

Exmoor in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Report

26th – 29th May 2023



Green Tiger Beetles



Green Hairstreak



Dipper



Pied Flycatcher

Tour report and images by Oliver Smart



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Introduction

Our short stay in Exmoor National Park in Somerset, was to coincide with the return of many African migrant birds, along with the chance to enjoy butterflies and moths and any other wildlife that we might encounter. Some of the highlights included Pied & Spotted Flycatcher, Common Redstart, Wood Warbler, Common Cuckoo, Nightjar, a Great Spotted Woodpecker nest, beautiful walks and a plethora of stunning moths. With lovely food at the hotel and beautiful surroundings and views throughout, this was a trip to savour and remember.

Day 1

Friday 26th May

Webber's Post

Following arrival at the Crown Hotel in Exford, we were introduced to our leader and covered the itinerary for the weekend. With a beautifully sunny forecast and wildlife rich tour focus, it was looking very promising indeed.

After our first delicious meal, where a particular range of additional vegan and vegetarian meals were offered, we headed out for an evening amble in the national park. Our targets were nocturnal, and we were able to hear both Tawny Owl and European Nightjar in the forest and heaths above Horner Wood. The sun had dipped below the distant hills and with perfect listening conditions we enjoyed the *churring* of one of our most enigmatic and evocative species.

Day 2

Saturday 27th May

Horner Wood & Bossington Hill

After our 7am breakfast, we headed straight to Horner Wood for our morning adventure. The day started with glorious blue skies and sunshine and these lasted all day! We headed off along the River Horner, connecting with an active Great Spotted Woodpecker nest with both parents bringing in food for their hungry chicks. A male Grey Wagtail bobbed and wagged about on rocks along the river.

The hedgerows and banks were covered in flowers including Greater Stitchwort and Red Campion and later a nice area of Sanicle and Meadow Saxifrage. Birdsong was in full swing still and we were able to enjoy a number of birds including Song Thrush, Blackbird, Wren, Goldcrest, Blackcap and Chiffchaff in the first few hundred metres. Shortly thereafter we began to pick up some of the woodland specialities including Pied Flycatcher and along the river, our leader heard a Dipper, soon to be seen really well by everyone as an adult sat on top of a rock!

After a short break, we climbed the slope into the wood and were in awe of the twisted and gnarled oaks. Redstart put on a wonderful song for us, but no matter how hard we tried we could not see it. Spending its time high in the canopy, it was completely obscured by vegetation. We did, however, discover a pair of Pied Flycatcher at a nest site in a tree hole, a great find so close to the footpath.

As we started our descent, we enjoyed spotting some other wildlife including Woodland Red Ant nests, a Lesser Stag Beetle and several Yellow-barred Long-horn moths, perching on bracken; their long antennae waving in the light breeze. Butterflies were a little thin on the ground, although we picked up several Speckled Wood and Green-veined White.

We enjoyed lunch at Horner Tea Gardens, where a Sparrowhawk flew overhead, a large swarm of bees were flying across the lane and House Sparrow and Chaffinch were picking up any free titbits from the tables!

Our afternoon walk took us to Bossington Hill along the Severn Estuary. We completed a loop walk from the main car park up to Selworthy Beacon and enjoyed plenty of butterflies here including Green Hairstreak, Small Heath, Red Admiral and a Painted Lady. The latter were behaving very territorially and chasing each other around, before returning to the same basking spot.

Our key target here was Dartford Warbler and despite not hearing one, Caroline managed to spot a bird she did not recognise and thankfully relayed the identification points to Oliver. He immediately suggested it was the target species and we went back to where the bird had been seen and thankfully it reappeared for all to see.

Not wishing to leave the gorgeous conditions, we headed back to the hotel and feasted on our second fine dinner. After the checklists, Oliver set up his moth trap in the hotel gardens ready for an early start on Sunday.

Day 3

Sunday 28th May

Dicky's Path & Chetsford Water

Our morning started with a moth trap in the gardens behind the hotel. The temperature had not quite remained over 10 degrees overnight but it was calm and fairly mild. Unfortunately, the activity had been very low and with only three moths, a Cockchafer and a caddisfly to show for our efforts, hence it was a little disappointing. On the positive side the three moths included a Poplar Hawkmoth, a Pale Tussock and a Brown Silver-line so at least they were three very nice moths.

