

# The Somerset Levels in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Report

4 - 6 May 2018



Peacock Butterfly



Eurasian Reed Warbler



Black-tailed Godwit



Eurasian Nuthatch

Report and images by Matt Collis  
Images courtesy of Mary Lewis



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Tour participants: Dominic Couzens and Matt Collis (Leaders) with 15 Naturetrek clients.

## Introduction

Touring around the internationally important Somerset Levels, this two-day trip was an exciting opportunity to experience some of the best inland spring birding and explore this unique wetland landscape. We were privileged to see a huge variety of species, including a few absolute spring birding gems, and were blessed with fantastic sunny weather the whole weekend. We couldn't have asked for more from the weekend (minus a flying Bittern - but we won't talk about that).

## Day 1

Friday 4th May

Gathered together at the small bar of the Swan Hotel, set within the picturesque English town of Wells, the weekend began with tour leaders Dominic and Matt formally welcoming the group and telling them a bit more about themselves and the weekend ahead. Invited to do the same, each member of our new group followed suit, introducing themselves and sharing their wildlife hopes and dreams. We then moved into the dining room for the first of our hearty three-course meals - the first of many food delights during this trip.

Straight after dinner the leaders gave a 30-minute talk explaining the history of the Somerset Levels, describing the uniqueness of the area and the incredible wetland habitat it provides for wildlife. The group were introduced to a selection of sites they'd be visiting and some of the species which call these wetlands their home. Both common species and some target star species were introduced. With the talk complete, everyone drifted their way to bed full of anticipation for the days to come.

## Day 2

Saturday 5th May

Rising well before the sun, the entire group gathered ready for a dawn chorus trip to RSPB Ham Wall. Arriving at the car park at 5.30am, we barely had to open the door before the cacophony of sounds filled our keen ears. Spoilt for choice, at first the group found it hard to separate the myriad of calls and song but, fortunately, two stood out amongst the rest: a softly spoken 'Cuckoo' came from deep in amongst the reeds and the haunting boom of an early rising Bittern. Both the group and leaders were delighted to hear these two so early on.

Leaving the car park and heading to the first bridge, several of the group were able to spot a Kingfisher as it flicked over the bridge and along the rhyne. Carrying on along the main stone path, stopping every 20 metres or so, Dominic took the lead describing the various songs we could hear; the descending warble of the Willow Warbler, the rhythmic two-tone song of the Chiffchaff, the sweet variable warble of a Robin and the more full-throated song of Blackbird. Further down the path we were lucky enough to have Blackcap and Garden Warbler performing right next to each other; two difficult and commonly confused singing warblers. The group spent some time trying to get to grips with these two before walking off to test their new knowledge on some other birds. Safe to say, there were plenty of chances to practice with at least another three or four Garden Warblers heard and many more Blackcaps.

Arriving at the first viewing platform, it became clear the view across the reed was obscured by heavy morning mist. Nevertheless, several birds were picked out, including Mallard, Tufted Duck and Gadwall on the water and

a Little Egret walking in the shallows. Several birds flew over our heads including the fast-winged Pochard and our first Great Egret of the weekend. Several pairs of Little Grebe, the odd Coot and a Lapwing were all heard from amongst the reed as were several Cetti's Warblers, including one which gave incredible views from a nearby willow and was later joined by another Garden Warbler in full view.

En route back to the car park, the group got the odd glimpse of some Long-tailed Tits, and were tantalisingly close to seeing a pair of Bullfinch which had been heard earlier, but no such luck this time. The leaders stopped to listen more closely to the Reed Warblers and Sedge Warblers which were now in full song; however, by this point most had one thing on their mind: breakfast!

After a delicious breakfast at the hotel, it was time to head to RSPB Greylake. The birding began as soon as the buses hit the road, with a flock of Rooks seen in the roadside trees tending to their young. Several small groups of Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls were seen in neighbouring fields, a Buzzard perched on a telegraph pole, and a colony of House Sparrows were spotted in a hedge.

Arriving at the car park, the group stepped out to the sharp song of Cetti's Warbler, two Goldfinch singing in a nearby tree and a lone Sedge Warbler singing from a willow by the road - a chance to study its song without the distraction of Reed Warbler. Fully kitted up and with sun cream on, the group headed along the main boardwalk through the reeds towards the hide. The air was filled with Reed Warbler song, only interrupted by the odd Reed Bunting with its three-part song. Stopping at a view point just outside the hide, the group scanned the open fields and were treated to a Marsh Harrier, mobbed by two Lapwings, gliding across the reed bed, before having an incredible encounter with a male Sparrowhawk which flew directly at and then between the group – wow!

