

The Somerset Levels – A Beginner Birdwatching Tour

Naturetrek Tour Report

10th – 12th February 2023



Tour report by Oliver Smart



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Tour participants: Oliver Smart and Marcus John (Leaders) with 12 Naturetrek clients.

Day 1

Friday 10th February

Arriving late-afternoon, the group convened in the early evening for introductions before our first of two delicious evening meals at the Swan Hotel in Wells.

After dinner, the group enjoyed a short slideshow showing the habitats and wildlife of the region and what makes the Somerset Levels such a special place for wildlife. As a beginner's group, it was a nice way to introduce some of the commoner species with details on how to identify and separate them in the field.

Day 2

Saturday 11th February

With a full but relaxed itinerary we enjoyed our breakfast, before leaving the hotel at 8am to head to Ham Wall. The starling roost had moved locations during the last few weeks, so it was worthwhile exploring this fabulous RSPB reserve as well regardless.

As is so often the case it was worth checking out the car park area first, usually with lots of passerines in the trees around the periphery. Goldfinch, Chaffinch, Blackbird and an assortment of tits were present. The feeders also attracted some little brown mammals, which appeared to be Bank Voles.

Continuing slowly along the tracks, we engaged with lots of the closer wildlife to start with; getting our eyes and ears focussed very much on the commoner species. We used some of the marshes around viewing platform 1 to begin to unravel the identification of lots of waterfowl, including Shoveler, Teal, Wigeon, Tufted Duck, Pochard, Gadwall, Mallard, Great Crested and Little Grebe, Cormorant, Mute Swan, Grey Heron and Great White and Little Egret. The group were amazed at the larger egret and how clean and smart they looked at such close quarters. Kingfishers repeatedly flew past with most of the group getting the briefest of glimpses, whilst everyone enjoyed a pair of Great Crested Grebes starting to build their floating nest; the male bringing larger reed stems to create the foundation, whilst the female appeared to be bringing in the soft furnishings with large beakfuls of weed.

We enjoyed feeding some very tame Robins by hand, as well as picking out other small birds in the hedgerow. Long-tailed Tit, Song Thrush and Redwing allowed for particular scrutiny and explanation. From the viewing platform we also saw our first distant Bittern flying away. Lapwing and a couple of Black-tailed Godwit were also observed in flight. The other highlight here were the number of Common Snipe, with all getting beautifully close views of them in the reed bed through our leader's telescopes.

From Ham Wall we drove the short distance to Westhay Moor and after a few minutes enjoyed super, albeit distant, views of Bewick's Swan, amongst larger groups of Mutes. Buzzard, Raven, Kestrel and a Great Spotted Woodpecker drumming were also observed and noted. Onwards once more, we stopped at Tealham Moor where we continued to enjoy the quartering behaviour of Marsh Harrier, whilst listening to Skylark and also watching (for some) a dashing female Merlin whizzing over the moor. Stonechats also put in an appearance with lovely views obtained. Our first perched Fieldfare too was an added bonus.

We completed our morning with a short stop at Catcott Lows. We did not add anything new to our list here, but that was of little importance as the primary goal was to see waterfowl really closely, enabling everyone to begin to self-ID the variety of species.

After our pre-ordered and very enjoyable lunch at The Duck in Burtle, we headed to Shapwick Heath for the afternoon. We slowly made our way to Seven Acres, first scoring six Bullfinch feeding on buds in the trees. Three males and three females made for incredible viewing some 15 feet from us. From the larger open water, we again spent time watching the waterfowl and finally picked up the over-wintering American Wigeon. Despite most of the group's newness to birding, it was a great opportunity to discuss the comparisons between the American and Eurasian species as well as generally talking about rarer species in the UK and how one should never take anything for granted!

Continuing towards Noah's hide, we stumbled upon a young Badger wandering in the wet woodland. It was foraging and certainly out of context during daylight, however it appeared happy and went about its business without any concern for the fourteen onlookers! From the hide, we were amazed at the number of waterfowl and in particular the huge numbers of Pintail and Wigeon that were floating about. Our guides exclaimed that they'd never seen so many of the former species anywhere in the UK at once!

Our day ended in truly remarkable fashion. We positioned ourselves along the bank overlooking the main marshes, but we very quickly felt the need to make our way to Meare Heath from where we'd watch the roosting starlings. A little before sunset the birds started to appear and soon it was apparent to all how amazing the evening was going to be. Hundreds of thousands of birds came together, swirling and joining up into a super flock of perhaps several million birds. It really is hard to gauge the volume, but the sky turned black as they spiralled and murmured. A Peregrine caught one bird, which of course sent the rest into a whirlwind of twisting and turning black dots.

The noise of the flock continued to increase as the numbers swelled. Tonight, the birds dropped down just to the edge of the woodland, so we made our way back to the bank to enjoy the last sequence of their performance. Here the birds reached capacity in the reedbed, and they continued to lift just above the reeds and move location, a continual stream of thousands of birds per second skimmed over at eye-level!

