

The Somerset Levels - A Beginner Birdwatching Tour

Naturetrek Tour Report

14 - 16 February 2020



Wildfowl (Mostly Wigeon with Teal, Shoveler & Gadwall)



West Sedgemoor



Starling murmuration



Cattle Egrets

Report & Images by Matt Collis



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Tour participants: Matt Collis and David Tattersfield (Leaders) with 15 Naturetrek clients.

Summary

This tour around the Somerset Levels in winter is 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 the UK and mainland Europe unseasonably mild, the diversity and density of birds (particularly waders) has been lower than normal all season but awe-inspiring nonetheless. Our weekend was significantly hampered by the arrival of Storm Dennis which produced strong winds and rain for 75% of our trip. As a result, we significantly changed the itinerary and spent one of our days at WWT Slimbridge. Nonetheless we managed to see a brilliant array of winter wildlife including some classic winter spectacles including vast numbers of Golden Plover, Lapwing and ducks. Opportunities to view the Starlings were limited to one visit but thanks to good positioning we had a fantastic spot and saw an estimated 200,000 – 300,000 birds putting on a fabulous show. As well the large and diverse gatherings of ducks and plovers, other special encounters from this trip included several groups of Eurasian Crane, several Bewick's Swans and a large array of geese species including both Barnacle and some feral Bar-headed Geese.

Day 1

Friday 14th February

The tour began in the lounge of the wonderful Swan Hotel, set within the picturesque English town of Wells. It was here that our trip leaders, Matt and David, introduced themselves to the group before taking them into the dining area where a hearty three course meal was ready and waiting – the first of many excellent meals.

Straight after dinner, the group moved to the Exmoor Room where each client introduced themselves and shared their wildlife hopes for the tour. It quickly became clear that while many had differing target species, they all shared the same excitement for the Starling murmuration which was the main driver for so many to be here this weekend despite the forecast of bad weather. To finish the evening, Matt gave a short talk outlining the plan for the weekend which included changes from the usual itinerary due to the presence of storm Dennis and several weather warnings for the Levels. It was always going to be challenging birdwatching in a storm but everyone seemed up for the challenge and ready for an exciting weekend ahead.

Day 2

Saturday 15th February

Awakening to the howling winds of storm Dennis, we departed for WWT Slimbridge where we knew we could make use of their hides and wonderful facilities for our first storm-struck day. We ended up having a wonderful day with excellent views of a fine array of ducks, swans and waders all across the site. The first part of the morning was spent viewing the Tack Piece which was alive with birds following a high tide on the Severn. Working our way through the flocks we soon picked out a good array of ducks including Pintail, Wigeon, Teal, Shoveler, Mallard and Shelduck and several waders including large numbers of Lapwing and smaller flocks of Curlew, Dunlin and Redshank. We had especially good numbers of Ruff too, many now moulting into breeding plumage to the delight of us all. Towards the back of the area we could also see a number of geese and swans had gathered together including Greylag, Canada Goose, two Bewick's Swan and a large flock of Barnacle Geese with two Bar-headed Geese mixed in amongst them.

Making our way down to the new Estuary Hide, we stopped off to watch some bird feeders which had attracted a large number of House Sparrow, a few Blue and Great Tits, a lone Dunnock and a female Chaffinch. The highlight though was the presence of a Water Rail feeding just a few metres away for several minutes – a very special moment. Once at the Estuary hide we were met by more duck and geese alongside a large flock of Rook and Jackdaw. We also spotted our first Fieldfare and a distant Peregrine Falcon which was taking shelter beside a log, not wanting to move to far away from a Great Black-backed Gull which it must have recently killed.

After lunch we spent the second part of the day exploring some of the other hides on site starting with South Lake. Although fairly quiet, we did get views of some Cormorants in stunning silver breeding plumage, saw a large flock of Pochard and noted several other ducks, mostly Teal and Tufted Duck, sheltering from the strong winds behind a muddy bank. Leaving the hide, we stopped to admire the wonderful array of exotic waterfowl displayed in the inner collection of ponds, before dropping in to Zeiss Hide. Once again we could see plenty of duck, mostly Wigeon and Teal, but also picked up a flock of Avocet, a large group of Dunlin and had several distant views of Snipe as they flushed out the field. It was also here that we saw an enormous number of birds take to the air, presumably disturbed by a raptor, with about three hundred Golden Plover mixed in which must have been feeding in a field just out of view – a little bit of luck to see them!

Our final stop of the day was the Peng Observatory to watch the daily commentated swan feed. After an unusually mild winter, the reserve had seen the earliest departure of its Bewick's Swans in its history, leaving several weeks earlier than previously recorded. It made for a fairly 'swan-less' display, but none the less we enjoyed the excellent commentary and watched the gathering of other wildfowl which had come in to take advantage of the free feed, including Shelduck, Mallard, Shoveler, Tufted Duck and Canada Geese. It was a fitting end to a great day where, despite the adverse weather conditions, we'd had fantastic time viewing a vast array of winter birds.

Day 3

Sunday 16th February

With the worst of the storm predicted to hit mid-morning, we spent the early part of the morning making our way to the southern end of the levels, stopping in behind RSPB Ham Wall to see if we could spot any Cattle Egrets occupying the fields. No luck this time and so we pushed on, travelling through the vast open landscape of the Somerset Levels which was visibly on the brink of some severe and disruptive flooding, with the ditches, drains, fields and roads right on the cusp of overflowing. It made for quite the spectacular scenic drive.

