

# The Somerset Levels in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Report

19 – 21 May 2021



Garganey



Yellow Wagtail



Slow Worm



Cuckoo

Report and images compiled by Matt Collis



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ UK Naturetrek

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: [info@naturetrek.co.uk](mailto:info@naturetrek.co.uk)

W: [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk)



Tour participants: Matt Collis & Josh Phangurha (Leaders) with 10 Naturetrek clients

## Summary

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 unfortunate that our trip overlapped with an Atlantic storm, bringing two days of heavy wind and intermittent rain – which, fortunately, we mostly dodged! Despite this, we were privileged to see a good variety of species and some excellent avian highlights including a family of Common Crane, Garganey, Bittern, Marsh Harrier, Hobby, Cattle Egret, Yellow Wagtail and a whole host of warbler species. It is also worth noting that the weather brought some benefits, namely the huge numbers of hirundines and Swifts halted on migration, which gathered over the pools in their hundreds, and gave incredible aerial displays - a spectacle that will live long in the memory.

## Day 1

**Wednesday 19th May**

The group met with Matt and Josh

## Day 2

**Thursday 20th May**

The weather was notably poor for the majority of the day with strong winds from midday onwards and intermittent showers. Despite this, we still enjoyed many excellent wildlife encounters and made the most of the better weather with a pre-breakfast walk at RSPB Ham Wall. This turned out to be our most productive walk for small birds with Willow Warblers, Blackcaps, Garden Warbler and Whitethroat all seen in quick succession. We had several particularly memorable moments, including an adult Slow Worm crossing the main path and posing for photos, a fabulous Sedge Warbler in full display and a family of Great Crested Grebes with two humbug-colour chicks. An excellent morning birding to start the trip.

After breakfast, we returned to RSPB Ham Wall for a second walk and enjoyed seeing many Marsh Harriers and hundreds of Swifts, Swallows and House Martins actively feeding over all available waterbodies – it truly was spectacular. The main highlights from this walk had to be the perched Hobby, spotted sheltering from the wind on an exposed branch that gave prolonged views, and the group of three Bitterns who flew together over the reeds fighting the growing wind – this was many people's first encounter with this species and amazing to see three together.

Away from the wetland sites, we also visited RSPB Swell Woods where we had amazing views of Spotted Flycatcher, Treecreeper, Goldcrest and Nuthatch. More fleeting views of Green Woodpecker, Great Spotted Woodpecker and the ever elusive Marsh Tit were also obtained. A favoured moment was spending an inspiring and relaxing 20 minutes in the hide watching the Grey Herons and the first Little Egrets in the Heronry – the new chicks already looking quite large. However, almost everyone's favourite encounter of the day was the family of four Common Cranes who were feeding on West Sedgemoor - the first-ever encounter for many on the trip and a bird suitably emblematic of the Levels.

## Day 3

Friday 21st May

Strong winds persisted the entire day, but it remained dry throughout, to our relief. We spent a very memorable morning at Westhay Moor which provided an incredible encounter with Cuckoo, when a lone male perched in the open and called for several minutes before giving us a very close flyby. Although bird song was heavily suppressed all day, both Cetti's Warbler and Reed Bunting were frequently encountered, with the latter posing wonderfully on some overhanging Willow branches near one of the hides. Another Slow Worm was found, this time a large female sheltering under a refuge out on the mire. We also successfully searched out the Round-leaved Sundew which was incredibly abundant in the marsh and had a Kingfisher perched up just a few metres away which was incredibly popular and a particularly special way to end our morning walk.