The short walk from the view point to the hide threw up a few more surprises including a Grass Snake, a Grey Heron and the most confiding Reed Warbler who happily sang mid-way up the reeds a mere metre in front: a rare experience to get so close to a usually elusive bird. Once in the hide the birds didn't stop, with great views of Gadwall displaying, several Teal and a Little Grebe in the water, a Great Egret fishing in the shallows, a single Redshank in the grassy verge and a Kestrel sitting on a pylon to the far right of the hide. However, by far the best bird was a stunning male Garganey which, despite only making two brief appearances, was enjoyed by all as it swam across the channel of water, 50 metres out from the hide.

Heading back to the car park, the first butterflies of the trip were spotted, including Brimstone, Orange Tip, Small Tortoiseshell and a Large White. Stopping only briefly at the view point for the second time, a distant Roe Deer was seen chilling in the field and we had a lingering view of a second Grass Snake as it swam in the pool next to the path. Once back at the vans there was just enough time to spot the Great Egret making its exit out of the reserve and to spot a second Kestrel perched in an oak tree.

Back on the road, the birding continued with glimpsing views of House Martins, two Mistle Thrush in a small cemetery field and a Pied Wagtail sitting on telephone wires. A quick detour was taken to look for Cranes from the bridge at Stathe, but with no luck, so the buses pushed on to the final birding stop before lunch, at Aller Moor. Strolling up the hill from the car park, Dominic picked out a Coal Tit perched singing in a conifer tree and helped people learn the difference between its song and a Great Tit. It was then a short walk through the churchyard and out to the back fields to scan the open expanse of fields. A couple of Ravens were seen flying over the woodland to the north-east, and several Stock Dove flew overhead - a firm favourite for one member of

the group. A distant Curlew was spotted down towards the river, difficult to pick out in the heat haze, and a small flock of Linnet flew around the farmyard. Both Skylark and a single Meadow Pipit were heard but not seen, and Swallows were a common sight, whizzing low above the grass. Thoroughly exhausted by a busy morning birding, everyone returned to the buses and retired to the King Alfred pub for a well-deserved lunch.

The afternoon's birding took started at RSPB Swell Wood, a remnant piece of ancient woodland along the Blackdown Hills. Arriving in the car park, the group got their first glances of several woodland specialists, including two fantastic Nuthatches gorging on the seeds hanging from the various feeders. Coal Tits were present too, showing off their white nape as they flicked from branch to branch, and the occasional Blue Tits and Great Tit also made an appearance.

It was then on into the wood, through the glorious floral display of bluebells and woodruff and onto the well-known view point at the edge of the wood. Birds were few and far between, but the first Great Spotted Woodpeckers were heard somewhere up high in the canopy. At the view point the group scanned the vast open and dramatic landscape of damp lowland grassland and peat moorland which forms the RSPB West Sedgemoor reserve. To everyone's delight not one but three Cranes were spotted out in the field and, although distant, everyone got good views through the scope.

On the return walk a Goldcrest was found clambering around in the ivy-covered trees before everyone stopped in a woodland clearing in the hope of seeing a Spotted Flycatcher. A single bird was heard briefly calling before it was spotted momentarily as it flitted around high above in the canopy. Unfortunately, it didn't show well and soon disappeared into the canopy with only a few members of the group seeing it. However, all disappointment soon passed when the group stepped into the beautiful and theatrical hide at the foot of Swell Wood herony. The sight of over 16 Heron nests high up in the trees, joined by the odd Little Egret pairing, brought delight to everyone's faces. After a good 15 minutes of soaking in all the calls and enjoying the small birds which came to a nearby puddle to drink, including Chaffinch, Wren and a Goldcrest, a final attempt was made to see a Treecreeper, but with no luck, so we returned to the buses.

After a quick discussion, the decision was to drop in to RSPB Ham Wall en route back to the hotel. Heading back up to the first viewing platform, several of the morning's songsters were still present, but it was notably quieter and number of singing birds fewer. With the mist now dispelled, the group were treated to great views across the whole reedbed system. We spotted several duck species including Gadwall, Tufted Duck and Mallard, and a beautiful Great Crested Grebe carrying a lone chick on its back. A bubble trail was spotted running along the edge of the reeds and an Otter briefly reared its head before turning over and slinking frustratingly out of view. Despite the leaders' best efforts, nobody else spotted the animal and only a few managed to catch the bubble trail.

Once at the viewing platform, a Whitethroat appeared guarding a nearby nest site and a single Water Rail called from the back of the pool. A lone Marsh Harrier crossed the back of the reedbed, past the tower hide, before dropping out of sight, and to everyone's utter delight, a group of four swifts circled overhead for a few minutes, giving the odd scream, which many commented on as being a sure sign the summer was truly on its way.

