

# The Somerset Levels in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Report

10 - 12 May 2019

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Willow Warbler by Lorraine Shaw

Report compiled by Matt Collis  
Image courtesy of Lorraine Shaw



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Tour participants: Matt Collis and Matthew Santos (Leaders) with 16 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.

## Day 1

Friday 10th May

Set within the picturesque English town of Wells, the weekend began in the bar of the beautiful Swan Hotel. Meeting the group for the first time, the two leaders formally welcomed the group, telling them a bit more about themselves and the weekend ahead. Invited to do the same, each member of the group took the opportunity to introduce themselves and share their wildlife background and aspirations for the trip. With the initial formalities done, it was time to move into the dining room for the first of several delicious meals during the tour.

Following 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 to be explored. A selection of the sites were shown, highlighting both the diversity of habitats and species we'd be searching for. A few star species were mentioned leaving the group perfectly poised and excited as everyone drifted off to bed full of anticipation for the days to come.

## Day 2

Saturday 11th May

Rising well before the sun, the group gathered ready for an early visit to RSPB Ham Wall. Arriving at the car park for 5am, the cacophony of sounds filled our keen ears the moment we opened the buses and continued for a good 30 minutes allowing us to enjoy the best of the spring's dawn chorus. Once the birds began to settle down, we made our way through the central part of reserve along the main track, reaching as far as Viewpoint 2.

Along the route we were treated to fantastic views of some brilliant birds including many warblers; Blackcap, Willow Warbler, Chiffchaff, Whitethroat, Cetti's and numerous Garden Warbler. Scanning the numerous pools we picked out several species of duck including many Gadwall, Pochard and Tufted, some with ducklings in tow. Great Crested Grebe and Little Grebe were also seen including one family with four chicks of various sizes. Waders were limited to a group of four Black-tailed Godwits in fine summer plumage whilst Great Egret and Grey Heron were abundant throughout the morning and seen many times both in flight and hunting for fish.

It was particularly pleasing to hear Bittern and Cuckoo in good numbers and we felt very lucky to get brilliant views of both; firstly when a male Cuckoo perched on top of a mature Silver Birch for 10 minutes and secondly when a Bittern flew over us for several minutes. Raptors were a little scarce but we did see one Marsh Harrier (a juvenile male) and had a brief view of a Sparrowhawk as it cut low between reedbeds, potentially after Reed Warblers.

After a delicious breakfast at the hotel we headed to RSPB Greylake to spend a few hours using the hides and exploring the site. Spending most of our time in the main hide, we immediately picked out a couple of Hobbys which were busy picking off dragonflies and using fence posts as perches, allowing brilliant scope views. Scanning more widely we added Shoveler, Redshank and Yellow Wagtail to our list for the day although the latter was a particularly distant view made more difficult with so much heat haze. This was also the case when a Eurasian Crane was spotted at the back of the reserve feeding in the long grass.

Wandering around the boardwalks at the centre of the reserve we managed to pick out several wetland specialists including Reed Bunting, Reed Warbler and Sedge Warbler. We stopped for a little while learning to pick out the different species by song and as a result enjoyed great views when both Reed Warbler and Sedge Warbler came out into the open right by the main car park.

Taking a well earned rest at the King Alfred Inn, we stopped for some lunch before continuing on south towards RSPB Swell Wood. From the car park we observed the hanging feeders and managed to spot some very confident Nuthatches which seemed happy to feed just a few metres away from us. Coal Tit, Great Tit, Blue Tit and Chaffinch all visited the feeders too, but no Marsh Tit on this occasion.

Walking down the woodland track we stopped to observe and ID some of the many woodland flowers now in bloom before stopping to scan from the viewpoint over West Sedgemoor. It wasn't long before we spotted our first Eurasian Cranes; a family of two adults with two chicks feeding in the nearby fields. A second more thorough scan revealed another four cranes stood in various other fields, Hobbys, corvids and a large gathering of Mute Swans.

Continuing around the woodland loop we made our way back to the car park via the Heronry to see the spectacular collection of Grey Heron and Little Egret nests. With the leaves now starting to provide thick cover we could only see about ten nests with any clarity, all of which appeared to still be at the egg incubation stage; no chicks. However, potentially the most exciting view was of Spotted Flycatchers, two birds, actively feeding and patrolling around the woodland but at one time giving us nice clear views for around a minute before continuing on. This has become an increasingly difficult bird to see, so it was an absolute delight to get lucky on this day.

With everyone on their last legs, the group retreated to the comfort of the hotel for a well-earned rest and our second three-course meal. Shortly after the meal, the group reconvened briefly in the Exmoor room to tally up the day's birds before heading off to bed in preparation for day two.

## Day 3

## Sunday 12th May

Following a later start this morning to allow plenty of rest, the group met at the buses just before 9am and headed out to Westhay Moor for our first walk. Once in the car park we took the opportunity to stand for a short while and take in some of the birds singing all around us; Reed Warblers, Blackcaps, booming Bitterns, Reed Bunting and a distant Cuckoo all made an appearance in the cacophony of sound. We also spent time admiring newly hatched Mute Swan cygnets, a group of eight swimming perfectly in line between two adults. A couple of Gadwall and a pair of Great Crested Grebes, still displaying whilst also building a nest, added to the scene.

