

# The Somerset Levels

## Naturetrek Tour Report

21st – 23rd January 2026

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Coal Tit



Marsh Harrier



Gadwall



Starling murmuration

Tour report by Adrian Langdon  
Photos by Adrian Langdon and Debbie Woollacott



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: [info@naturetrek.co.uk](mailto:info@naturetrek.co.uk)

W: [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk)

Tour participants: Adrian Langdon and Andy Mears (leaders) with 14 Naturetrek clients

## Summary

The Somerset Levels in winter provide an incredible backdrop to some very special wildlife spectacles. 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.

This mid-January tour took place during a period of exceptionally high and continually rising water levels across the Levels. A succession of winter storms, particularly affecting Cornwall, before tracking through Devon and into Somerset, resulted in widespread flooding, saturated landscapes, and challenging travel conditions throughout the tour.

Starling roost activity was notably unsettled, with the birds highly mobile and frequently shifting between RSPB Ham Wall and Shapwick Heath. RSPB staff at Ham Wall confirmed ongoing difficulty in locating the main roost, with large numbers of Starlings causing extensive flattening of reed beds due to the sheer weight of birds on the reeds.

## Day 1

## Wednesday 21st January

Our tour began in the lounge of the beautiful Swan Hotel in the city of Wells, in front of an inviting log fire. We then moved into the Garden Room where Adrian and Andy introduced themselves to the clients, and we all chatted about our hopes and aspirations for the coming few days. High up the list of conversation topics was the weather forecast, which threatened heavy rain and gales. Fortunately, that proved to be somewhat exaggerated, and we enjoyed quite favourable conditions for most of the tour.

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 Adrian gave a short, illustrated talk of some of the proposed areas we would visit, and we looked at images of many of the bird species we hoped to see in 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, learned a bit more about each other and our birdwatching history, and talked more about the Somerset Levels, 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

## Thursday 22nd January

Day two began wet, though conditions gradually improved. After breakfast, we travelled to RSPB Greylake, arriving to find the reserve very quiet. As we walked through the reedbeds towards the hides, several Cetti’s Warblers were calling, with one individual giving excellent views to some clients. Reed Buntings were active, and Water Rails called persistently from all directions. From the hides, we enjoyed

superb views over flooded pools holding hundreds of Wigeons, Teals and Shovelers. Close views of Common Snipes were obtained through binoculars and telescopes. With no other visitors present, the group split comfortably between the two hides.

Recent habitat management had created open willow areas near one hide, where an exceptional seven Water Rails were observed feeding in the open, a standout highlight of the tour. Additional sightings included a distant Peregrine Falcon perched on a pylon, Stonechat, Great Egret, Cormorant and Moorhen. A flock of geese flushed by a passing Marsh Harrier initially appeared to be Greylags; however, photographs later confirmed twelve White-fronted Geese accompanied by Greylag and Canada Geese, which was an excellent record for the reserve.

We then travelled (via Othery and Burrowbridge) across West Sedgemoor to RSPB Swell Wood, a woodland reserve situated on a steep escarpment, and home to a large heronry of nesting Grey Herons and Little Egrets. Although nesting activity had not yet commenced, time in the hide produced many of our target woodland species, including Marsh, Blue, Great and Coal Tits, Nuthatch, Robin and, after much searching, a Treecreeper.

From the overlook across West Sedgemoor, three Common Cranes were located feeding in a wet marsh area, giving prolonged and excellent telescope views. As the rain began to intensify, the group returned to the minibuses and headed to the King Alfred Inn for lunch. Heavy rain continued during lunch, with the River Parrett visibly at the top of its banks, and reports received of flooding increasing across the Levels. A cautious route was taken back to Ham Wall via Greylake, Greinton, Ashcott and over the Polden Hills.

Despite poor weather, the afternoon visit to RSPB Ham Wall proved productive. Highlights included more than fifty Black-tailed Godwits, along with large numbers of Gadwalls, Shovelers, Teals, and Wigeons. Other species recorded included Great Crested and Little Grebes, Moorhen and large numbers of Coots. Marsh Harriers were particularly active, with five or six individuals seen during the afternoon. From the Tor Hide, overlooking Glastonbury Tor, a Grey Heron was observed already settled on a nest, with further nesting activity expected in the coming weeks.

At about 4.00pm, we started to get in position to view the incoming Starling flocks as they came to roost, in the hope of seeing some of their amazing murmurations against the fading light of dusk. Following reports of birds settling between Viewing Platforms 1 and 2 the previous evening, we decided to walk along the side of the Glastonbury Canal, so we could have maximum visibility of incoming flocks. Large flocks started to appear, but were passing over the reserve before gathering at a distance over Sharpham and toward Glastonbury. We had good views of them as they displayed in the distance, before they eventually combined into one immense murmuration and dropped in to roost outside the reserve as darkness fell.