With everyone on their last legs, the group retreated to the comfort of the hotel for a well-earned rest and second three-course meal. Shortly after the meal, the group reconvened briefly in the Exmoor room to tally up

the day's birds which totalled a whopping 80 species - a brilliant score for an inland day's birding in May. It was decided it was too late for a specialist talk but the offer was made for one bus to go out in search of owls, as several had expressed hope of seeing one this trip. In total, a group of six and the two leaders took on the challenge a little after 9pm, and within 10 minutes of getting out of Wells, a Barn Owl was spotted sitting on a wooden post by the road. After turning around to get a second view, the owl sat for about five seconds before heading off into the darkness of the field. The bus moved on in the hope of further nocturnal delights but only a couple of Rabbits were seen, as we completed our circuit back to the hotel to get some well-earned rest.

## Day 3

## Sunday 6th May

With a later start, and full from another breakfast buffet, the group met at the buses at 9am for the second day of birding on the levels. The first stop was the much-anticipated Westhay Moor reserve, a less well-known and visited reserve, just north of RSPB Ham Wall. With 81 species seen the previous day, it was now just a select few birds which were being targeted. Before even reaching the reserve, one new bird was added to the list as a single Jay flew across the front of the buses just outside of the reserve. The group also spotted two fields full of Mute Swan, maybe 300 birds sitting amongst the grass.

Once in the car park the group took the chance to stand for a short while and take in the birds all singing from all around; more Reed Warblers, booming Bitterns, a very showy Reed Bunting and a distant Cuckoo all made an appearance. Just before heading out into the reserve, a single Hobby was seen flying high above the site which its pointed wings and very short tail visible even at this distance. Walking down the main path, another Great Crested Grebe was seen on the water and a group of six Greylag Geese came low overhead, honking as they flew.

Reaching the first hide, two Hairy Dragonflies hawked around the grasslands before sitting up in the silver birch trees, the only dragonfly to be seen in May here, and several damselflies including Large Red, Variable and Azure were also seen. From the hide the group got further great views of Little Grebe and more Hobbies were spotted high in the sky. Walking along the main circuit, the leader stopped to point out the amazing sphagnum peat bog and cotton grass growing within. From here several Buzzards were seen, including one returning to a nest high in the crown of a tree, before six Hobbies gathered overhead, giving spectacular views.

Once recovered from this mini spectacle, the group headed along the loop towards the tower hide. With such a small hide people took it in turns to look out across the reeds from this high vantage point. During this time several Reed Warblers appeared including one avidly collecting nesting material, a stunning male Marsh Harrier showed well, and a single Sedge Warbler sang from close by. Whilst waiting below, other members of the group spotted a Kingfisher as it whizzed low, close to the water underneath the hide.

Completing this loop, we moved out onto the open heath bog to follow the trail around this very different type of wetland habitat. A few birds were seen, including a couple of Whitethroat and a solitary Linnets which proved a challenge to spot, hidden in a tree. With temperatures reaching their peak, a small section of woodland provided welcome shade, home to several Blackcaps, and a single Great Spotted Woodpecker was heard in the distance. Walking back through the bog, a Hobby and a Sparrowhawk flew close together, providing a great opportunity to compare the two. The leaders then lifted a metal panel in the hope of finding some reptiles but instead revealed the nest chamber of a vole and a small red ants' nest. Thoroughly pleased with all that had been

seen, the group headed back to the buses and made their way to The Crown Inn for our lunch, a delicious carvery and ploughman's selection.

For the final stop of the trip, it was back to the RSPB Ham Wall car park, but this time to the opposite end to explore Shapwick Heath, owned and managed by Natural England. A small stroll along the boardwalk into the woodland just off the car park resulted in brilliant views of a Cetti's Warbler hunting spiders off a fence and a bold Treecreeper which came within a few metres from where people stood. After leaving the woodland it was out along the main path up towards Meare Heath to look out at the muddy pools opposite the new tower hide. A Great Egret, a large group of Black-tailed Godwits in fine summer plumage and the odd duck were taking advantage of the shallow pools. Everyone's heart raced when a Cuckoo was spotted flying low across the reeds and landing up in a tree where it became difficult to spot, but luckily everyone had had good views in flight!

Finally, we walked up to Noah's Lake hide to look out across the large expanses of water. A couple of Great Crested Grebes were spotted, together with several species of duck, a selection of gulls including Herring, Lesser Black-backed and Black-headed, and a few Cormorants which stood drying their wings. Although a good number of birds were present, there were no new species for the list, and the day and trip were done. Returning to the buses one final time, aptly, the group were treated to great views of a pair of Marsh Harriers as they flew in tandem across reedbeds before they drifted off out of sight.

Hot and tired from an excellent second day's birding, the group boarded the buses and headed back to the hotel for our goodbyes. Gathered in the hotel lounge, it was announced that the trip's final species count was a brilliant 86 species, with many of the group seeing numerous birds for the first time. By the smiles on faces it appeared everybody had had a wonderful couple of days' birding and was going home feeling inspired by some of the incredible things we'd seen during the weekend. A successful trip all round.

