

The Somerset Levels in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Report

20 - 22 May 2016



Early Morning Scene



Great Egret



Hairy Dragonfly



European Grass Snake

Report compiled by Dave Nevitt
Images courtesy of Glenn Wilson



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Summary

This tour around the Somerset Levels in spring was a fantastic opportunity to witness the wildlife in one of Britain's prime wetland areas. A home in winter to massive concentrations of waders, wildfowl and the country's largest roost of millions of Starlings, in spring the area comes alive with the many species which come here to breed.

A host of warbler species, the broadest range of breeding heron species in the country, and many specialists of reedbeds and wet grassland habitats combine to make this a unique area. Sought-after species include the largest concentration of breeding Bitterns in the country, the only site in Britain where the Great Egret breeds, the Cranes which have been reintroduced here after an absence of over 400 years, and Hobbies which congregate to feed on the plethora of Odonata in the rhynes. The stage was set for a fantastic feast of wildlife.

Day 1

Friday 20th May

The group assembled in the evening of a cool and showery Somerset evening. In the cosy setting of the Swan Hotel, with Wells Cathedral glowing in floodlight opposite, expectations were high as Dave and Tom introduced themselves and whet the group's appetite with the plan for the days ahead. The group members introduced themselves and said what they particularly wanted to see and shared their level of experience to assist the leaders. We adjourned to sample our first of several delicious Swan Hotel meals before moving to the Exmoor Room where Dave gave a short talk by way of an introduction to how the Levels were formed and the special species that now call it home.

Some having spent much of the day travelling, and with an early start scheduled for tomorrow, all took a welcome early night.

Day 2

Saturday 21st May

All the group bar one emerged in the early dawn light at 5 a.m. to be welcomed by Tom and Dave. Loading up into the bus, we were soon on our way across the marshy fields of the Levels, heading for Ashcott Corner. Arriving in the car park at 05:20, the heavily overcast skies did not bode well and we donned our waterproofs, just in case. Despite this, we were greeted by a cacophony of bird song in the car park. A Bittern boomed in the distance, giving us an immediate indication of how good this area is, and making everyone feel that it had already been worth getting up early! A Cuckoo called in the distance and, just from the car park, we had Blackcap, Chiffchaff, Wren, Song Thrush and Great Tit.

We checked the road bridge for Kingfishers but they weren't there today. Moving on, we found several more Blackcaps and had a lesson on their songs to equip us for the walk. A Willow Warbler sang from its windy perch as we saw a couple of Blackcaps and some smart Chaffinches in their summer finery.

We proceeded down the old railway line, taking the path to RSPB Ham Wall reserve. A Goldcrest was singing from the ivy on an alder tree but, in the cool and windy weather, it understandably seemed more interested in feeding than coming out to meet us.

A Whitethroat sang from the low scrub and Reed Warblers were chuntering away in the reeds. A Cetti's Warbler gave its loud song from a willow, then did the atypical and showed himself to the group! Cormorants were flying overhead and Pochards and Tufted Ducks were zooming around in the skies above us. Another Cuckoo was calling in the distance and another Bittern was booming. With the rain having forced any aerial insects down, there were hundreds of Swifts whizzing around quite low, making the most of this feeding bonanza. They were also joined by some House Martins. A fine male Marsh Harrier patrolled the far reed beds looking for a meal. The much longed-for cry of "Bittern!" went up as Tom spotted one quite close, flying over the reed tops. It stayed in view for quite some time and was enjoyed by all. We were treated to several fly-bys by the rare Great Egrets as they flew between their feeding sites and their nests – this is the only place in the country where this spectacular bird breeds!

Getting to the viewpoint, the weather hadn't improved much but we still spotted a Marsh Harrier, several Little Egrets, and Great Crested Grebes with their adorable stripy humbug chicks. What a magical place – despite the weather! Several more sightings of Great Egret later and it was time to turn back to the buses.

On the way, we heard a rather shy Garden Warbler getting in on the dawn chorus. We hoped for a better performing one later. An obliging Treecreeper, picked up by its distinctive call, performed on a nearby tree for all to see.

