

The Somerset Levels – A Beginner Birdwatching Tour

Naturetrek Tour Report

9th – 11th February 2024



Grey Heron



Drake Teal



Common Cranes



Drake Wigeon

Tour report and images by Adrian Langdon



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Summary

The Somerset Levels in winter provide an incredible backdrop to some very special wildlife spectacles.

Firstly there is a huge concentration of wintering wildfowl scattered across an often flooded vista of lowland fields, marshes and peat ponds south of the Mendips and the Quantock hills. During early February the flood water had started to recede with access now back to the majority of places and hides but a few days of heavy rain prior to our tour raised the water levels once again although failed to cause significant issues. Early winter storms had left many fields and meadows inundated with water, but that is classic Somerset Levels, and the birdlife seemed to take great advantage of it.

The second major spectacle is that of the largest roost of Starlings in the country with an estimated 500,000 birds. We had great views of the starlings arriving en masse from many directions and at times directly overhead, when the sound of their wings added to the visual spectacle. On both evenings we went to RSPB Ham Wall. On the first evening we had incredible views as they twisted and turned over the reed beds. On the second evening they came through in waves and ultimately decided to roost at Shapwick Heath. Other highlights of the trip included great views of Eurasian Cranes, numerous Marsh Harriers, Glossy Ibis, hundreds of Cattle Egrets and vast flocks of Teal and Wigeon both on the water and in the air, including the very rare Baikal Teal which has been wintering at RSPB Greylake.

Day 1

Friday 9th February

Our tour began in the lounge of the beautiful Swan Hotel in the Somerset city of Wells, in front of a blazing log fire. We then moved into one of the Garden Rooms where Adrian and Chris introduced themselves to our guests in a relaxed and informal manner, and we all chatted about our hopes and aspirations for the coming few days. High up that list was “good weather”, and so it proved to be.

We also chatted about “birdwatching for beginners” and whilst most guests knew their garden birds, many were not so familiar with those of the wetlands. We then chatted about how we would try to help everyone get to know them and become more confident when faced with different species. Most people were keen to witness the “Starling experience” and others had certain species they were keen to see, notably some classic Somerset Levels birds: Bittern, Bearded Tit and Common Crane.

We discussed the proposed itinerary and looked at maps so that we could all get an idea of the topography of the area and locate some of the reserves to prepare us for the following days. We vacated the Garden Room and moved into the restaurant for the first of our delicious three-course meals. We soon got chatting, learnt a bit more about each other and our birdwatching history, and talked more about the Somerset Levels and where we’d be visiting and what we expected to see. While a few people retired to the lounge for a nightcap the majority drifted off to their rooms for the night.

Day 2

Saturday 10th February

This morning it was dry and cloudy with no rain on the forecast, so after breakfast we split between our two vans and headed south-west to RSPB Greylake reserve. The car park was really busy due to the fact that a rare Baikal Teal had been frequenting the reserve, and the hides were also quite active as birders struggled to get their optics on to the bird. There were hundreds of birds in front of the two hides, mostly Teal, Wigeon and Lapwing, and we had some amazingly close views. Common Snipe could be viewed very close to the hide as they probed their long bills into the soft mud for food. Cetti's Warblers were heard and occasionally spotted. We got both our telescopes set up on various birds and shared our finds with the group, while explaining many of the distinguishing features of each species, such as the differences between males and females. We were also treated to a fly past from a pair of Common Cranes and they vocalised as they passed. One of our group, Ben, was most excited to relocate the rare Baikal Teal after all the flock had risen in the air due to a pass by a Marsh Harrier, so we were able to highlight the differences between it and the Common Teal.

We left Greylake and headed to the small reserve of RSPB Swell Wood to find some woodland species. In the car park someone was photographing birds from their car and had put out food that was already attracting Great, Blue, Marsh and Coal Tits, along with Robins and Nuthatch. At the Heron Hide, the area was alive with birds and it was great to look up into the leafless canopy and watch Herons sat on nests, while others flew in with sticks to refurbish previous nests. There was a cacophony of sound coming from the birds as their early breeding got under way.

We then headed down to the overlook to take in the view over West Sedgemoor, and hopefully to spot Common Cranes. We were not to be disappointed as we quickly had the telescopes on 4 Cranes feeding on our side of the valley. All of us had fantastic views of these birds. We also set the telescopes on three Roe Deer as they grazed in the wet pasture. As we made our way back through the wood we had good views of Treetreeper and also heard a Mistle Thrush singing high in the canopy.