Following a delicious pub lunch, we dropped in on Catcott Meadows which proved incredibly productive with both a stunning male Garganey and two Yellow Wagtails seen incredibly well, just 25 and 10 metres away respectively. There were a lot of Greylags parading their young on the pools, at least five families and 20 goslings, while Lapwings continuously chased off the lingering Carrion Crows, providing excellent entertainment. From the buses, we spotted two Cattle Egrets in amongst the feet of some cattle, but unfortunately, we were unable to stop for long, due to traffic. We finished the weekend with a short walk at Shapwick Heath, where we successfully searched out the majestic Royal Fern and found several Southern Marsh Orchids, before finishing with one final close encounter with a Marsh Harrier.

A final count of 78 bird species (in very challenging conditions) included many lifetime firsts for the group. As we said our goodbyes, it was clear everybody had had a wonderful couple of days birding and exploring the wide range of habitats on the Somerset Levels. We look forward to planning the next adventure.

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## Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	Trip	May 20	May 21
1	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>			ü
2	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	2	2	
3	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	Y	ü	
4	Garganey	<i>Spatula querquedula</i>			1
5	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>			ü
6	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	Y	ü	ü
7	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	Y	ü	ü
8	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	Y	ü	ü
9	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>			ü
10	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>			ü
11	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	Y	ü	
12	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	Y	ü	
13	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		H	
14	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	Y	ü	ü
15	Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	H	H	
16	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	2	2	
17	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	Y	ü	ü
18	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	Y	ü	ü
19	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	Y	ü	ü
20	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	Y	ü	ü
21	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	4	4	
22	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	Y	ü	
23	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	Y	ü	ü
24	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	Y	ü	ü
25	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			
26	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	Y	ü	
27	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	Y	ü	ü
28	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	Y	ü	ü
29	Eurasian Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>	5	5	
30	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>			2
31	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	Y	ü	ü
32	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	Y	ü	ü
33	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	Y	ü	
34	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	Y	ü	ü
35	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>			ü
36	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	Y	ü	
37	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	Y	ü	

	Common name	Scientific name	Trip	May 20	May 21
38	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	Y	ü	
39	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>			ü
40	Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>	1	1	
41	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	Y	ü	
42	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	Y	ü	
43	Western Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	Y	ü	
44	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	Y	ü	ü
45	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	Y	ü	ü
46	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	Y	ü	
47	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	Y	ü	
48	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	Y	ü	
49	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	Y	ü	ü
50	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	Y	ü	
51	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	Y	ü	ü
52	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	Y	ü	ü
53	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	Y	ü	ü
54	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	Y	ü	ü
55	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	Y	ü	ü
56	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	Y	ü	ü
57	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>	Y	ü	
58	Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>	H	ü	ü
59	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	Y	ü	ü
60	Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>	Y	ü	
61	Common Whitethroat	<i>Curruca communis</i>	Y	ü	
62	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	Y	ü	H
63	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	Y	ü	ü
64	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	Y	ü	
65	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	Y	ü	
66	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	Y		ü
67	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	Y	ü	ü
68	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	Y	ü	ü
69	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	Y	ü	
70	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	Y	ü	ü
71	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	Y	ü	ü
72	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	Y	ü	
73	Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>			2
74	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	Y	ü	ü
75	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	Y	ü	
76	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	Y	ü	
77	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	Y	ü	
78	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	Y	ü	ü

	Common name	Scientific name	Trip	May 20	May 21
	Other Notable Sightings:				
1	Slow Worm	<i>Anguis fragilis</i>	Y		
2	Marsh Frog	<i>Pelophylax ridibundus</i>	Y		
3	Long-jawed Orbweaver	<i>Tetragnathidae</i> sp.	Y		
4	Red-eyed Damselfly	<i>Erythromma najas</i>	Y		
5	Furrow Orbweaver	<i>Larinioides cornutus</i>	Y		
6	Large Red Damselfly	<i>Pyrrhosoma nymphula</i>	Y		
7	Variable Damselfly	<i>Coenagrion pulchellum</i>	Y		
8	Blue-tailed Damselfly	<i>Ischnura elegans</i>	Y		
9	Common Carder Bee	<i>Bombus pascuorum</i>	Y		