We were soon back at the Swan enjoying a nice cooked breakfast that we all felt that we had thoroughly earned. After a rest, we headed out again, this time to the Parrett valley in the south of the Levels. First stop was the RSPB Greylake reserve where, as the rain came in again, we checked the viewpoint over the reed bed. A fine male Reed Bunting sat atop a bush for all to admire as he gave his monotonous, off-key song. Another Bittern boomed from deep in the reeds, this one seeming to be gasping for breath before each boom!

We followed the boardwalk into the realm of the Reed Warbler. We were soon surrounded by their songs, some only metres from us. We had another lesson, this time on separating the songs of Reed and Sedge Warblers – this pair were to trouble the group for the next two days!! Approaching the open grassland, we started to hear the Skylarks singing above us as the Lapwings flew up to beat up a Crow as it went by. As the rain continued, the Swifts were again whizzing around having a feast.

Damp grassland is a habitat that holds a wealth of breeding birds but, by their very nature, most of them keep hidden – it is one of the reasons why they nest here so that their chicks can remain safe in the grass. So we sat it out in the hide to see what came out. A Cuckoo called in the distance and we were hearing Yellow Wagtails calling too. Several of them kept perching up on a fence, but they didn't stay for long and it was irksome trying to get all the group on to them. Some obliging Gadwalls were right in front of the hide and looked stunning in the telescope.

Lapwings were plentiful and frequently came up to harry the Carrion Crows that searched for their young. Several of the Lapwing had chicks, including a couple right by the hide. We had good views of several Redshanks

as they patrolled the area to protect their chicks which were no doubt hiding unseen in the grass. One of the Bitterns gave us a great fly-past on its way back to its nest, and later we saw its return flight back to its chosen feeding area. Linnets were flying all around us and a couple of Marsh Harriers were looking for unwary prey. A Sedge Warbler was singing right by the hide but it kept hidden in the vegetation. Some in the group had brief views of fly-by Hobby and Peregrine.

It was time to move on so we headed back towards the buses. One the way, we heard more Reed and Sedge Warblers. We stopped at the pub to use the loos and from the car park a Lesser Whitethroat gave its characteristic machine gun like rattle from a nearby thick hedge. Dave was able to lure it out so that the group could see it properly, and to compare it to the Common Whitethroats that we had seen earlier.

We then headed off to Aller Moor. This is the site where the Cranes have their feeding station in the winter, but sadly they were elsewhere today, probably disturbed by a chap strimming the grass. We spotted some Roe Deer in the distance and a Grey Heron in a ditch.

Moving on to Oath railway bridge, we scoped the low-lying wet fields. Several Curlew flew up in the murk as we looked for Cranes. Eventually Tom spotted some flying in and, through the mist, we were able to just about make out four of them. A sighting, but we hoped to do better later!

It was time for lunch so we journeyed back up the road to the King Alfred pub in Burrowbridge, the hub of much of the relief effort during the 2013/14 winter's flooding. As well as the local ciders, we had a lovely lunch, including the famed "Somerset Smokie" for some.

After lunch, we headed back past Oath railway bridge and stopped again to look for Cranes. We spotted four distant ones, probably those we had seen earlier, and some were lucky to see them in flight.

We made our way up the hill to nearby RSPB Swell Wood. We put down some seed in the car park and soon had clocked Coal, Great and Blue Tits, two Nuthatches and lovely Chaffinches. Then the scarce Marsh Tit came in several times to feed – a new species for many in the group. We went to the hide overlooking the south-west's largest heronry where we admired the prehistoric-looking young Grey Herons as they squabbled noisily in their treetop nests. They were a fair size and no doubt not many days from departing their nests. Their neighbouring Little Egrets, nesting somewhat later, were still incubating eggs and sitting tight on their nests.

We heard several Spotted Flycatchers outside the hide but the thick vegetation prevented us from getting good views of them.

