

# The Great British Bird Race - Somerset

Naturetrek Tour Report

28th – 30th January 2026

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Meadow Pipit



Kingfisher



Rainbow over the Levels



Water Rail

Tour report by Andy Mears  
Photos by Janet Panter



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Tour participants: Andy Mears (leader) with four Naturetrek clients

## Day 1

Wednesday 28th January

After the most beautiful late January morning, warm with blue skies, our team of five set off from Wells at 1.15pm, bang on schedule. Our mission was to see as many bird species in Somerset as we could over forty-eight hours, starting at 2.00pm on the dot. At precisely that time, we drove into the car park at Burrow Mump: and the drizzle started! The afternoon turned into an unpredictable mix of showers, downpours and a little watery sunshine. The rain was falling on an already saturated Somerset landscape, with areas flooded I've never seen before in thirty-five years, and national news reports starting to cover the inundation.

When the Somerset Levels flood to extreme degrees, it becomes exciting for the local birders. Birds move around, are unpredictable, and it feels like anything can turn up anywhere. However, it's far from ideal on a bird race! Many of the flocks, scarcities and rarities that had been in place for weeks beforehand had moved. Over our forty-eight hours, we didn't see a single scarce duck, gull or goose. This was unprecedented and, of course, disappointing. We did make up for it by doing well for the commoner species, which are not always easy to find, and we had a nice surprise or two to boot.

Burrow Mump is a striking landmark in this area of flat levels and marshes. An ancient ruined church stands atop a steep isolated hill that rises from the flatlands like a beacon. We were unable to drive further south than Burrow Mump because of a seriously flooded road, so I'd improvised the itinerary, and our main targets here were Bewick's Swans and Cranes, both of which had been seen regularly in the area in recent days and weeks. Scanning over Southlake and Earlake Moors from halfway up the Mump was challenging. We looked out over a seemingly endless landscape of flood and marsh, and we'd have needed hours really to do it justice. In thirty minutes, we failed to find the swans or cranes, but Great and Little Egrets, Marsh Harrier and some other common wetland birds were seen, along with our only Mistle Thrush of the tour.

Not far north was Greylake, where a winter's day can often provide astonishing views of thousands of ducks. We were the only people there, perhaps unsurprisingly, and to get to the hides, we had to walk a seriously flooded access track. Our team were all game though, and no-one was prepared to abandon the endeavour at this early stage of the tour.

Instead of thousands of ducks, in front of the Greylake hides were a handful of Teals, and as the rain set in, we soon found some distant Graylag Geese and Lapwings. I suspect we were all feeling that forty-eight hours of this might prove wearing. All was not lost though, and over half an hour, we saw a super Water Rail very close to the hide, four distant Cranes in the gloom, a Peregrine, and plenty of Snipe giving perfect views. All was good, and the Cranes in particular were a rather wonderful 'catch up'.

Now was the time for our attempt to see the Starling murmuration, so we headed to the Sharpham area, where they had been roosting a few days earlier. The RSPB's 'Starling Hotline' was advising people not even to try for murmurations, because the birds had not been using Ham Wall or Shapwick Heath: but we rolled the dice.

Sharpham had also been a wildfowl hotspot of late, with regular wild geese and large flocks of duck; it also had great potential for an unearthed scarcity. Not for us today though! There were no wild geese and virtually no ducks.

I was astounded. I'd never seen so few birds here, and what were the chances of that happening during the bird race?

Our first Treecreeper was welcome in lakeside trees, with a few other small birds seen, but our attention soon turned to a couple of large Starling flocks moving past. They were actually heading towards Ham Wall, so we swiftly returned to the bus and drove in that direction. Before we even reached the reserve, we noticed that the sky was teeming with Starlings, and a quick roadside stop had us watching a vast flock, leaving our jaws hanging. They soon tumbled down to roost, and we thought ourselves lucky to have seen them at all. Not long before dusk, we walked out onto Ham Wall, as other Starling watchers walked back. Apparently, the birds had used Ham Wall the night before, but the hotline hadn't been updated: hmmm. We spent a few minutes at the famous 'Viewing Platform 1', and while we hoped for a fly-by Barn Owl or Bittern, only some Black-tailed Godwits obliged as a new bird for the tour.