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## Species Lists

### Birds (86 Species)

- Little Grebe, *Tachybaptus ruficollis*  
 Great Cormorant, *Phalacrocorax carbo*  
 Little Egret, *Egretta garzetta*  
 Eurasian Bittern, *Botaurus stellaris*  
 Greylag Goose, *Anser anser*  
 Common Shelduck, *Tadorna tadorna*  
 Gadwall, *Mareca strepera*  
 Mallard, *Anas platyrhynchos*  
 Garganey, *Spatula querquedula*  
 Tufted Duck, *Aythya fuligula*  
 Eurasian Sparrowhawk, *Accipiter nisus*  
 Common Kestrel, *Falco tinnunculus*  
 Common Pheasant, *Phasianus colchicus*  
 Water Rail, *Rallus aquaticus*  
 Eurasian Coot, *Fulica atra*  
 Black-tailed Godwit, *Limosa limosa*  
 Eurasian Curlew, *Numenius arquata*  
 Lesser Black-backed Gull, *Larus fuscus*  
 Feral Pigeon, *Columba livia domestica*  
 Common Wood Pigeon, *Columba palumbus*  
 Common Cuckoo, *Cuculus canorus*  
 Common Swift, *Apus apus*  
 Great Spotted Woodpecker, *Dendrocopos major*  
 Barn Swallow, *Hirundo rustica*  
 Meadow Pipit, *Anthus pratensis*  
 Eurasian Wren, *Troglodytes troglodytes*  
 Mistle Thrush, *Turdus viscivorus*  
 Common Blackbird, *Turdus merula*  
 Eurasian Blackcap, *Sylvia atricapilla*  
 Cetti's Warbler, *Cettia cetti*  
 Willow Warbler, *Phylloscopus trochilus*  
 Eurasian Reed Warbler, *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*  
 Goldcrest, *Regulus regulus*  
 Long-tailed Tit, *Aegithalos caudatus*  
 Great Tit, *Parus major*  
 Eurasian Nuthatch, *Sitta europaea*  
 Eurasian Jay, *Garrulus glandarius*  
 Eurasian Jackdaw, *Corvus monedula*  
 Carrion Crow, *Corvus corone*  
 Common Starling, *Sturnus vulgaris*  
 Common Chaffinch, *Fringilla coelebs*  
 European Goldfinch, *Carduelis carduelis*  
 Eurasian Bullfinch, *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*  
 Great Crested Grebe, *Podiceps cristatus*  
 Grey Heron, *Ardea cinerea*  
 Great Egret, *Ardea alba*  
 Mute Swan, *Cygnus olor*  
 Canada Goose, *Branta canadensis*  
 Eurasian Wigeon, *Mareca penelope*  
 Eurasian Teal, *Anas crecca*  
 Northern Shoveler, *Spatula clypeata*  
 Common Pochard, *Aythya ferina*  
 Western Marsh Harrier, *Circus aeruginosus*  
 Common Buzzard, *Buteo buteo*  
 Eurasian Hobby, *Falco subbuteo*  
 Common Crane, *Grus grus*  
 Common Moorhen, *Gallinula chloropus*  
 Northern Lapwing, *Vanellus vanellus*  
 Common Redshank, *Tringa totanus*  
 European Herring Gull, *Larus argentatus*  
 Black-headed Gull, *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*  
 Stock Dove, *Columba oenas*  
 Eurasian Collared Dove, *Streptopelia decaocto*  
 Western Barn Owl, *Tyto alba*  
 Common Kingfisher, *Alcedo atthis*  
 Eurasian Skylark, *Alauda arvensis*  
 Common House Martin, *Delichon urbica*  
 Pied Wagtail, *Motacilla alba yarrelli*  
 Dunnock, *Prunella modularis*  
 Song Thrush, *Turdus philomelos*  
 European Robin, *Erithacus rubecula*  
 Garden Warbler, *Sylvia borin*  
 Common Chiffchaff, *Phylloscopus collybita*  
 Common Whitethroat, *Sylvia communis*  
 Sedge Warbler, *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*  
 Spotted Flycatcher, *Muscicapa striata*  
 Coal Tit, *Periparus ater*  
 Eurasian Blue Tit, *Cyanistes caeruleus*  
 Eurasian Treecreeper, *Certhia familiaris*  
 Eurasian Magpie, *Pica pica*  
 Rook, *Corvus frugilegus*  
 Northern Raven, *Corvus corax*  
 House Sparrow, *Passer domesticus*  
 European Greenfinch, *Chloris chloris*  
 Common Linnet, *Linaria cannabina*  
 Common Reed Bunting, *Emberiza schoeniclus*