Further down the path, we stopped at a clearing where this time we were able to see several Spotted Flycatchers, along with a Treecreeper the came in to its nest several times. As it waited for its partner to vacate the nest for it to take food to its chicks, it sat motionless on a tree – an unusual event for a bird that is usually constantly on the move.

We got to the "viewpoint", curiously mostly obscured by trees which can't be removed to improve the view because rare bats live in them! We scanned the marsh for Cranes and Jane found a couple – a clearer view this time but still 2km away! At least we could make out the head markings of these two adults. We then went down

the lane, descending down the hill, with a wonderful view across the huge expanse of the great West Sedgemoor reserve.

We again scoped for Cranes and found those we had previously seen. We all admired them, but we were all thinking that they were ridiculously far away to appreciate them. Then a quick glance at the field just in front of us revealed another two Cranes – at last, a decent view as they were only a few hundred metres away. Zooming in with the scopes, we now saw these magnificent birds in all their glory. What a great result!

Everyone was flagging by now from our early morning start and it was time to go so we returned up the hill to the buses and made our way back to the luxury of the Swan at Wells.

After some time to relax and spruce ourselves up, plus the chance to watch the FA Cup final (!), we enjoyed another delicious dinner. We then caught up with our checklists for the day, which revealed a very respectable total of 82 species despite the inclement weather, before retiring after a very successful day.

Day 3

Sunday 22nd May

After another satisfying breakfast, we left Wells to explore the more northerly valleys of the Levels. We returned to Ashcott Corner car park where we had been at dawn yesterday. On arrival, we paused to listen and, despite there still being many birds singing, we commented how much quieter it was than at dawn yesterday. It certainly had been worth getting up early yesterday! For a change, we headed west this time, to the Natural England Shapwick Heath reserve. The weather was kinder today – it was still, and even the sun was poking out occasionally. A Chiffchaff showed nicely in a bush in front of us as a Goldcrest sang nearby. As we got to the more open area we spotted a Marsh Harrier quartering the reeds. A warbler chuntering away in a large willow was our first decent Garden Warbler. Initially he kept hidden but we then managed to see him in the telescopes. Sedge and Reed Warblers sang nearby as well as the loud Cetti's Warbler. On the pools we had Grey Heron in their breeding finery and a pair of Coots were looking after their cute youngsters.

At the lagoon, which had been drained, we saw a flock of nine Black-tailed Godwits, some resplendent in their summer plumage. A superb male Garganey was sat on the island and Gadwall and Mallard all around. Several Pochard were feeding busily. Red-eyed Damselflies were an intriguing new species for most as we watched them sitting on the lily pads on the rhine. We had a couple of distant Hobbies over the woods and there were several Buzzards enjoying the sunshine.

Trying out the new Tower hide, we had a better view of the Garganey as well as a nice Whitethroat singing and Long-tailed Tits. A fine full adult male Marsh Harrier patrolled the reeds and a couple more Hobbies were still frustratingly distant.

As we reached the bridge there was a Blackcap singing away and Common Blue Damselflies were emerging from the grass. We waited here to see what would appear and we were delighted to soon see four Hobbies feeding over Noah's Lake. They then proceeded to come closer until they were just above us and we could see them much better. They were very popular with all the group as this is one of the target birds that occurs here in some number in spring, feasting on the plentiful dragonflies. A Common Tern was found perched on a tree stump in the middle of the lake, then a Kingfisher flew in and perched for a while to be admired by all.

Time was pressing on so we headed back to the buses, striking it lucky with another Marsh Harrier on the way back. We then popped in for a brief visit to Catcott Lows SWT reserve where we enjoyed many Greylag Goose goslings, Reed Bunting and four more Hobbies right above us giving great backlit views.