We spent most our time walking around the reserve, dropping in to visit several of the hides, and also completing the heath walk around the acid mire. Warblers were once again in brilliant voice with several excellent views of Whitethroat, Willow Warbler and Blackcap. Linnets were also added to the list when a couple flew in to some Gorse and a pair of Ravens were also seen flying overhead chased by Carrion Crows.

Raptors remained a little elusive although a single Hobby was seen; no surprise given the number of Hairy Dragonflies and various damselflies including Azure and Variable observed on site. With such beautiful sunny weather, we also spotted the first of the Broad-bodied Chasers, all females busily flying around the wet ditches, and spent time identifying several other insects including beetles, spiders and bees with probably the star insect being Tiger Beetle.

After a brief stop back at Ham Wall to use the facilities, it was on to our final stop before lunch at Catcott Meadows. Observing from the main car park, the group split themselves between those inside the hide and those using the outdoor screen. The number and diversity of birds close in here was fantastic; Great Egret, Little Egret, Lapwing, Wigeon, Gadwall, Tufted Duck and Greylag were all present in good numbers, but it was the waders which really stole the show. As well as a group of about 40 Black-tailed Godwit, we managed to pick out a lone Greenshank, Ruff, Redshank and then two Whimbrel. Views proved challenging as all the waders were mixing in with one another, however, this provided a great opportunity for clear comparison and close inspection of key ID features, including size.

Additional birds seen here included Marsh Harrier, Swift, Swallow, Pied Wagtail and a close view of Sedge Warbler singing in the car park. Thoroughly pleased with our morning's beautiful walks and great array of species, we made our way to The Crown Inn for a delicious carvery and ploughmans selection. Even at the pub the birding didn't stop with a brilliant Goldcrest seen eating flies out of the spider nest around the window and a Green Woodpecker feeding in the neighbouring field.

With our bellies full, it was time for our final walk of the day, exploring the opposite end of the Avalon Marshes at Shapwick Heath, after stopping en route to watch a lone Cattle Egret seen walking, appropriately enough, amongst a herd of Cows - a surprise but welcome sighting. Once at Shapwick Heath, our visit involved walking along the main path up towards Noah's Lake hide to look out across the large expanses of water. The lake was very busy with birds including many pairs of Great Crested Grebe, several species of duck, a selection of Gulls including Herring, Lesser Black-backed and Black-headed, and a few Cormorants stood drying their wings.

Marsh Harriers were also seen busily patrolling the distant reedbeds whilst a selection of hirundines spent time feeding over the water. A Kingfisher was heard briefly but not seen; however, no matter as we were treated to brilliant long views of three Cattle Egrets in full breeding plumage perched on top of some tree stumps above the water. A fitting end to a exciting and diverse weekend of birding.

Returning to the buses one final time, we headed back to the hotel to complete our day's checklist and to say our goodbyes; a final count of a brilliant 81 species including many lifetime firsts for the group. With smiles on faces, it appeared everyone had spent 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, with everyone looking forward to planning the next adventure.

## Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	May	
			11	12
1	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	✓	✓
2	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓	✓
3	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓
4	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓
5	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓	✓
6	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		4
7	Great Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>	1	H
8	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓
9	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
10	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓
11	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓
12	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	✓	□
13	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓	✓
14	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓	✓
15	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	✓	✓
16	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
17	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	✓	✓
18	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
19	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓	✓
20	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1	
21	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
22	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	1	
23	Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>	✓	✓
24	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	□
25	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	10	
26	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
27	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
28	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
29	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	4	40+
30	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓	✓
31	Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		1
32	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>		1
33	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>		2
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>		H
42	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	✓
43	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>		✓
44	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓
45	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	✓	✓
46	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	□	✓
47	Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>	✓	□

	Common name	Scientific name	May	
			11	12
48	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
49	Duncock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
50	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	H
51	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
52	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
53	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	✓
54	Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>	✓	H
55	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	✓	H
56	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	H
57	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	✓	✓
58	Common Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>	✓	✓
59	Eurasian 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	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓	□
65	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
66	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
67	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	✓	□
68	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	✓	H
69	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	✓	✓
70	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
71	Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓
72	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
73	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
74	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓
75	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
76	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
77	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
78	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
79	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	□	H
80	Common Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	✓	✓
81	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓

## Mammals

Roe Deer, *Capreolus capreolus*

Common Pipistrelle, *Pipistrellus pipistrellus*

## Reptiles

Grass Snake, *Natrix natrix*

Terrapin sp.,

## Butterflies

Peacock, *Inachis io*

Speckled Wood, *Pararge aegeria*

Brimstone, *Gonepteryx rhamni*

Orange Tip, *Anthocharis cardamines*

Green-veined White, *Pieris napi*

Large White, *Pieris brassicae*

Small Copper, *Lycaena phlaeas*

## Dragonflies/Damselflies

Blue-tailed Damselfly, *Ischnura elegans*

Large Red Damselfly, *Pyrrhosoma nymphula*

Azure Damselfly, *Coenagrion puella*  
Hairy Dragonfly, *Brachytron pratense*

Variable Damselfly, *Coenagrion pulchellum*  
Broad-bodied Chaser, *Libellula depressa*

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