

The Somerset Levels in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Report

23 - 25 April 2019



Great Egrets



Nesting Grey Heron



Great Crested Grebe



Garganey

Report compiled by Matt Collis



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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 many close encounters with the best of spring's migrants, and despite mixed weather, were blessed with brilliant birding the whole trip. Personal highlights included a beautiful male Garganey, seeing Eurasian Cranes with chicks and a superb display of Hobbies and Swifts. A total of 81 species were seen over the course of two action-packed and thoroughly enjoyable days.

Day 1

Tuesday 23rd April

Gathered together in the small bar of the Swan Hotel, set within the picturesque English town of Wells, the weekend began with tour leader Matt formally welcoming the group and telling them a bit more about himself 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, before moving into the dining room for the first of our hearty three course meals - the first of many food delights during this trip.

With the usual post-dinner introductory talk on the Somerset Levels unable to happen due to technical issues everyone drifted off to bed in preparation for an early start tomorrow and two full days birding ahead.

Day 2

Wednesday 24th April

Rising well before the sun, the entire group gathered ready for a dawn chorus experience at RSPB Ham Wall. After arriving at the car park for 5.30pm, we barely had to open the door before the cacophony of sounds filled our keen ears. Alongside the usual voices of a dawn chorus we had several exciting additions including many people's first Cuckoo and several booming Bitterns. We also were treated to a non-avian spectacle when we encountered a swarming group of Pipistrelle bats returning to their roost in a nearby house – a truly remarkable spectacle to watch.

Following the main walkway, we spent the next hour scouring the site for migrants whilst attempting to learn and differentiate the various different songs. We encountered many birds singing from the bushes including a few particularly close and special encounters including Blackcaps, a rather showy Willow Warbler, and a brief but delightful Garden Warbler. It was also a particularly exciting moment when a Cetti's Warbler, normally so elusive, perched in full view in a small shrub for almost a minute before disappearing off into the undergrowth. Other birds of note included a brilliant Whitethroat, a plucky Song Thrush collecting snails and some Chiffchaffs nest building in the bank.

Away from the song birds we spent our second hour doing a more general bird watch of the site and encountered several other exciting birds including a good number of raptors. The first was a Hobby which flew across the path and over our heads giving sparing views, soon followed by a Sparrowhawk which flew down the hedge not long afterwards. Marsh Harrier was also seen, with one male and one female seen quartering the reeds at different locations, but both from distance.

Most of the other birds seen came from within the various pools which we scanned including many egrets, plenty of duck species and several other waterbirds. The most interesting of those sightings included a Common Sandpiper flushed onto a wooden perch by a fishing Great Egret, a rather large gathering of ten Great Egrets, a pair of nesting Great Crested Grebes and a brief view of a Kingfisher whizzing up a reed.

We also had several brilliant birds flyover but not land on the reserve. The first was a pair of Bitterns which flew quite high in the sky circling round the reserve giving long and excellent views – a real trip highlight. The second was a group of approximately sixteen Cattle Egrets which flew as a flock towards Westhay Moor.

After a delicious breakfast at the hotel, we headed to RSPB Greylake to spend a few hours searching the site. The weather had taken a turn for the worse at this point so the majority of our visit was spent in the main hide at the centre of the reserve. However, on the walk which we managed we noted several new species including Reed Bunting, Reed Warbler and Sedge Warbler, spending a bit of time learning to pick out the differences audibly between the latter two.

Once in the hide we scanned the wet meadows in front of us to keep watch on the unfolding action. Several birds were resident throughout including a small flock of Wigeon, Teal, Mallard and a couple of Redshank. Other birds encountered in the marshy meadows included a number of Lapwing, a lone Snipe, Little Grebe and Coot. Birds occupying the more peripheral habitats included Buzzard, a couple of Yellow Wagtails and a Peregrine Falcon which was perched on one of the gates before flying low off site. Nice views of a grazing Roe Deer not far out from the hide was also a bonus of our visit.