It was time for lunch so we headed to the Crown at Catcott where we all enjoyed a lovely Carvery meal before moving on to the Somerset Wildlife Trust Westhay Moor reserve, where we had the now-familiar song of the Cetti's Warbler from the car park. Reed Warblers continued to confuse with their repetitive songs and a couple more Hobbies continued to delight. By the first hide we walked through the long grass and disturbed hundreds of damselflies. We saw Blue-tailed, Azure, Common Blue and Large Red Damselflies. In a sunny glade we found several dragonflies – Hairy Dragonflies, both male and female, as well as Four-spotted Chaser and Broad-bodied Chaser. We gathered by a piece of corrugated iron for the “big reveal”, of three superb Grass Snakes that were curled up underneath: a splendid sight indeed.

We moved on and were soon in the depths of this ancient unspoilt marshland, one of the first reserves on the Levels, with reedbeds on one side and thick alder carr on the other. We spotted the Royal Fern growing in a shady woodland edge then tried to find Bearded Tits. The wind had got up quite strongly by now and they weren't to be found, no doubt busy feeding at the base of the reeds somewhere.

At the Tower Hide, made famous by John Craven as he was filmed here on Countryfile watching the huge winter Starling roost, we had an elevated panoramic view of the reserve. A Bittern boomed and we looked from the hide to watch another Marsh Harrier over the reeds. As expected, overlooking reed beds on a windy day, other birds were few and far between.

It was time to return as some of the group wished an early arrival at Wells; after farewells, Tom took half the group back whilst Dave took the other half back up the drove to have another go for Bearded Tits. Here it was rather windier and they were staying well down in the reeds so we retraced our steps in this wonderful reserve. Back to the bus, we ventured back to Wells to say our goodbyes and parted after what we hope all in the group found to be a hugely enjoyable and fulfilling few days.

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Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	May	
			21	22
1	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	✓	✓
2	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	7	✓
3	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓
4	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓
5	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	15	5
6	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	4	1
7	Great Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>	2S , 2H	3H
8	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
9	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	4	40
10	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓
11	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	2	
12	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	✓	✓
13	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
14	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	6	
15	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	✓	✓
16	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
17	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	5	5
18	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	2	
19	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
20	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	
21	Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>	1	14
22	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	1	
23	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓
24	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	8	
25	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	H	H
26	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
27	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
28	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
29	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	3	
30	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		9
31	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓	
32	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	2	
33	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
34	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓
35	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>		1
36	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	3H	1
37	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
38	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
39	Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	1S , 4H	3H
40	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	✓	✓
41	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		1
42	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	✓
43	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	2H	
44	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓	✓
45	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓
46	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	✓	✓
47	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	May	
			21	22
48	Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>	6	1
49	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
50	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
51	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓
52	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
53	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
54	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	✓
55	Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>	✓	✓
56	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	✓	✓
57	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓
58	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	✓	✓
59	Common Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>	✓	✓
60	Lesser Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia curruca</i>	1	
61	Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>	✓	✓
62	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>	✓	✓
63	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	✓
64	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	6	
65	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
66	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	2	
67	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓	
68	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
69	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
70	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	✓	
71	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	2	
72	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
73	Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓
74	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
75	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
76	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	1	2
77	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
78	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
79	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
80	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	2H	
81	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
82	Common Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	2	
83	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	✓	✓
84	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓

Mammals

1	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓	✓
2	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	✓	✓
3	Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>	✓	

Invertebrates

1	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>		✓
2	Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>		✓
3	Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>	✓	✓
4	Banded Demoiselle	<i>Calopteryx splendens</i>		✓
5	Blue-tailed Damselfly	<i>Ischnura elegans</i>		✓
6	Common Blue Damselfly	<i>Enallagma cyathigerum</i>		✓

	Common name	Scientific name	May	
			21	22
7	Red-eyed Damselfly	<i>Erythromma najas</i>		✓
8	Variable Damselfly	<i>Coenagrion pulchellum</i>		✓
9	Azure Damselfly	<i>Coenagrion puella</i>		✓
10	Large Red Damselfly	<i>Pyrrhosoma nymphula</i>		✓
11	Four-spotted Chaser	<i>Libellula quadrimaculata</i>		✓
12	Broad-bodied Chaser	<i>Libellula depressa</i>		✓
13	Hairy Dragonfly	<i>Brachytron pratense</i>		✓