After breakfast, we headed to the heart of the Exmoor National Park and walked a trail from Webber's Post along Dicky's Path. This route takes in a number of habitats including woodland, streams, heath and moorland. We kept to a slow pace, in part due to the amount of wildlife we spotted. Common Tiger Beetle were sighted in numerous places including a mating pair later. Several Common Heath moths were very active, resting only very briefly. A juvenile Viviparous Lizard posed momentarily too in amongst bracken. We could hear a number of heathland bird species; with Siskin, Lesser Redpoll, Common Cuckoo, Common Redstart, Wood Warbler and Pied Flycatcher as we navigated the small combs. In one of the woodlands Oliver spotted a Blue Tit nest in the hole of a tree. The adults were very active; feeding the chicks every couple of minutes. We also spotted our first Spotted Flycatcher and Marsh Tit too.

Out on more open ground a pair of Cuckoo dashed passed us whilst we enjoyed Sheila's excellent Heath Fritillary larva find! We spent a few minutes getting to know this lone caterpillar as it scurried along the dusty track. Its favoured larval foodplant Common Cow-wheat is common on the moors, but some distance away from where it

was. The warm 20+ degrees was definitely encouraging a lot more invertebrate activity, but some of the woodland plants were already looking very dry.

We dropped down the side of the hill to the river below, enjoyed some plant-life and also a Nettle Weevil, Green Drake Mayfly and Comma butterfly too!

To make the most of our time, we enjoyed another lunch at the Horner Tea Gardens, with a nesting honeybee colony in the outside post box, before taking a route further west on the moor to Chetsford Water. On the journey, we encountered a distant Whinchat, which unfortunately not everyone managed to see. The plan at Chetsford was to walk along the valley, however we found ourselves so engrossed with a couple of lovely species for the last hour or so of the day. Dippers were nesting close by, and Caroline discovered a Chaffinch nest in a Mountain Ash tree alongside the road. We discovered we could view into the nest from the hillside behind, so we all climbed up and engaged in the most wonderful views of the pair of adults bringing in beakfuls of grubs, moths and other insects.

In the background of this front row seat into one of our commonest breeding species, we also could enjoy several other species. Common Redstart and a family of Common Stonechat could be seen in the hawthorn trees. Lesser Redpoll and European Goldfinch were flying and calling overhead and a Common Cuckoo began calling far off in the valley.

We ended the day with a brief glimpse of a Golden-ringed Dragonfly, which was a nice fitting way to complete a golden day watching wildlife in Exmoor.

Day 4

Monday 29th May

Chetsford Water & Dunkery Beacon

We decided to run the moth trap for a consecutive night, just in case Saturday's catch was a one off. At 6.30am the weather was still, cool and with clear skies, however unbelievably there were a tonne of moths present. There were 35 species with 54 moths, quite the contrast to the previous day, when to us, it appeared the conditions were exactly the same. Every moth was in pristine condition, so perhaps after a few days of good warm daytime weather there was a big emergence overnight. We enjoyed Privet and Poplar Hawkmoth, Flame, Sandy, Wood, Green, Red Twin-spot and Broken-barred Carpet, Lunar Thorn, Scalloped Hazel, Small Phoenix, Brown Rustic, Lychnis, May Highflyer and Puss Moth! Some beautiful specimens with wonderfully evocative names.

After breakfast we walked through Chetsford Water. Above the treeline the wind had picked up and was much stronger, making it harder to hear birds and even harder to spot them if there were in the trees. Despite the trickier conditions, we enjoyed two Whinchat, Stonechat, Cuckoo, Common Redstart, Dipper, Bullfinch, Willow Warbler and Chiffchaff. We crossed the small stream and enjoyed blossoming Hawthorn and a male Beautiful Demoiselle. We walked as far as the reservoir and rested to enjoy the views.