The weather improved dramatically during the evening, and after a hearty dinner, we were able to walk around the wooded edges of the Bishop's Palace moat in Wells city centre, to listen for Tawny Owls. Nothing was calling though, so we all turned in, wondering just what we'd see on Days 2 and 3. Day 1 had been unquestionably tough!

## Day 2

## Thursday 29th January

We left Wells in good weather, and set off towards the coast, with a first stop planned for Cheddar Reservoir. Cheddar had hosted some great birds recently, but after yesterday's challenges, it was with trepidation that we started scanning for grebes and ducks. We had four main targets and, in a nutshell, all of them behaved. Thank goodness for that! The rarest was Red-necked Grebe: there is a chance that the individual we saw was of the ultra-rare American form *bolboelli*. We had very nice views, and were soon watching two dapper Black-necked Grebes and a beautiful pair of Goosanders. The fourth target was Greater Scaup, and while our views were distant, we were all pretty happy. Bonuses here were our only Meadow Pipits and Ravens of the tour.

Next up was Burnham-on-Sea for coastal waders, and a try for the Kentish Plover. The latter has led birders a merry dance for the last five winters, and its appearances on the miles of tidal mudflats are sporadic to say the least. On arrival, we were able to chat to birders who'd been looking for well over an hour, with no success. We spent a few minutes seeing some common waders such as Oystercatcher, Curlew and the always-welcome Avocet, but soon cut our losses and set off for Steart Marshes, with minimal time wasted.

It's easy to spend a whole day around Steart, but we had just a couple of hours scheduled. We began by checking Wall Common for the small group of Short-eared Owls that had been using the rough grassland for vole hunting this winter. I glimpsed one in flight, which had probably been flushed by a walker or perhaps a photographer, but nothing else was moving, so we planned a return and headed out onto Otterhampton Freshmarsh with our coffee and sandwiches.

A lovely session in the hides gave us good views of a plethora of ducks and waders, including more Avocets and our first Golden Plovers. Two Little Stints were found, and the weather was holding: this was more like it. We then had another quick look at Wall Common, but still no hunting owls were apparent. We would be back.

A short drive along the coast to Stolford proved better than expected, because the high tide was pushing roosting waders onto the rocky foreshore. It didn't take us long to find Brent Goose, Grey Plover, Turnstone and Knot, all new birds for the tour and extremely welcome. We were just short of Ringed Plover, which we inexplicably missed.

So, we returned Wall Common once more! And this time we were lucky, when a distant dog walker seemed to flush a Short-eared Owl. It flew directly towards our vantage point, giving beautiful views in the mid-afternoon sunshine, and it even settled on the ground a few times, allowing some decent scope views. Buoyed by our good fortune, and slightly ahead of schedule, we were able to head off to Catcott Lows, back on the Levels, and a site that we'd only be able to fit in if the day was going well.

The idea was to wait until dusk and (we hoped) watch the Levels' only wintering Glossy Ibis fly in to roost. In the meantime, we'd amuse ourselves by sifting through the huge duck flocks on site, and hope for a surprise Merlin or Hen Harrier. This is what actually happened:

Within seconds of entering the hide, we were watching the Glossy Ibis, which had decided to spend the whole afternoon right in front of the hide! There were very few ducks, again, which was becoming somewhat tedious. We then chatted to a local birder, who brought us up to date on the movements of a juvenile White-tailed Eagle that had been found on the Levels earlier in the day. Eagles are still rare in the area, and although I'd noticed the earlier report on my phone, I'd written it off as an impossibility for us. We now discovered that within the last hour, the eagle had actually been at Catcott!

