

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

17 - 19 May 2010



Field of orchids



Ham Wall at 5.30am



Garden Warbler



Ham Wall and Glastonbury Tor

Report and images compiled by Ed Drewitt



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Summary

This tour around the Somerset Levels in mid-May was a brilliant opportunity to see the diversity and abundance of wildlife using the wetlands during the spring. Touring across the many reserves we were able to soak up the atmosphere and absorb the magical sounds and vibes that the environment provides. The wildlife didn't disappoint and we had excellent views of bitterns and hobbies while hearing many cuckoos. Other highlights included many singing garden warblers, a spotted flycatcher, a displaying curlew and a red kite.

Day 1

Sunday 17th May

After a beautiful day, spirits were high as the group gathered pre-dinner for everyone to mingle and learn of the plan for the next few days. This was all in the appropriate setting of the Swan Hotel with Wells Cathedral easily viewable from the bar. After a delicious dinner the group enjoyed an illustrated talk by Charles exploring the human and natural history of the Somerset Levels over the past 10,000 years and an insight into some of the wildlife we may expect to see.

Day 2

Monday 18th May

We had an early start, setting out from the hotel at 5am to experience the wonders of Ham Wall RSPB reserve at first light. As we ventured along the old railway line, the birds sang out loud – it was almost deafening with so many blackcaps, garden warblers, song thrushes, wrens and other common songbirds singing. It wasn't long before most of the group heard their first bittern booming out across the reedbeds. As a beautiful sun rose up from behind the reeds we watched as two parent great crested grebes tended their three young chicks.

Pairs of tufted ducks often took flight, with the female grunt-whistling as they lifted off. Swifts gathered in numbers as insects swarmed above the reserve and a cormorant flew past with dangling nest material in its beak – a very unusual sight! Gadwall and pochards flew low over the reeds and one or two male cuckoos called across the reserve. We also heard one or two female cuckoos with their little grebe-like bubbling call. A heavily pregnant female roe deer slowly walked along the edge of a reedbed. Cetti's warblers became a common sound along with the cacophony of tens of reed warblers and sedge warblers.

As we ended the walk around 8am we had heard at least six different singing garden warblers and ten blackcaps. As the temperature rose, one or two whitethroats appeared, raising their heads above the brambles. Some of the group saw their first cuckoo as it flew briefly over the reserve. A pair of great spotted woodpeckers flew past, their beaks full of food for chicks.

After a welcome breakfast to keep us stoked up for the day, we set off at 9:30am to the RSPB's Greylake Reserve. The lanes and countryside looked stunning – the fresh lime greens of leaves and grasses making the levels look succulent and fresh. As the sun shone brightly we spent time learning the song and calls of the reed bunting while trying to distinguish sedge warblers from reed warblers. Most of the group watched a hare which sat in the middle of the track before it characteristically loped away from us and out of sight. From the hide, a lapwing took flight and no doubt had a young family nearby. A buzzard perched on the pylon. After some careful searching, a female yellow wagtail was seen perched on a gate post. Quite a rarity in this part of the world, the yellow wagtail is just about hanging on as a breeding species on this reserve. Just before we left a cuckoo called nearby.

We then ventured on to Swell Wood, part of the RSPB's West Sedgemoor Reserve to look for woodland birds. Now into mid-May, the herony – one of the largest in the West Country- was busy as adolescent grey herons sat in their large stick nests waiting to be fed. Every so often we saw an adult heron flying in to the herony. From the hide we could also see three little egret nests with the adults still sitting on eggs or chicks. The group saw incredible views of a treecreeper on a tree near the hide while blue tits and great tits busily searched for food to feed hungry chicks. A nuthatch, wren and robin could also be heard. As we gathered in the car park before leaving for lunch, the distinctive thin, squeaky call of a spotted flycatcher was detected and it wasn't long before we had views of this remarkable bird as it moved from tree to tree, sometimes hovering off leaves to glean any insects. We celebrated with a well-earned lunch at a pub in Curry Rivel, graced with sunshine in the beer garden and having good views of screaming swifts, house martins, swallows and a sparrowhawk.

After lunch we drove back the RSPB West Sedgemoor and walked down to the reserve and along the farm track. Grey herons and a little egret glided in from high, channelling in to their breeding colony on the hill. The hedgerows and verges provided a scrumptious selection of herbs and other spring plants to observe which also in turn attracted various butterflies including green-veined white, orange tip, comma, peacock and large white. Despite the hot sunshine, chiffchaffs, blackcaps, robins and a sedge warbler continued to sing. We came to a stunning field full of orchids including green-veined, common spotted and possible southern marsh – we also saw plenty of bugle and a small copper butterfly. A number of group members were very adept and helpful with orchid and butterfly identification. A few holly blue butterflies flew along the trees while a brimstone moth sat on a blackthorn branch. Some buzzards and a raven flew above the escarpment and on a few occasions we spotted a red kite with its distinctive forked tail and wing patterns.