We returned to Wells where, after hot showers, the day concluded with a review of the bird list, followed by an excellent three-course dinner. Despite challenging weather and difficult conditions, the day had produced a strong species list and several memorable highlights.

## Day 3

## Friday 23rd January

Day three began far more positively than had been forecast. As we left Wells, heading west, patches of blue sky appeared, lifting our spirits despite severe weather warnings for Storm Ingrid, which was forecast to arrive later that day.

Knowing the Starlings had been roosting near Sharpham, a circular route was taken in that direction before continuing to the Ham Wall/Shapwick Heath car park. Road conditions towards Sharpham were extremely poor, with subsiding tarmac laid over peat, extensive potholes and standing water in deep roadside ditches. An articulated lorry was found on its side in one of these ditches; fortunately, the driver was reported to be unharmed. No obvious signs of Starling roosting activity were found. We did, however, see Roe Deer in the wet meadows as we continued towards Ham Wall.

From the car park, we continued on foot to Shapwick Heath National Nature Reserve, managed by Natural England. The Tower Hide overlooking Mere Heath provided elevated views across flooded pools holding large numbers of wildfowl. Reports of nearby Penduline Tits prompted careful scanning, though none was located. Marsh Harriers were again a constant presence, repeatedly putting wildfowl to flight as they passed overhead.

We then moved on to Noah's Lake, where the poor weather forecast had kept people away and meant the hide was empty, allowing us uninterrupted viewing. By this time the sun had emerged, and the lake was alive with birds. Excellent telescope views were obtained of Pintails, including striking drakes moulting into breeding plumage. A Kingfisher was active around the base of the hide, repeatedly showing well during our stay, while Great Crested Grebes were feeding close in front of us.

A major highlight here was the discovery of a flock of White-fronted Geese, eventually counted as comprising thirty-nine individuals, the first time the species has been recorded on our tours at Shapwick. This reflected a wider recent influx of 'white-fronts' into Britain, with birds spread out at wetland sites across the country. Additional interest came from mammal signs, with Otter tracks linking two lake areas, and fresh Otter spraint.

After a slow, bird-filled walk back towards the car park, lunch was taken at the Avalon Marshes Tea Hub. Despite it being January, conditions were good enough for most of the group to sit outside under the awning and to enjoy lunch in the sunshine.

Following lunch, we drove a short distance to Westhay Moor, and visited the hide overlooking the reedbeds. Marsh Harriers were again prominent, with at least three individuals seen; one pair appeared to be engaging in courtship behaviour, repeatedly dropping into the same area of reeds. Gadwall was the most conspicuous duck species present during the visit.

From Westhay, we continued along Westhay Drove, in search of Cattle Egrets. At the end of the drove, a field holding approximately a dozen very muddy cattle revealed an extraordinary sight: an estimated 170 Cattle Egrets feeding among them. We stopped to watch, photograph and enjoy prolonged views, with the iconic Glastonbury Tor in the background. Among this flock were a single Great Egret and several

Little Egrets. As we travelled around the area, a further flock of forty Cattle Egrets and another of twenty were encountered, bringing the day's total to approximately 230, an exceptional count and one of the highlights of the tour.

An attempt was made to visit a site where Short-eared Owls had been reported overwintering, but access was prevented by a road closure, due to deep flooding. Water levels across Somerset had continued to rise throughout the week, and subsequent reports confirmed widespread road closures and overtopping rivers, placing significant strain on flood management systems.

We returned to RSPB Ham Wall, where extensive enquiries with contacts and RSPB staff led to a final decision on where to view the Starling murmuration once more. This time we walked out along the Cuckoo Ditch towards Sharpham, to position ourselves closer to the likely roost site.

The Starlings arrived late, with the first flocks appearing around 4.45pm. As on the previous evening, birds passed across the skyline towards Sharpham, but our closer position allowed improved views of several impressive murmurations. Although the birds again roosted outside the reserve, and did not pass directly overhead, the experience was enjoyable and satisfying, particularly as we had all remained dry throughout the day!

We returned to the car park and travelled back to Wells, where farewells were said and contacts exchanged. Several clients stayed on for an additional night. And so we concluded another successful Somerset Levels winter tour, with a total of seventy-two bird species recorded, an excellent result given the challenging conditions.

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## Species lists

Birds (H = heard only)

I=Introduced		January 2026	
Common name	Scientific name	22	23
Canada Goose - I	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓
Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>	12	39
Black Swan - I	<i>Cygnus atratus</i>	2	
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
Egyptian Goose - I	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</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>	✓	✓
Common Pheasant - I	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓
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
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>	✓	✓
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	✓	✓
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	✓
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</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>		230
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>	✓	✓
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</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>Pariparus ater</i>	✓	✓

I=Introduced		January 2026	
Common name	Scientific name	22	23
Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	✓	
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	✓	H
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	H	✓
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</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>	✓	✓
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>	✓	✓
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>		✓
Eurasian Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