I quickly scanned the more distant areas of the reserve, and there it was, perched on some distant fencing. We all enjoyed scope views of the enormous juvenile White-tailed Eagle, before it lumbered into the air and disappeared off to the south-east. What a moment that was! This was the first White-tailed Eagle I'd ever seen in Somerset, and it just goes to show that luck can go either way. Soon after driving away from Catcott, we passed a damp field full of Cattle Egrets, a quintessential view in Somerset these days. A Great and a few Little Egrets were also in the field, making it an egret full house.

We made it back to the hotel at a very respectable time, after a long but excellent day. After another satisfying meal and a quick log call, we headed to bed, with rain just starting to fall once more.

## Day 3

## Friday 30th January

We had just six hours to add whatever new species we could. No visit to the Levels would be complete without a look at Noah's Lake, so that was our first stop today. We enjoyed good weather again, and a lovely couple of hours walking out to the lake and watching the wildfowl there. As we walked to the hide, Song Thrush song was almost overwhelming, with birds heard in all directions. And at last, we had numbers of duck: some four thousand Wigeons, with plenty of Teals and Pintails carpeted the lake. It was spectacular. Kingfishers and Marsh Harriers flew past regularly, and the sun shone. None of us could find the usual Goldeneye, however, and yet again, we left a flagship site with no unusual ducks in the notebook.

We did see Siskin, Blackcap, Great Spotted Woodpecker and Egyptian Goose as new species, in addition to the Pintails, so the stop was fun and worthwhile. We then drove the short distance to the fields around Westhay NNR, which had hosted masses of birds since Christmas. Several roadside stops were productive, and while rare gulls

were uncooperative, we did see our first Reed Buntings, a surprise pair of handsome Goldeneyes, some sneaky Cetti's Warblers, and more impressive Cattle Egret, Golden Plover and Lapwing flocks. Driving the droves around the flooded fields was exciting, with water and birds seemingly everywhere.

A quick stop at a typically quirky Levels café for coffee and snacks set us up well for the last two hours of the tour. We drove up towards the Mendip Hills, where a frustrating walk along the fast-flowing River Axe in Wookey Hole village was sadly Dipper-less. We heard a couple of Grey Wagtails, but we couldn't even spot them. Overhead Red Kites were welcome, though.

A mile up the hill was Ebbor Gorge: silent hanging deciduous woods had us wondering just how long to give it, but eventually we found a few small birds. After thirty minutes, we'd managed nice views of Treecreeper, plus our two main targets, Marsh Tit and Nuthatch. For the second time in three days, we heard Bullfinches calling, but just couldn't get a view.

Our last half hour of the tour was spent in the picturesque pine woods at Stockhill. We hoped for Crossbill and Coal Tit, but all we could find prior to our 2.00pm deadline was a brief Stock Dove, more Siskins and some extra Goldcrests.

We finished on a very respectable 97 species, with an extra two only heard. We'd seen a million Starlings, a few thousand ducks and one eagle, but no Bitterns or Bearded Tits: and that is January on the Somerset Levels for you. The birds are all there, but whether or not they show on any given day is another matter!

Our team members were enthusiastic, energetic and resilient throughout. We'd visited a brilliant cross section of Somerset birding sites, and all in what felt like the blink of an eye.

Total = 95 species

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## Species lists

Birds (I = from introduction projects)

Common name	Scientific name
Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>
Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>
Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>
Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>
Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>
Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>
Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>
Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>
Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>
Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>
Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>
Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
Red-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps grisegena</i>
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>
Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>
Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>
Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>
Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>
Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>
Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>
Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>
Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>

<b>Common name</b>	<b>Scientific name</b>
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>
Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>
Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>
Cattle Egret	<i>Ardea ibis</i>
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>
Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>
Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>
Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>
Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>
Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>
Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>
Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>
Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>
Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>
Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>
Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>
Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>
Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>

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<b>Common name</b>	<b>Scientific name</b>
Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Duncock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>
Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>
Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>
Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>
Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>
Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>
Common Crane (I)	<i>Grus grus</i>
White-tailed Eagle (I)	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>