After we picked our jaws off the floor, we made our way back to the vehicles and back to Wells to enjoy our final dinner. We completed our checklists and discussed some of the finer moments of the day.

Day 3

Sunday 12th February

Pre-breakfast, a group of five clients and one leader headed off to Shapwick Heath to watch the starlings leave their roost. We left the hotel at 6am and by 7am, we were standing in the dark in the same spot as the night before. We'd already enjoyed a *twooing* Tawny Owl from the car park and three separate Bittern calling, with their softer, even lower-toned booms. Our leader discussed each of the birds calling; some singing their dawn chorus repertoire and others just making their usual commoner calls.

As the very first signs of daybreak appeared, our leader quickly realised that the birds had all disappeared from the previous night's roosting site. They were no longer in the reeds alongside the track, and we suddenly heard some

distant commotion near to where we had been sitting in the hide the night before. We made our way quickly to the hide with two other birders and within two minutes enjoyed the most extraordinary experience as the birds began to explode from the reedbed. They emerged in probably four huge groups, but what made this so different was that they seemed to explode and separate out as they left, covering the sky above us. The previous evening they were being drawn in together so this was quite a different view of them. They actually all flew directly over the hide and listening to their wingbeats was magical.

After this once-in-a-lifetime experience, we drove on to Aller Moor, close to Tadham Moor and watched a large group of Cattle Egret amongst cattle. Habitually following cattle in search of food, these hunched white birds are very easily separated from their marshland cousins.

We returned for breakfast, whilst the other half of the group visited Westhay Moor at a slightly more reasonable hour. They enjoyed a number of birds, recapping on some of their previous day's sightings. They also had wonderful views of a pair of displaying Great White Egret, the birds dancing and jumping into the air to form their bond.

Later in the morning the two groups met at Greylake and once more we could spend time identifying the various waterfowl species. In the distance five Common Crane fed, along with a number of egrets and Mute Swan. Some Roe Deer were also visible. Raptors included Buzzard and Marsh Harrier and they appeared to spend most of the time either perched or harassing the waterbirds, with swathes of duck or Lapwing taking to the air. A flock of Golden Plover, a single Grey Wagtail and our first Lesser Black-backed Gulls were also spotted earlier.

We took a slightly earlier lunch at the King Alfred in Burrowbridge and being a Sunday, it was nice to enjoy a roast dinner for a change. Not wasting any time, we spent the afternoon walking in Swell Wood. It is a great time of year to be visiting as the Grey Herons had just started nestbuilding. The clattering calls of them on their nests, high in the trees is always impressive to hear.

Around the car park, we enjoyed a number of birds coming to the feeders, including Blue, Great, Long-tailed and our first (of many) Coal Tit. Robin and Duncock joined in on the ground too and a Nuthatch called overhead. We walked to the heron viewing area and had the most wonderful observation of two, (possibly) male Goldcrest initially coming to bathe and drink, before they perched in a nearby tree and displayed at each other. The vivid orange crown being shown off in astonishing colour! Such a treat for everyone and the leaders had not ever observed such a striking display before either.

We completed our search of the wood with a short walk to the viewpoint overlooking West Sedgemoor. We added a brief calling Marsh Tit to the list with just a few of the group obtaining views. The view looking down on the floodplain was great as we found four more Common Crane and several Roe Deer. It was interesting to have the direct size comparison as they fed side-by-side.

We returning to our vehicles and slowly made our way back along the River Parrett. We were hoping for owls this afternoon as it was starting to get dusky, but none appeared. We did spot a number of other raptors as well groups of thrushes and further Lapwing.

We returned to the hotel to complete the tour and say our goodbyes. Everyone was thoroughly satisfied with their short stay and wished it had been longer. It would be safe to say that there would now be another twelve additional birdwatchers enjoying the subject from here-on-in.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only, I = Introduced)

Common name	Scientific name	February 2023	
		11	12
Canada Goose - I	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓
Bewick's Swan	<i>Cygnus bewickii</i>	✓	
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓	✓
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	✓	✓
American Wigeon	<i>Mareca americana</i>	✓	
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓	✓
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	✓	✓
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
Common Pheasant - I	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓
Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	✓	✓
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	H	H
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>		✓
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	✓	✓
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓	
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	✓	✓
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	✓	
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	✓
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>	✓	✓
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		✓
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓	✓

Common name	Scientific name	February 2023	
		11	12
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	✓	
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓	✓
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>		H
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	✓	
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	✓
European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	✓	
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	✓	
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	✓	
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	✓	
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>Parus 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>	✓	
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	H	H
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		✓
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	✓
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		✓
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	

Common name	Scientific name	February 2023	
		11	12
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	✓	
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓	
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	

Mammals

Common name	Scientific name	February 2023	
		11	12
European Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	✓	✓
Badger	<i>Meles meles</i>	✓	
Bank Vole	<i>Myodes glareolus</i>	✓	
European Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>		✓
Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>		✓