Returning to the minibus we headed off to The King Alfred Inn for a hearty lunch before travelling on to our penultimate stop of the day at RSPB Swell Woods. Give the rain was still drizzling we started off at the amazing and very active heronry found within the wood. From the hide we could see lots of active nests with Grey Herons either sat on or perched near. We also saw a couple of Little Egrets who had only recently taken up residency and were very much more vocal, and fighting during territorial disputes.

Away from the heronry we took a walk around the woods starting in the car park to enjoy the birds coming to the feeders. Coal Tit, Great Tit, Chaffinch and some very confiding Nuthatches were all spotted. Following on down the track we stopped to scan from the view point over West Sedgemoor and were delighted to see a family of two adult Eurasian Cranes and their two freshly hatched chicks feeding in the fields below – another top memory from the day. Following the path around we enjoyed the freshly flowering array of woodland wildflowers, including the Bluebells but also enjoyed a very close encounter with a Marsh Tit carrying a caterpillar and finished our visit off with a great view of Treecreeper.

Our final stop of the day was on our route back; a quick scan from Oath Railway Bridge for any waders. No luck today but an additional three Eurasian Cranes, much closer in than the previous ones, was a brilliant end to a wonderful days birding in mixed weather conditions.

Day 3

Thursday 25th April

A slightly later start to the morning allowed everyone to feel refreshed for a busy second day in the field. We started at Westhay Moor in slightly overcast, drizzly and windy conditions which improved later on during our

visit. We explored a large amount of the reserve and picked up several good sightings including more close views of territorial warblers like Blackcap, Willow Warbler and Chiffchaff. Other birds were slightly more elusive including a tricky Treecreeper and brief Reed Warbler.

Over the large pools we noticed a large number of House Martins, the odd Marsh Harrier and enjoyed close views of Gadwall and Great Crested Grebe, the latter with two ten(ish) day old chicks in tow. We also noticed a large number dragonflies around the reserve including Hairy Dragonfly and Large Red Damselflies. It was then no surprise to see our first good sighting of Hobby, a single bird swooping and stooping over the pools as we left the reserve.

After a loo and food stop at The Crown Inn, we dropped in on Catcott Meadows where we spent a good hour scanning from the main hide. We enjoyed close views of Wigeon, Lapwing, Gadwall and Greylag, another bird with goslings in tow. A Sparrowhawk briefly crossed over the back of the site but the best raptor was a beautiful male Marsh Harrier which glided slowly over the main pools close to the hide giving brilliant views. A Yellow Wagtail made a brief appearance on the muddy island in front of the hide but by far the best bird of the visit was a stunning male Garganey which was feeding in the shallow marshy grassland. It was incredibly well camouflaged but everyone got fantastic and long views of this elusive duck.

Our final stop of the day was Shapwick Heath, on the opposite side of Ashcott Road to RSPB Ham Wall. We spent most of our time split between the main path and Noah Lake hide where we sat to watch the action over the main pool. The birding was fantastic with a large number of Hobbies, several Common Swifts, (many people's first of the year and likely to be some of the first to arrive in the UK!) We also had a brief view of a Kingfisher which whizzed across the front of the hide before flying off into the reedbed – our second tantalising brief encounter of the trip.

We continued to scan the pool and managed to pick out Great Egret, several gull species, a large number of Great Crested Grebe and a selection of ducks including Gadwall, Tufted and Pochard. Our time was pretty much up so we strolled back to the bus enjoying our final moments in this magical part of the country. More booming Bitterns and a final close flyby from a Hobby were a fitting end to the trip.

On the journey back we shared our trip highlights, of which there were many, and by the chipper tone we all knew it had been a fantastic few days birding. A total of 81 species seen despite some difficult weather conditions and some wonderful wildlife memories which we could all share with friends and family.

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Species Lists

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

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

	Common name	Scientific name	April		
			24	25	
48	Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>	✓	✓	
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	Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>	✓	✓	
61	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>	✓	✓	
62	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	H	H	
63	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓	
64	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	✓		
65	Coal Tit	<i>Parus 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>	✓	H	
70	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	✓		
71	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	
72	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	
73	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓	
74	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	
75	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2		
76	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	
77	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	
78	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	
79	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	
80	Common Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	✓		
81	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓	

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