

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

24 - 26 May 2010



A typical Levels scene



The Group scanning for Bitterns across the marshes



Blue-tailed Damselflies hatched in their thousands



Bittern – we had an amazing 20 sightings of this target bird!

Report compiled by Dave Nevitt and Mike Johnson



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Day 1

Monday 24th May

A very warm and sunny day

Travelling from all points of the country, fourteen tour members enjoyed a glorious sunny May day to travel to the picturesque city of Wells that will be our base for the next few days to explore the wonders of the Somerset Levels. Everyone was soon checked-in by the friendly staff at the Swan Hotel with its spectacular views across to Wells Cathedral and the famous school.

After introductions, Dave and Mike gave the group an overview of the origins of the Somerset Levels as background information for the tour. A whistle-stop presentation from Stone Age Britain and the Sweet Track (the Northern Hemisphere's oldest recorded man-made road) to the modern-day Levels gave us an insight into the variety of habitats and their origins that we have around us to explore.

The group members got to know each other over a superb dinner before getting an early night in preparation for tomorrow's early start.

Day 2

Tuesday 25th May

Pleasantly warm with sunny periods. 23°C

All the group members were eagerly assembled at the minibuses at 05:00 and we were soon driving across the Levels, which looked all the more atmospheric because of the low hanging mist. Our target was the spectacle of the Levels dawn chorus and our destination was "Warbler Alley" at Ashcott Corner.

At this early hour of the day, many birds are both more active and more inclined to sing than later in the day. On arrival, we were soon surrounded by the intense sounds of bird song, heralded by our first Cuckoo. Walking along the cinder path to Ham Wall RSPB reserve, one by one we picked out the warblers in song in the trees lining the river; a Garden Warbler delighted us all as we scoped him in a tree-top babbling away to himself. We were then able to compare his song with the similar song of the nearby Blackcaps. Cetti's Warblers shouted out their songs from deep within cover but refused to give themselves up to our gaze. A Whitethroat was busy feeding young in its riverbank nest whilst her mate gave a song-flight above her, and then we found a Willow Warbler likewise taking food to its nest and we were lucky to spot a Clouded Border moth resting up for the day on a leaf. Dave was just telling us that we would never actually see a Cetti's Warbler because they are so secretive when a cry of "there's one there!" gave everyone in the group an amazing opportunity to see one in plain view only 10 metres from us, for over a minute!

Craning our necks, we all heard the very distinctive sound of a distant booming Bittern – hopefully a taste of things to come! A very high-pitched whistle in the reeds hidden behind a line of trees gave away the presence of an Otter. As the bushes opened up to give way to reed beds and open water so a new set of species appeared. A pair of Great Crested Grebes delighted us with their antics as they fed their small stripy chicks. Tufted Ducks and Pochard were found, diving for food in the deeper water areas.

Great Spotted Woodpeckers, their cheeks bulging with food for their chicks, flew across the path in front of us. Reaching the Viewpoint over the reedbeds, we looked in vain for a glimpse of a Bittern, the one bird we had all hoped for above all others. But instead we had some excellent views of Gadwall, as ever in pairs, and saw the fine vermiculations of their plumage through the telescope. Some Roe Deer were feeding quietly in the distance.

A little further on, and another Bittern boomed away – sounding like someone blowing across the top of a milk-bottle. We were just learning the song of the many Reed Warblers when up went the shout "Bittern!" and we marvelled as this beautiful brown heron did a circuit in front of us. Just in case anyone has missed him the first time, he obligingly did the same again 15 minutes later and this time we were able to see his throat full of food for his young.

On the return walk to the buses, we logged our first Hobby of the trip – somewhat distant, but hopefully the first of many to come.

After a well-earned hearty breakfast back at the hotel we set off again, this time headed for Greylake RSPB reserve. Here the habitat was different from Ham Wall, being more open sedges, iris-lined rhynes and open grassland. The bird species were different and we soon spotted handsome male Reed Buntings proudly delivering their song from exposed perches. Sedge Warblers chirruped from deep within the vegetation and we all strived to glimpse them. Our patience was rewarded when one male bird sat right on top of a sedge for all to see his creamy eyestripe and streaked plumage that distinguishes him from the Reed Warblers we had heard at Ham Wall.

Further on, the hide revealed Lapwings frequently sparring with neighbouring Redshank – no doubt they both had chicks hiding in the long grass. We left to the wonderful sounds of a Skylark singing.

