

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

7th – 9th January 2026



Marsh Harrier



Drake Wigeon



Chiffchaff



Pintails

Tour report and photos by Adrian Langdon



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Tour participants: Adrian Langdon and Richard Bashford (leaders) with 11 Naturetrek clients

Summary

The Somerset Levels in winter offer a stunning setting for some truly memorable wildlife experiences. One of the highlights is the vast number of overwintering wildfowl spread across a frequently flooded landscape of low-lying farmland, marshes and peat pools lying south of the Mendips and east of the Quantock Hills. During our visit, floodwaters were beginning to drain away following weeks of early winter storms. As water levels dropped, shallow pools remained in many fields and meadows, creating ideal feeding conditions that drew in a wide variety of birdlife as exposed mud replaced deeper water.

The second major attraction was one of the country's largest Starling roosts, estimated at around half a million birds. We enjoyed excellent views as vast flocks arrived from all directions, swirling overhead before cascading down into the reedbeds. Both late afternoons were spent at Shapwick Heath, as the main roost had shifted from Ham Wall. On the first day, bad weather dictated that we watched the gatherings from inside the large hide at Noah's Lake. They swept across the far side of the lake for quite a time, and we had fantastic views of their murmurations.

On the second afternoon, we positioned ourselves nearer the Shapwick end of the track. This gave us superb views of the incoming flocks, and we felt immersed in the event as their restless, swirling movements were literally overhead and we could hear their calls and their wingbeats before they finally settled to roost.

Additional highlights included good views of two Eurasian Cranes and large numbers of Marsh Harriers. Cattle Egrets were also present, along with huge flocks of Teal, Wigeon and Pintail, both on the water and in flight.

Day 1

Wednesday 7th January

Our tour began in the lounge of the beautiful Swan Hotel in the Somerset city of Wells. Adrian and Richard introduced themselves to the clients, and we all chatted about our hopes and aspirations for the coming few days. High up that list was "the weather", as the forecast was horrific, with Storm Goretti due to arrive from the north-west. 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 chatted about how we planned to shape it so that we could take advantage of breaks in the weather, and how we hoped to use the many hides if the rain got bad.

We vacated the lounge and moved into the restaurant for the first of our delicious three-course meals. We soon got chatting and learned a bit more about each other and our birdwatching histories, and talked more about the Somerset Levels, where we would be visiting, and what we expected to see.

Day 2

Thursday 8th January

The storm wasn't due to arrive until noon, so after breakfast we split between two vans and headed south-west to RSPB Greylake reserve. The car park was empty, as the previous day the reserve had been totally iced up, so we headed toward the hides in the hope there had been a bit of a thaw and that some birds would have returned.

Within a minute of leaving the car park and heading into the reedbed path, one of our clients spotted a Bearded Tit atop a reed; sadly, it spotted us too, and shot off into the deepest part of the reeds, never to be seen again! Fortunately, there were hundreds of birds in front of the two hides, mostly Teal and Wigeon, and we had some amazingly close views. A lone Common Snipe could be seen very close to the hide, but the usual flock hadn't returned after the freeze. Cetti's Warbler was heard, as was Water Rail, but RSPB staff were doing some maintenance work in the tallows behind one of the hides, so the rail kept itself hidden. We saw three Marsh Harriers, some Shovelers, a Great Egret and a Stonechat, and were lucky to have the freedom to use both hides, as the reserve had no other visitors that morning.

We left Greylake and headed to the small reserve of RSPB Swell Wood, to find some woodland species and to see whether the Grey Herons had started to nest. The bad weather had obviously kept many people away in recent days, as the usual feeding stations both in the car park and at the hide were devoid of any food. A few sunflower hearts sprinkled around soon brought out lots of Coal Tits, along with Blue, Great and Marsh Tits. Some of the Heron nests looked as if refurbishment had started for the new breeding season, but there was no action as we looked into the canopy and the branches holding their large nests of sticks.

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 two Cranes feeding on our side of the valley. Everyone had fantastic views of them. On leaving the overlook, we worked our way through the wood toward the car park, hoping to find Treecreeper or Nuthatch, but the best we could do was hearing a Nuthatch in a large oak near our vans.

Adrian had booked lunch for us at the King Alfred Inn at Burrowbridge, so we drove down and across the West Sedgemoor meadows, where we had fine views of two Great Egrets, before spotting the derelict church which sits on the top of Burrow Mump, alongside the inn. The King Alfred Inn is a good, old-fashioned Somerset pub which 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, and they opened an upstairs room for us. Both the food and the service were first class.

The rain had arrived in Somerset as we ate our lunch, so we made the call to head to RSPB Ham Wall car park and get into our waterproofs before heading down to Shapwick Heath, knowing that there were four good hides where we could watch the birds and stay dry! The weather forecast had reached most people, and both the car park and all the hides were empty: we had them all to ourselves.