It was a most enjoyable meander through the quiet little valley but before long we were enjoying lunch once more at Horner Tea Gardens. The last hour of the tour was spent walking the short trail to the top of Dunkery Beacon. The spectacular viewpoint with a full 360 degree panoramic landscape was a fitting end to this short but wonderful visit to a peaceful, beautiful and productive corner of Somerset.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

I = Introduced		May 2023			
Common name	Scientific name	26	27	28	29
Common Pheasant - I	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>			✓	
European Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus europaeus</i>	H			
Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	✓	H	✓	✓
Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>		H		✓
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓	✓	✓
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>				✓
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		✓		
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓	✓
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	H			
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		✓	✓	
European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>		H	✓	✓
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		H	✓	✓
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		✓		✓
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>		✓	✓	✓
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓		✓
Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>		✓	✓	
Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>			✓	
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓	✓	✓
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		✓	✓	
Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>				✓
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓	✓	

I = Introduced		May 2023			
Common name	Scientific name	26	27	28	29
Wood Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus sibilatrix</i>		✓	H	
Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	H	✓	✓	H
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	H	H	H	H
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		✓	H	
Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>		✓	✓	✓
Common Whitethroat	<i>Curruca communis</i>			✓	
Dartford Warbler	<i>Curruca undata</i>		✓		
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		H	✓	
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	H	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		H		
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓	✓	✓
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓		✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓	✓
European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>		✓	H	
Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>		H	✓	✓
Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>			✓	✓
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>		✓	✓	✓
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓	✓	✓
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		✓	✓	✓
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>			✓	
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>			✓	
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>				✓
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>			H	
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓	✓	✓
Lesser Redpoll	<i>Acanthis cabaret</i>			✓	H
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓

Mammals

		May 2023			
Common name	Scientific name	26	27	28	29
Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	
European Rabbit - I	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓	✓		
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	✓			
Exmoor Pony	<i>Equus caballus</i>	✓		✓	✓

Butterflies and Moths

		May 2023			
Common name	Scientific name	26	27	28	29
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>		✓	✓	✓
Green-veined White	<i>Pieris napi</i>		✓	✓	✓
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>		✓		

Common name	Scientific name	May 2023			
		26	27	28	29
Small Heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>		✓	✓	✓
Green Hairstreak	<i>Callophrys rubi</i>		✓		
Holly Blue	<i>Celastrina argiolus</i>		✓	✓	
Comma	<i>Polygonia c-album</i>			✓	
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>		✓		
Heath Fritillary (larvae)	<i>Melitaea athalia</i>			✓	
Moths					
Yellow-barred Long-horn	<i>Nemophora degeerella</i>		✓		
Hook-streak Grass-veneer	<i>Crambus lathoniellus</i>				✓
Common Spruce Bell	<i>Epinotia tedella</i>				✓
Bee Moth	<i>Aphomia sociella</i>				✓
Small Magpie	<i>Anania hortulata</i>				✓
Treble Brown Spot	<i>Idaea trigeminata</i>		✓		
Flame Carpet	<i>Xanthorhoe designata</i>				✓
Red Twin-spot Carpet	<i>Xanthorhoe spadicearia</i>				✓
Lead Belle	<i>Scotopteryx mucronata</i>		✓	✓	
Wood Carpet	<i>Epirrhoe rivata</i>				✓
Small Phoenix	<i>Ecliptopera silaceata</i>				✓
Common Marbled Carpet	<i>Dysstroma truncata</i>				✓
Broken-barred Carpet	<i>Electrophaes corylata</i>				✓
Green Carpet	<i>Colostygia pectinataria</i>				✓
May Highflyer	<i>Hydriomena impluviata</i>				✓
Sandy Carpet	<i>Perizoma flavofasciata</i>				✓
Mottled Pug	<i>Eupithecia exigua</i>				✓
Common Pug	<i>Eupithecia vulgata</i>		✓		✓
Oak-tree Pug	<i>Eupithecia dodoneata</i>				✓
Clouded Border	<i>Lomaspilis marginata</i>				✓
Brown Silver-line	<i>Petrophora chlorosata</i>			✓	✓
Lunar Thorn	<i>Selenia lunularia</i>				✓
Scalloped Hazel	<i>Odontopera bidentata</i>				✓
Common Heath	<i>Ematurga atomaria</i>			✓	
Clouded Silver	<i>Lomographa temerata</i>				✓
Light Emerald	<i>Campaea margaritata</i>				
Privet Hawkmoth	<i>Sphinx ligustri</i>				✓
Poplar Hawkmoth	<i>Laothoe populi</i>			✓	✓
Puss Moth	<i>Cerura vinula</i>				✓
Pale Tussock	<i>Calliteara pudibunda</i>			✓	✓
White Ermine	<i>Spilosoma lubricipeda</i>			✓	
Heart and Dart	<i>Agrotis exclamationis</i>				✓
Pale-shouldered Brocade	<i>Lacanobia thalassina</i>				✓
Lychnis	<i>Hadena bicruris</i>				✓
Coronet	<i>Craniophora ligustri</i>				✓
Brown Rustic	<i>Rusina ferruginea</i>				✓
Angle Shades	<i>Phlogophora meticulosa</i>				✓
Nut-tree Tussock	<i>Colocasia coryli</i>				✓
Spectacle	<i>Abrostola tripartita</i>				✓

