

The Somerset Levels - A Beginner Birdwatching Tour

Naturetrek Tour Report

21 - 23 January 2015

Report compiled by Dave Nevitt



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Introduction

This tour around the Somerset Levels in mid-winter was a fantastic opportunity to witness two major British Wildlife spectacles; the largest roost of Starlings in the country and the massive concentration of waterfowl and other wetland species that winter in the area. With quite cold weather in recent weeks but no snow to drive them abroad, most of the wildfowl were present in exceptional numbers. Fortunately the dry weather ensured that last year's extensive flooding had not been repeated. It was very pleasing that we managed excellent views of all the expected Levels wildfowl as well as many small birds. The Starlings put on a fantastic roost display on the first evening that amazed us all with huge numbers of birds that then, rather pleasingly, moved into close proximity. Fantastic!

Day 1

Wednesday 21st January

The group assembled in the evening of a chilly Somerset winter's day. In the cosy setting of the Swan Hotel with Wells Cathedral glowing in floodlight opposite, expectations were high as Dave introduced himself and whet the group's appetite with the plan for the days ahead. The group members introduced themselves, said what they particularly wanted to see and shared their level of experience to assist Dave. As this tour was advertised as a Beginner's Tour, fortunately everyone was at a similar level of experience.

We adjourned to sample our first of several delicious Swan Hotel meals before moving to the Oak Room where Dave gave a talk giving an introduction to how the Levels were formed and the special species that now call it home. Some having spent much of the day travelling, all took a welcome early night.

Day 2

Thursday 22nd January

After a hearty cooked breakfast we set off across the low damp fields towards Glastonbury with the Tor on the skyline. Today we were to explore the valley of the River Parrett, the most southerly of the four main valleys that form the Somerset Levels. We alternated between crossing valleys and the intervening ridges, the latter giving us spectacular views of the areas that had extensive flooding last year.

We were soon at our first destination, RSPB Swell Wood. Dave put out some seed and peanuts in the car park and we were soon familiarising ourselves with a splendid variety of woodland species. Blue and Great Tits were soon on the list, joined by a surprising number of Coal Tits. We heard a Great Spotted Woodpecker but he

avoided our gaze. The other special bird we were hoping for here was the Marsh Tit and it wasn't long before one was tempted down by the nuts, soon to be joined by a second bird. One eagle-eyed group member spotted a Goldcrest in the ivy and it then came out to be admired by all. Dave heard the unobtrusive squeaking of a Treecreeper calling. It wasn't showing so we tried the tape briefly and there it was, spiralling round the tree trunk just in front of us. With this being such an inconspicuous bird, this was the first time that many had ever seen it.

We walked to the hide overlooking the heronry but it was a little too early in the year for them to have started nesting. However we did see more Coal Tits and another Great Spotted Woodpecker was seen by some of the group. We carried on down the footpath to the lookout across the valley. On the way, we came across several more Goldcrests calling in the ivy-covered trees. The view across the wide valley below us was spectacular, thankfully not flooded this year. Returning to the car park, some in the group again caught up with the Marsh Tits which were now coming down to the peanuts.

We moved on to RSPB Dewlands Farm, the centre of the West Sedgmoor reserve. After a comfort stop we set off with our guide Dion down the muddy track. We saw a very pale Buzzard that initially had us wondering if it was a Barn Owl! A Mistle Thrush was keeping sentinel in a poplar tree as a Raven called repeatedly from a nearby wood.

We walked along the muddy drove to the hide in a converted barn. Great flocks of duck lay before us as we had a panoramic view across the wide open valley. A recent count of the wildfowl and waders at this site had resulted in 48,000 birds! Soon the telescope was set up on our first views of Pintail, Wigeon, Shoveler and Teal. Every now and then huge swathes of birds went up in the air, presumably to avoid unseen raptors, only to settle once more after their furtive air manoeuvres. Amongst the throngs of Lapwings, we picked out several enormous flocks of Golden Plovers in the distance, alternating white and gold as they banked. Marsh Harriers patrolled along the rhynes in search of food and several were lucky to pick out a Hen Harrier in the distance.

We then moved on to Aller Moor in search of the Cranes from the Great Crane Project. They had been moving about a bit in recent days and our luck wasn't in today as we scanned the fields without finding any.

By now we were cold and we needed some sustenance so we adjourned for lunch at the King Alfred pub which was very welcome. The fire was just as popular as the warming food!

Heartily refreshed, we moved on to Greylake RSPB reserve where we enjoyed a good selection of birds at the feeders including several Reed Buntings in various plumages. We then walked to the nearby hide. On the way, eagle-eyes spotted a movement in the bases of the willow trees. Our patience was well rewarded as a Water Rail crept out into the open. What a special moment to see not one but two of these secretive birds extremely well – not surprisingly, a new bird for most in the group.

At the hide we were soon enjoying close view of the various duck species – Teal, Gadwall and Wigeon. Then close scrutiny of the reed edges revealed some Snipe that looked amazing in the telescope. Several Marsh Harriers lived up to their name as they buzzed the flocks of ducks looking for the weak one for their next meal. It's a harsh world out there. Little Egrets were also very entertaining as they fed in the rhynes alongside Grey Herons.

It was then time to head for the much-anticipated Starling roost. They had been leading everyone a merry dance over recent days, choosing two different roost locations in the past two days. We arrived at Ashcott Corner car park and had to decide which way to go – east to Ham Wall or west to Shapwick Heath. We elected to go for Ham Wall and proceeded along the disused railway line until we arrived at the first viewing point. Here we decided to wait to see what happened. Scanning the reeds, a Bittern made a brief flight and was seen by two lucky members of the group while a Great White Egret was a rare treat on the reed edges.