As we walked back up the hill, those at the back saw a curlew in its display flight – flapping, rising and then gliding round in a very un-curlew fashion until its bubbling call stretched across the reserve and sealed its identity. The odd linnet and goldfinch graced nearby trees. After a long, busy day we headed back to the hotel in Wells for a well earned rest before a delicious dinner. After, the group reflected on the day's delights before watching an illustrated talk by Ed about his work on urban peregrines. ,

Day 3

Tuesday 19th May

After another wholesome breakfast and later start the group headed to RSPB Ham Wall for a leisurely three hour circuit around the reserve. Despite the cloud, it was remarkably mild and the birds were still in full flow. The bitterns showed well this morning and began by a display of two birds above the reed beds, apparently in dispute and clearly chasing one another away. A further six sightings were to be had. As we walked around the reserve we had brief views of cetti's warblers – not an easy bird to see. During our time here we experienced a soundscape of reed, sedge, willow and garden warblers along with blackcaps and whitethroats. An obliging cuckoo sat on a tree singing away giving excellent views for everyone – its distinctive drooped wings and falcon like posture very evident. We also had nice views of pochards and great crested grebes.

After a welcome warm lunch in Ashcott comprising homemade hot soups and wholesome baguettes, our next visit was to Natural England's Shapwick Heath Reserve. The group had the best views yet of two nearby bitterns in flight. The shallows pools and exposed mud revealed a redshank, dunlin and a washing whimbrel while a dozen or more gadwall busily fed, sieving their beak through the mud. A pair of canada geese had two young goslings. More garden warblers sang from the trees. Over the open water, a few hundred swifts were feeding. In the far distance one or two hobbies could be made out as they glided along with their larger bodies and longer wings. Over time, one or two came closer and eventually the group were given excellent views of feeding hobbies – their orange-red vents clearly visible as they caught insects with their talons before eating them on the wing. At least two sparrowhawks were seen and more cetti's, reed and sedge warblers could be heard.

We had our final drive back to Wells, still with Glastonbury Tor in view – a landmark which had been visible from most sites during our tour and journeys. Back in Wells we said our farewells and parted after a hugely enjoyable and fulfilling few days.

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Species Lists

Birds (H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	May	
			18	19
1	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	H	H
2	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓	✓
3	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓
4	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓
5	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓
6	Great Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>	✓	✓
7	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
8	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	
9	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓
10	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	✓	✓
11	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
12	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	✓	✓
13	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
14	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	✓	
15	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	✓	✓
16	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
17	Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>		✓
18	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	
19	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	H	H
20	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
21	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
22	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
23	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		✓
24	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓
25	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	
26	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>		✓
27	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	
28	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
29	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓
30	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>		✓
31	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	✓	✓
32	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
33	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
34	Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	✓	✓
35	Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	✓	✓
36	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		✓
37	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	✓
38	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓
39	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	✓	✓
40	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	May	
			18	19
41	Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>	✓	
42	Northern Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
43	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
44	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓
45	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
46	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
47	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	✓
48	Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>	✓	✓
49	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	✓	✓
50	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓
51	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	✓	✓
52	Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>	✓	✓
53	Lesser Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia curruca</i>	✓	
54	Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>	✓	✓
55	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>	✓	✓
56	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	✓
57	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	✓	
58	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
59	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>	✓	
60	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
61	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
62	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	✓	
63	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	✓	
64	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	✓	
65	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
66	Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓
67	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
68	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
69	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	
70	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
71	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
72	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
73	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	✓	✓
74	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
75	Common Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>	✓	
76	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓

Mammals

1	Brown Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	✓	
2	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	✓	✓
3	Shrew sp	<i>Sorex sp</i>	H	H

	Common name	Scientific name	May	
			18	19

Signs of

	Badger	<i>Meles meles</i>	✓	✓
	Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>	✓	✓

Butterflies

	Orange Tip	<i>Anthocharis cardamines</i>	✓	✓
	Holly Blue	<i>Celastrina argiolus</i>	✓	
	Peacock	<i>Inachis io</i>	✓	✓
	Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>	✓	
	Comma	<i>Polygonia c-album</i>	✓	
	Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>	✓	
	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>	✓	
	Green-veined White	<i>Artogeia napi</i>	✓	✓

Orchids

	Green-veined	<i>Anacamptis morio</i>	✓	
	Common Spotted	<i>Dactylorhiza fuchsii</i>	✓	
	Southern Marsh	<i>Dactylorhiza praetermissa</i>	✓ ?	

Dragonflies and Damselflies

	Broad-bodied Chaser	<i>Libellula depressa</i>	✓	
	Blue-tailed Damselfly	<i>Ischnura elegans</i>	✓	
	Common Blue Damselfly	<i>Enallagma cyathigerum</i>	✓	