We then adjourned to a relaxing pub lunch in Curry Rivel before moving to Swell Wood. This forms part of the RSPB's West Sedgmoor reserve, comprising extensive unspoilt grazing marshes overlooked by a hillside woodland that houses the southwest's largest heronry with 81 nests this year. They have also been joined by 5 nests of that recent colonist of our shores, the Little Egret. The hide afforded us an intriguing window into the world of the nesting heron as we watched their awkward-looking chicks move about in their tree-top nests. The strange gargling noises of the chicks sounded pre-historic, and the smell of the chicks' deposits certainly added to the atmospheric experience!

We then took a walk round the rest of the wood and were very lucky indeed to be rewarded with at least 6 Spotted Flycatchers, a species that has declined significantly over the last 30 years. Despite them being highly elusive at times, most of the group managed to see at least one of these. Blackcaps were singing throughout the wood and we were lucky to see several of these very well, plus several Nuthatches. Coal Tits and a Marsh Tit taunted us with their calls and a Goldcrest showed itself to a lucky few. Dave then called in two Treecreepers that delighted the group as they corkscrewed their way around the tree-trunks looking for food.

A commotion of calling birds a little way off the path was a sign that some of the small birds had found a roosting owl and were mobbing it. This was confirmed a few minutes later when, at 4 p.m., two Tawny Owls started hooting! Two lucky people also saw a Bullfinch fly across the path.

To finish the day, we sauntered down the hill and out of the woods, marvelling at the view across the Levels. We were entertained by a female Blackcap hovering like a hummingbird just 10 metres from us. Speculation as to what it was feeding on was answered when it finally managed to dislodge a huge Lime Hawk Moth caterpillar from a small elm.

As the sun descended, we were treated to some Linnets feeding on the path. The pinky-red plumage of the male bird was so bright as to appear painted-on and provided a superb end to a wonderful day on the Somerset Levels.

Returning to the hotel, the group agreed to a more leisurely breakfast tomorrow rather than another dawn start. Another excellent dinner was followed for many by a stroll in the warm evening around the picturesque city and Cathedral of Wells before a well-earned rest.

Day 3

Wednesday 26th May

Warm with sunny periods. 24°C

After breakfast we were soon heading back to the heart of the Levels. This morning we were indeed privileged as Mike took us on a walk around an area of the RSPB Ham Wall reserve that the public are not normally allowed in. This was made possible by Mike having previously worked, both as an employee and a volunteer, on the reserve. Hardly had we closed the first gate when one of the group members saw our first Bittern of the day – a great omen, indeed! Walking along the grassy paths, it was striking that there was a massive hatch of dragonflies underway. Great clouds of hundreds of newly-emerged Four-spotted Chasers took to the air, and every 20cm there was a pair of Blue-tailed, Common Blue or Azure Damselflies mating in the grass.

The morning was warmer than yesterday, with more thermals resulting and as such there was more raptor activity. Buzzards soared over the nearby woods, and a distant male Marsh Harrier tested out our identification skills. As expected, the hatching dragonflies soon brought in Hobbies and we watched several circling round, plucking the insects from mid-air, removing their wings with their beaks before eating them.

Regularly throughout the morning, the welcome cry of “Bittern!” was greeted with fantastic views as they flew between their feeding areas and their nests. We were even fortunate enough to see two together in the air, one chasing the other and nipping its feet with its bill. Subsequent correspondence with researchers has confirmed that this was an unmated male chasing a female bird.

By now, the group had become adept at separating the songs of Garden Warbler and Blackcap that seemed to be in every group of bushes, even if the differences between Reed and Sedge Warblers remained more of a challenge!

Two very smart Shovelers were certainly appreciated by the group, and a female Marsh Harrier quartering the reedbeds was a definite highlight. We heard two Water Rails squealing briefly in the reeds – it was remarkable that this was our only encounter with this secretive but highly vocal resident of the reedbeds after the devastating effect of the very cold weather earlier in the year. But it was the Bitterns that stole the show this morning, and rightly so. Several of the group members were indeed fortunate to hear the call of a Little Bittern that had been found a few days earlier, but the tally of 11 sightings of Great Bittern before lunch was truly spectacular!