Soon flocks of Starlings started to arrive from all directions, amalgamating into even larger flocks each time. We had a grandstand view as they assembled off to our left, swirling in twisting shapes across the sky. Then we were delighted as one flock performed the rare “corkscrew” manoeuvre right in front of us. What a treat! As they settled down for the night, some way off over to our left, all the other observers called it a night but our group stayed on – and what a good job we did, as the whole of the starling roost then decided to move towards us and came down considerably closer. We were transfixed as the reeds went black as they settled. We cupped our hands to our ears to marvel at the amazing sound of over a million birds chattering excitedly as they settled for the night. As it got dark, so it was time to go; we returned to the buses, buzzing with the excitement of what we had just witnessed.

An hour later we were back at the Swan Hotel where we relaxed before another delicious dinner. We then caught up with our checklists for the day before retiring after a very successful day.

Day 3

Friday 23rd January

After another satisfying breakfast, we left Wells to explore the more northerly valleys of the Levels.

We arrived at Ashcott Corner and set off west to Shapwick Heath Natural England reserve. Stealthy progress enabled us to all enjoy excellent views of at least one Kingfisher in the telescope as it fed along the edge of the channel. Scanning the reed beds we soon picked up a Marsh Harrier which was then joined by a second bird, both hunting for their next meal. We carefully examined the reed edges looking for a Bittern but sadly they weren't on show today. We did, however, find some Snipe hiding on the edge. The woodland edge revealed several Bullfinches which are always popular. We waited at the bridge to see if any Bearded Tits were calling but there was just a Cetti's Warbler on view – not a bad consolation prize and evidence, if any were needed, of what a special place this is.

Moving on to the hide, we were treated to another good throng of ducks. Amongst the many Wigeon we found Gadwall, Pochard, Tufted Duck, and a Goosander flew by. As the ducks in front of us panicked, flying up in all directions, we scanned the horizon for the culprit. There it was – a magnificent immature male Peregrine which then settled on a bare tree in front of the hide for all to admire through the telescope. What a privilege! It stayed there for 10 minutes before proceeding to buzz the many ducks again. Greylag Geese were also present and another Marsh Harrier quartered the back of the lake. On the way back to the bus we enjoyed fine views of Reed Bunting and were entertained by the squeals of the Water Rails in the reeds.

Moving on, we were soon at Catcott Somerset Wildlife Trust Reserve. Here we had excellent views of a multitude of ducks which enabled us to consolidate our earlier learnings as well ensuring all were able to appreciate the amazing patterning of each feather on the very close array of ducks. By now we had all become

experts in duck identification! The close views of Pintail were very much appreciated. We also saw another Marsh Harrier, this one wearing a green wingtag that told us it had been born at Lakenheath, Suffolk last year. It spent some time tussling with Buzzards, obviously trying to protect its latest meal from them! A Great White Egret was very popular as it strutted amongst the sedges looking for food and we saw Stonechats perched up on the reeds at the edges.

Our lunch stop at the Crown was very welcome and we were well looked after before warming up in front of the log fire.

We then headed to the Somerset Wildlife Trust Westhay Moor reserve for a walk in the winter sun. Gadwall showed well as we headed towards the Tower hide. Here we had an elevated view over the reed beds from which we were able to admire the Marsh Harriers which quartered the reeds between the isolated bushes. Many commented on how they liked this reserve in a quiet corner of the Levels.

Time was ticking on so we pressed onwards, back to Ashcott Corner car park for the Starling roost. As we got to Ham Wall Viewing Platform 1, we were soon experiencing impressive numbers of Starlings in huge flocks as they filed past us. It soon became obvious that they weren't going to be roosting in front of us tonight, as the flocks continued west past us. It looked like they might be coming down in the reeds between us and the minibus so we took a swift walk back to a viewpoint to see if they were. As we got there, the Starlings were continuing west and obviously headed for Shapwick Heath tonight, so we settled down to enjoy the spectacle as thousands of birds filed past us. As darkness fell, we made our way back to the bus, marvelling at how nature manages to put on a different display every night to keep us amazed.

We ventured back to Wells to say our goodbyes, and parted after a hugely enjoyable and fulfilling few days.

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Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	January	
			22	23
1	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	H	✓
2	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	1	20
3	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓
4	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓
5	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	10	10
6	Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	2	2
7	Great Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>	1	
8	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
9	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		20
10	Canada Goose	<i>Branta Canadensis</i>	✓	✓
11	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	✓	✓
12	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	✓	✓
13	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓
14	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
15	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	25	15
16	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	✓	✓
17	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya farina</i>		10
18	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
19	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	6	5
20	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		1
21	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
22	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		1
23	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		1
24	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	
25	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	2S, 6H	H
26	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
27	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
28	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
29	Eurasian Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	6000	
30	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	5	3
31	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	1	
32	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
33	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓
34	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓
35	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
36	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓
37	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
38	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
39	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		3
40	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	✓
41	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		H
42	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓
43	Northern Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
44	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
45	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		5
46	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	2	
47	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	January	
			22	23
48	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		✓
49	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>		✓
50	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
51	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
52	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	6	2
53	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	H	✓
54	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		1
55	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	
56	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	2	
57	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>	✓	
58	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
59	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
60	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	4	
61	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	1	
62	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
63	Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓
64	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
65	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
66	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	1	
67	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
68	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
69	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
70	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	✓	✓
71	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
72	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		2
73	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓

Mammals

	European Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	3	6
	Brown Rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>		1