later that afternoon. The water levels had dropped considerably since the last tour two weeks before and we could now access the blinds and hides at Tor and enjoy unfettered views from Viewing Platform 1. Moorhens and Coots were alongside Shoveler, Teal, Wigeon, Tufted Duck, Pochard and Gadwall and of course the ever-present Marsh Harriers. We also spent some time watching the birds on the feeders by the RSPB huts and recorded Reed Bunting and Bullfinch as we sampled their teas and coffees.

All the information we had was that the Starlings had shifted their roost site from Ham Wall out to Shapwick Heath and as it was literally just across the road we drifted that way to be in a good position before sunset.

At about 4.45pm we started seeing huge flocks of Starlings crossing the horizon and soon they made their way onto the wetland reed beds with groups arriving from 360 degrees such that we were constantly moving around as calls of "behind you" echoed around. As the sky darkened, the birds were still on the move and a few good murmurations were seen both high in the sky and low over the reeds between the trees toward Meare Heath.

With all the group together, we walked back to Ham Wall and discussed where best to go the following evening to get another ringside seat. So it was a short trip back to the hotel and the welcome log fire.

Day 3

Sunday 2nd February

After a damp & misty night, we were forecast another dry day so after a comprehensive breakfast we set off for Sharpham Lane near Street where we had been told there were some Greater Scaup. The roads were classic Levels droves with undulating tarmac and deep ditches on either side. Eventually we found the pool and five Greater Scaup were diving along with a lot of Tufted Ducks, so were really pleased.

We then started looking around a bit more and found a Grey Wagtail, three Cattle Egrets, which, on a bit more looking, turned into 93! Then the spot of the day from one of our guests turned out to be a fine Glossy Ibis sitting in a Weeping Willow in the middle of a fishing pond. After we all had super views it then dropped down into a field of winter wheat and fed in a small flooded area alongside the South Drain and a few guests got photos of it as it waded around in the shallow water.

We left Sharpham and cut across country to Ham Wall where we grabbed hot drinks and started down toward Shapwick Heath with the aim of visiting the hide at Noah's Lake. As we approached Noah's Lake we heard our first "booming" Bittern and also watched a mixed flock of Siskin and Redpoll feeding in the Alders. The lake was tightly packed with wildfowl including hundreds of Pintail. We had also had a tip off that there were three Whooper Swans in the reeded area to the right of the hide and sure enough we found them, although we only got glimpses of the bright yellow bills of the wintering Swans as they slumbered under a small copse of Willows in the middle of the pool.

On leaving this area, we headed across to the Avalon Marshes Centre and had lunch at the Marshes Tea Hub and a bit of down time. Guests enjoyed the meal and the chance to browse the Avalon Marshes centre and pick up a few souvenirs.

Suitably refreshed we motored along some of the droves south of the Westhay reserve where we watched hundreds of Mute Swans in the meadows. Moving farther east, we stopped and checked out a few pools which held the usual Great Crested and Little Grebes, Teal and a few Cormorants. Near to Lewis's Drove we saw lots of Tufted Ducks but were unable to spot a Ring-necked that had been there a few weeks back, nor the female Goldeneye either. However a flock of over 40 Stock Doves was a welcome bonus.

As the afternoon went by we made the decision to hopefully watch the Starlings by walking in from the Shapwick end of the path, so after dropping our guests at the entrance to the reserve Adrian and Chris parked the vans at the Avalon marshes Centre and walked down the road to meet up with the group. This paid dividends as the majority of Starlings came in to the area from all directions and there was a pre-roost build-up of predators with two Marsh Harriers and a superb female Hen Harrier, a Sparrowhawk and a Merlin all actively awaiting the Starling flocks. In the background a Bittern "boomed" away but never showed!

Once again huge numbers of Starlings flooded in and darkened the skies. Many seemed to drop in deeper into the reed bed toward Decoy Lake but the predators must have kept disturbing them as they regularly erupted and rumbled past us so close that we heard their wing beats. A bit of mist swept in as darkness fell and we made our way back to the road. Adrian and Chris fetched the vans and we loaded everyone up and headed back to the Swan at Wells.

Once again we witnessed hundreds of thousands of birds but maybe not the dramatic murmurations we had hoped but that's all the more reason to return to this fascinating place.

With the trip coming to an end we arrived back at the hotel where we said our goodbyes amid exchanging emails, blogs and phone numbers.

Another successful tour had come to an end.



Burrow Mump

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Species lists

Birds (I = Introduced)

Common name	Scientific name	January – February 2023		
		31	1	2
Canada Goose - I	<i>Branta canadensis</i>		✓	✓
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓	✓
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		✓	✓
Tundra (Bewick's) Swan	<i>Cygnus columbianus</i>		✓	
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>			✓
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</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>		✓	✓
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓	✓
Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>			✓
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>		✓	✓
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓	✓
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓	✓
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>		✓	
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		✓	✓
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		✓	✓
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>		✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓	
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓	✓
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>			✓
Eurasian Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>			✓
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>			✓
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		✓	✓

Common name	Scientific name	January – February 2023		
		31	1	2
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>			✓
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓
Western Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>		✓	
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	✓		
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>			✓
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		✓	
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓	
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</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>Parus ater</i>		✓	
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		✓	
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓	✓
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		✓	✓
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓	✓
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		✓	
Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>		✓	
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</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 /Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓	✓
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓
Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>			

Common name	Scientific name	January – February 2023		
		31	1	2
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</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>			✓