Our next stop was at RSPB West Sedgemoor where we made our way out towards the Barn Hide through strong winds and driving rain. Once under the shelter of the barn, we scanned across the reserve in the hope of finding anything braving this site despite its exposed nature. Duck were fairly limited with just small groups of Wigeon, Teal and Shoveler sat in the closer pools but huge numbers of Golden Plover and Lapwing were present in the pools and fields to the back and periodically got pushed up into the air giving lovely tumbling displays. Raptors were understandably absent except for two Buzzards perched in a copse of wood but both Little Egret and Great Egret were spotted, as were two Roe Deer feeding on the lush grass. Just as we thought we'd got the most out of this hide in horrible conditions, we spotted a group of four Cranes; distant admittedly but distinguishable and fairly active as they foraged for bulbous roots. A short pause in the rain allowed us to have a fairly dry walk back towards the vans and also revealed three more Cranes including one which was within 100m of the path – fantastic and a just reward for our efforts!

We finished our morning by dropping into RSPB Greylake where the weather seemed to relent even further for a while. This allowed us to scan the car park and we got excellent views of both a Chiffchaff and Goldcrest frantically feeding in the brambles. We also got lucky on the walk towards the hide, getting nice views of a Cetti's Warbler in the open and saw several birds on the feeders, including the odd Starling, Chaffinch, Dunnock and a lone Reed Bunting mixed in with the resident House Sparrows. Once at the hide we enjoyed fantastic views of many duck including Wigeon, Teal, Gadwall, Shoveler and Pintail all positioned right in front of the hide. We also got lucky with Snipe with at least forty seen; an enjoyable challenge for people to spot in amongst the clusters of rush and reed.

Following a rather busy and blustery morning we made our way to the pub for lunch before being startled by the rarest sighting of the weekend so far, the Sun! Our first stop on the way there was a visit to Catcott Meadows where we got even closer views of Wigeon, Shoveler and Teal and also had our first views of Marsh Harrier, a total of four, who were probably equally hungry given the prolonged bad weather. We then made our way to RSPB Ham Wall, stopping en route to watch a large flock of Little Egret with a single Cattle Egret in amongst them. Fairly intolerant of our viewing, the flock moved further away but subsequently drew our attention to a large flock of Starlings, a thousand or so, gathered in some nearby trees and who took to the air to give us a few twisting displays – a good omen for later potentially?

Arriving at RSPB Ham Wall, we took a slow stroll up to VP1 which ended up being a very nice and productive walk. We stumbled across a number of passerines including Long-tailed Tits, Blue Tits, Great Tits, Chaffinch, Goldfinch and Goldcrest with the highlight being a Song Thrush standing boldly in the middle of the path feeding on worms. We also had an epic fly over view of Great Egret as it passed just a few metres above us and from the view point we got nice views of Great Crested Grebe, Pochard, Lapwing and some more Snipe.

With the day drawing to an end, our focus switched to the Starling murmuration. The weather had vastly improved and we took a chance on viewing them from their last known location on Meare Heath. As we waited we were treated to lovely views of Great Egret and Cormorants coming in to roost and had a Sparrowhawk fly through, closely followed by a Peregrine Falcon. It wasn't long until the first Starlings began to appear too, wheeling around in the sky in an ever growing swarm of black. This lasted for several minutes and the birds were visibly unsettled and unsure of where to roost. After the arrival of almost 200,000 birds, they began to drift out of view over the trees to an unknown roosting location. Just when we thought the show was over, a few minutes later an enormous super flock appeared back over our heads, the noise and chattering simply amazing, before wheeling off out of view and seemingly back towards roost – a stunning way to end our weekend.

With the display at an end we returned to our vehicles and headed back towards the hotel. We'd had dreadful weather almost the entire weekend, clearly impacting on the distribution and number of birds, yet we still managed to see some excellent birds and an inspiring Starling display to cap it all off. It made for a cheery goodbye and, although sad the trip had ended, we certainly had wonderful memories of a great weekend to share with our friends and family.

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Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			15	16
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	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		1
6	Great White Egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>		✓
7	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		✓
8	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
9	Bewick's Swan	<i>Cygnus columbianus bewickii</i>	9	
10	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓
11	Bar-headed Goose (Feral/Escape)	<i>Anser indicus</i>	2	
12	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓
13	Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>	100	
14	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	✓	
15	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓	✓
16	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓	✓
17	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>		✓
18	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓
19	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
20	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	✓	✓
21	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	✓	✓
22	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
23	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	1	
24	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		✓
25	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	✓	✓
26	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
27	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓
28	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	✓	✓
29	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓
30	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>		7
31	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	✓	H
32	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
33	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
34	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	✓	✓
35	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
36	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	✓
37	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓	
38	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	✓	
39	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>	22	
40	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	
41	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	3	
42	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus longirostris</i>	✓	
43	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
44	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	
45	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
46	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓
47	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia domestica</i>	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			15	16
48	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	3	
49	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
50	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
51	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>		H
52	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	✓	
53	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		✓
54	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓	
55	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>		✓
56	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓
57	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
58	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓
59	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓
60	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
61	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	1	✓
62	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		✓
63	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
64	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		✓
65	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓
66	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		✓
67	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓
68	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
69	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</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	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
78	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
79	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		✓

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