Others

		May 2023			
Common name	Scientific name	26	27	28	29
Beetles					
Lesser Stag Beetle	<i>Dorcus parallelipipedus</i>		✓		
Cockchafer	<i>Melolontha melolontha</i>			✓	✓
Common Tiger Beetle	<i>Cicindela campestris</i>			✓	✓
Nettle Weevil	<i>Phyllobius pomaceus</i>			✓	
Reptiles					
Viviparous Lizard	<i>Zootoca vivipara</i>			✓	
Adder	<i>Vipera berus</i>			D	
	<i>Anabolia nervosa</i>				✓
Dragonflies					
Beautiful Demoiselle	<i>Calopteryx virgo</i>				✓
Golden-ringed Dragonfly	<i>Cordulegaster boltonii</i>			✓	
Fish					
Brown Trout	<i>Salmo trutta</i>			✓	
Other					
Green Drake Mayfly	<i>Ephemera danica</i>			✓	
Woodland Red Ant	<i>Formica rufa</i>		✓	✓	
cadisfly sp.	<i>Stenophylax permistus</i>			✓	

Flora

Common name	Scientific name	May 2023			
		26	27	28	29
Red Campion	<i>Silene dioica</i>		✓	✓	✓
Greater Stitchwort	<i>Stellaria holostea</i>		✓	✓	✓
Green Alkanet	<i>Pentaglottis sempervirens</i>		✓	✓	
Common Milkwort	<i>Polygala vulgaris</i>		✓	✓	
Lady's Bedstraw	<i>Galium verum</i>		✓		
Wall Pennywort	<i>Umbilicus rupestris</i>		✓		
Meadow Saxifrage	<i>Saxifraga granulata</i>		✓		
Wood Sanicle	<i>Sanicula europaea</i>		✓	✓	
Common Cow-wheat	<i>Melampyrum pratense</i>		✓	✓	
Germander Speedwell	<i>Veronica chamaedrys</i>		✓	✓	✓
Bilberry	<i>Vaccinium myrtillus</i>		✓	✓	✓
Ling	<i>Calluna vulgaris</i>		✓	✓	✓
Bell Heather	<i>Erica cinerea</i>		✓		
Common Honeysuckle	<i>Lonicera periclymenum</i>		✓	✓	
Tormentil	<i>Potentilla erecta</i>		✓	✓	✓
Lesser Celandine	<i>Ficaria verna</i>		✓	✓	
Foxglove	<i>Digitalis purpurea</i>		✓	✓	✓
Common Poppy	<i>Papaver rhoeas</i>		✓		
Bluebell	<i>Hyacinthoides non-scripta</i>		✓	✓	✓
Garlic Mustard	<i>Alliaria petiolata</i>		✓		

Common name	Scientific name	May 2023			
		26	27	28	29
Ramsons	<i>Allium ursinum</i>		✓		
Pignut	<i>Conopodium majus</i>		✓		
Yellow Pimpernel	<i>Lysimachia nemorum</i>			✓	
Bugle	<i>Ajuga reptans</i>			✓	
Marsh Lousewort	<i>Pedicularis palustris</i>			✓	✓
Bird's-foot Trefoil	<i>Lotus corniculatus</i>			✓	
Ground Elder	<i>Aegopodium podagraria</i>			✓	
Common Nettle	<i>Urtica dioica</i>			✓	
Lesser Trefoil	<i>Trifolium dubium</i>			✓	
Herb Bennet	<i>Geum urbanum</i>			✓	
Herb Robert	<i>Geranium robertianum</i>		✓	✓	✓
Daisy	<i>Bellis perennis</i>			✓	
Cuckoo Flower	<i>Cardamine pratensis</i>			✓	✓
Barren Strawberry	<i>Potentilla sterilis</i>			✓	
Common Eyebright	<i>Euphrasia nemorosa</i>			✓	
Maidenhair Spleenwort	<i>Asplenium trichomanes</i>			✓	
Ivy-leaved Toadflax	<i>Cymbalaria muralis</i>			✓	