We left Swell Wood and drove down across the levels to Burrowbridge and our lunch stop. The King Alfred Inn is a good, old-fashioned Somerset pub which offers traditional pub food using local meats, fish and vegetables. The staff were great and knew that we wanted to get back out into the wild as quickly as we could: they opened an ante-room for us, and both the food and the service were first class. The Inn is adjacent to the famous Burrow Mump with its unfinished church on the top

We then drove the short distance to RSPB Ham Wall to explore the reserve before the Starlings were due to come in to roost later that afternoon. The water levels had dropped considerably since the last tour two weeks before, and we could now access the blinds and hides at Tor, and enjoy unfettered views from Viewing Platform 1. Moorhens and Coots were alongside Shoveler, Teal, Wigeon, Tufted Duck, Pochard and Gadwall and, of course, the ever-present Marsh Harriers. We also spent some time watching the birds on the feeders by the RSPB huts and recorded Reed Bunting and a fast and fleeting view of a Sparrowhawk as it flashed between the feeders and left empty-taloned as we sampled their teas and coffees.

It's always a lottery deciding where best to set ourselves up to watch the Starlings: this year in particular has had several changes of roosting site. The birds were splitting between sites as well, so we took a chance and stayed at Ham Wall.

It was almost 5.00pm before the sharp-eyed among us spotted flocks of birds in the distance, and very soon they were passing overhead in vast numbers. We could hear the whoosh of their wings as they flew really low and seemed to envelop us as we stared in wonderment at their numbers. They moved in unison and swept over the reeds and the treeline making their familiar patterns and shapes. One of our group spotted a Bittern flying, while the rest of us made do with listening to one “booming”.

As a group we walked back to the car park with lots of smiley, happy faces and discussed where best to go the following evening to get another ring-side seat. It was a short trip back to the hotel and the welcome log fire.

Day 3

Sunday 11th February

We awoke to a rainy start, but after a hearty breakfast we headed out just as the clouds were clearing and a blue sky was showing in the west. The forecast for the day was good, although temperatures were still quite low. We headed toward Sharpham on the eastern edge of Ham Wall, to an area of farms and industrial works, but as it was a Sunday we had the place to ourselves. The roads were classic Levels droves with undulating tarmac and deep ditches on either side. As soon as we arrived we spotted about 100 Cattle Egrets in a distant field, with a Glossy Ibis in their midst. Mute Swans were everywhere and lots of Lapwings were feeding in the wet fields. A pair of Little Egrets also showed well. Very soon something spooked the Cattle Egrets from the field and we benefitted from views of them in flight: their final stop was in a meadow very close to us.

We left Sharpham and cut across country to Ham Wall where we grabbed hot drinks and started down toward Shapwick Heath with the aim of visiting the hide at Noah’s Lake. As we approached Noah’s Lake we heard a Bittern “booming” and then climbed the stairs up to the hide to be greeted by the sight of thousands of wildfowl on the lake. Wigeon and Teal were joined by big numbers of Pintail, Gadwall and Tufted Duck. We had also had a brief views of three Whooper Swans in the reedy area to the right of the hide, although we only got glimpses of the bright yellow bills of these wintering birds as they fed amongst the willow carr. We also had views of a Kingfisher as it darted across the front of the hide several times in each direction.

Upon leaving this area, we headed across to the Avalon Marshes Centre and had lunch and a bit of down time at the Marshes Tea Hub. Guests enjoyed the meal and the chance to browse the Avalon Marshes centre and to pick up a few souvenirs.

After lunch we motored along some of the droves south of the Westhay reserve, where we watched hundreds of Mute Swans in the meadows, alongside approximately 100 Cattle Egrets. We stopped the vans and all spent some time watching this spectacle of a field full of white birds. There were even three Glossy Ibis amongst the egrets. Moving farther east, we stopped and checked out a few pools which held the usual Great-crested and Little Grebes, Teal and a few Cormorants.

Making our way back to RSPB Ham Wall we chatted to the group about where we thought to be the best spot to watch the Starlings that afternoon. We chose to try Ham Wall again, as it had been so productive the previous afternoon. On balance, we perhaps got it wrong on this occasion, as the majority of birds passed overhead in continuous waves and went on towards Shapwick Heath. We all had great views of the flocks but could only see the murmurations in the distance. The birds beat us this time, but everyone was so thrilled that the previous

afternoon had been so successful. It does show that wildlife can be very unpredictable! The weather had stayed dry and there was a nice colour in the sky before darkness set in and we headed back to the Swan at Wells. With the trip coming to an end we arrived back at the hotel where we said our goodbyes amid exchanging emails, blogs and phone numbers. Another successful tour had come to an end.

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Species lists

Birds (I= Introduced)

Common name	Scientific name	February 2024	
		10	11
Canada Goose - I	<i>Branta canadensis</i>		✓
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		✓
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	✓	
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓	✓
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓	✓
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓
Baikal Teal	<i>Sibirionetta formosa</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>	✓	✓
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>	✓	✓
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	✓
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</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>	✓	✓
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	✓	

Common name	Scientific name	February 2024	
		10	11
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓	✓
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	✓	
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		✓
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</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>	✓	✓
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	✓	✓
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>	✓	
Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	✓	✓
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</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 - Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		✓
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		✓