We set off for lunch at a nearby pub but hardly had we left the car park when we stopped to take in breathtaking views of a stunning Red Kite that circled unconcernedly above us! The pub provided not only lunch but a Green Woodpecker too before we headed back to explore Shapwick Heath. Although called a heath, this area is far from the expected dry area. It is one of the oldest reserves in the area and as such is well established, rather than the relatively young reedbeds at Ham Wall. The old peat diggings have been largely left undisturbed, resulting in raised banks that were used to remove the peat alternating with wide watery dykes where the peat was removed by the diggers. The result is a mosaic of well-grown trees on the banks with reedy edges and open water in between. Again we noticed that the bird populations were different as Willow Warblers were singing from each clump of mature trees in this drier habitat.

Further along, with good visibility from the open path, we enjoyed watching several Hobbies feeding on dragonflies. It was particularly pleasing to see them at close quarters as previous sightings had been a little distant. As we watched, yet another Bittern flew over – it dawned on us that we had seen many more of these than Grey Herons on this trip! A section of the reserve had been pumped out to provide some open mud for any passing waders. This area gave us many more Gadwall, a pair of Shoveler and a very energetic flock of 15 Black-tailed Godwits, many resplendent in their orange breeding plumage. They were joined by a Redshank that introduced the group to the challenges of wader identification – a topic for the next trip, maybe!

We finished the trip by splitting the group between the two small hides. Those who went to Noah’s Lake Hide saw the Cormorant colony there, with their tatty nests protecting their chicks. A group of c.6 Hobbies in the distance were making sorties from their perches in dead trees to pick off passing dragonflies.

Those who went to Meare Heath Hide were delighted by a Hobby performing very well close to the hide and another Bittern sighting.

After an action-packed couple of days, with some superb wildlife experiences, we finally made our way back to the buses and our return to Wells for the close of the tour. And what could be a more fitting sighting on the way back to the minibuses but a fly-past of a Great Bittern – our 16th sighting of the day and a great memory for a fantastic trip!

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Species Lists

Birds (H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	May	
			25	26
1	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	H	H
2	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓ + chicks	✓
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>	4	16
7	Little Bittern	<i>Ixobrychus minutus</i>		H
8	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
9	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	
10	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓
11	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	✓	✓
12	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
13	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>		✓
14	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	✓	✓
15	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
16	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>		✓
17	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		✓
18	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		✓
19	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
20	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓
21	Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>	2	12+
22	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	H
23	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>		H
24	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
25	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
26	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
27	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		✓
28	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓	✓
29	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	
30	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
31	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓
32	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
33	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	✓	✓
34	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
35	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
36	Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	✓	✓
37	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	H	
38	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>	✓	
39	Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	May	
			25	26
40	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	✓
41	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>		✓
42	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓	✓
43	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓
44	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	✓	✓
45	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		✓
46	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	
47	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓
48	Northern Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
49	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
50	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓
51	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
52	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
53	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	✓
54	Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>	✓	✓
55	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	✓	✓
56	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓
57	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	✓	✓
58	Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>	✓	✓
59	Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>	✓	✓
60	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>	✓	✓
61	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	
62	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	✓	
63	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
64	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	H	
65	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>	✓	
66	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
67	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
68	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	✓	
69	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	✓	
70	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	✓	✓
71	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
72	Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓
73	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>		✓
74	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
75	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	
76	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
77	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
78	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
79	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	✓	✓
80	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
81	Common Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	May	
			25	26
82	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	✓	✓
83	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓

Mammals

1	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓	✓
2	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	✓	
3	Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>	H	

Lepidoptera

1	Orange Tip	<i>Anthocharis cardamines</i>	✓	
2	Holly Blue	<i>Celastrina argiolus</i>	✓	
3	Peacock	<i>Inachis io</i>	✓	✓
4	Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>	✓	
5	Comma	<i>Polygonia c-album</i>	✓	
6	Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>	✓	✓
7	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>	✓	
8	Green-veined White	<i>Artogeia napi</i>		✓
9	Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>	✓	✓
10	Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>	✓	
11	Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>		✓
12	Clouded Border moth	<i>Lomaspilis marginata</i>	✓	
13	Silver Y moth	<i>Autographa gamma</i>		✓
14	Lime Hawk Moth	<i>Mimas tiliae</i>	✓	

Dragonflies and Damselflies

1	Four-spotted Chaser	<i>Libellula quadrimaculata</i>	✓	✓
2	Broad-bodied Chaser	<i>Libellula depressa</i>	✓	
3	Blue-tailed Damselfly	<i>Ischnura elegans</i>	✓	✓
4	Common Blue Damselfly	<i>Enallagma cyathigerum</i>	✓	✓
5	Azure Damselfly	<i>Coenagrion puella</i>	✓	✓
6	Banded Damselfly	<i>Calopteryx splendens</i>	✓	✓