At the first hide adjacent to the South Drain, we had good views of Water Rail, a Chiffchaff and a Cetti's Warbler; the pool opposite held several Mute Swans and lots of Wigeon, Gadwall and Teal. We moved on to the large hide at Noah's Lake, where we were treated to a view of many hundreds of wildfowl on the lake: Pintail, Wigeon, Teal, Coot, Shoveler, Great Crested and Little Grebes, all spread out on the water.

Suddenly, one of our group spotted a Kingfisher close to the hide, and we were all able to watch it perched in an overhanging willow. Later, two Whooper Swans, an adult and a juvenile, joined us from the north side of the lake and swam directly in front of us, affording exceptional views and a useful comparison with the resident Mute Swans.

The wind and rain had now started to kick in, and we decided it was probably best to stay in the hide, as large flocks of Starlings were passing overhead and other groups were joining from all areas. They then started murmuring along the tree line at the western edge of the lake, and we had a grandstand view as they went all around the lake perimeter, making their amazing patterns. As they seemed to settle back towards Decoy Lake and the light was beginning to fail, we made a dash for the vans along the path. It was now very windy and quite cold, so when we got back to the hotel the prospect of a hot shower dominated most people's thoughts!

We met up again at 6.30pm and went through the day's bird list in the hotel garden room, where the manager had set up a projector and screen for Adrian to show a set of images of the Levels and many of the species to be found there. We then enjoyed a super three-course meal in the restaurant, before retiring for the night.

Day 3

Friday 9th January

As all of south-west of England was under a Yellow Weather Warning of rain and gales, we decided it would be prudent to not go out on an early morning Starling watch, and agreed to try again in the afternoon, and this time to get more immersed in the action, if possible.

After breakfast, we set off for RSPB Ham Wall and took a slow walk up the main path toward Viewing Platform 1 (VP1). As we left the car park, Richard spotted small flocks of Pintail flying over, heading west; we counted over two hundred of these amazing ducks. We had good views of mixed finch flocks feeding high up on the alders, and managed to get the telescopes trained on a small party of Redpolls. Most of our group had stunning views of these birds as they clung upside down on the Alder 'cones'. A couple of Song Thrushes showed well, along with some overwintering Blackcaps among the brambles. There was a line of over forty Black-tailed Godwits on the pool at VP1, with numerous other wildfowl and regular fly-pasts from Marsh Harriers.

We moved across at a right angle to use the blinds and hides out towards the Tor Hide which, as its name suggests, gave great views of Glastonbury Tor to the east. Grey Herons, Great Crested Grebes and Marsh Harriers put on quite a display for us, but the biting northerly wind cut short our time in the hide.

We moved on to VP2. Many Robins, Great, Blue and Long-tailed Tits kept us company, while most of the group watched some Siskins feeding in the alders. We wandered back to the vehicles at leisure, enjoying a spot of sunshine, before heading across to the Avalon marshes Tea Hub for lunch.

After another good lunch, we went up to Westhay, a Somerset Wildlife Trust reserve, where we spent a short while at the Viridor hide, having just missed an Otter on the ice by a few minutes. The island hides were closed due to an outbreak of bird flu, which limited our choice, although there was only one other person on site. So, we decided to check out the reserve at Catcott Lows. We didn't use the hide, as it was well occupied, but used the blinds at the side to get close-up views of Wigeon and Teal in the pool in front of the hide. Roe Deer were also visible in the distance.

Driving to and from Catcott, we stopped to watch over forty Cattle Egrets in the field near to Burtle, and also saw both Little and Great Egrets in some of the drains.

We then stopped back at the Tea Hub, where we picked up some hot drinks, before parking at Shapwick Road and walking up the track as the Starlings started to arrive. This time, we were among the big flocks, and we watched them flying across the track in both directions, covering the trees and dropping into the reedbeds. We were so close that we could hear their wingbeats and constant chatter as they passed around us. This was the final chapter for our group, and there were a lot of happy faces!

It was only a short trip back to the Swan Hotel in Wells, and we said our goodbyes to everyone in the knowledge that many new friendships had been made on another successful tour. We had stayed dry, warm, and content that we'd made the best of a damning weather forecast and seen many of the wintering birds that Somerset has to offer.

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Species lists

Birds

I=Introduced		January 2026	
Common name	Scientific name	8	9
Canada Goose - I	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</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>	✓	✓
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</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>	✓	✓
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		✓
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</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>		✓
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓	✓
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Ardea ibis</i>		✓
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</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>		✓
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>	✓	✓
Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>	✓	
Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	✓	

I=Introduced		January 2026	
Common name	Scientific name	8	9
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
Bearded Reedling	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>	✓	
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	✓	✓
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		✓
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	H	
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>		✓
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓
Eurasian Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		H
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓
Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>		✓
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		✓
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