

The Somerset Levels – A Beginners' Birdwatching Tour

Naturetrek Tour Report

4th – 6th February 2026



Common Starling



Glastonbury Tor from the Levels



Shoveler



Redpoll

Tour report and images by Adrian Langdon



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Tour participants: Adrian Langdon (leader) with seven Naturetrek clients

Summary

The Somerset Levels in winter provide an exceptional setting for birdwatching, offering some of the most striking wildlife spectacles in southern Britain. During this tour, the extensive lowland landscape of flooded fields, marshes, and peat ponds lying south of the Mendip Hills and the Quantocks supported a huge concentration of wintering wildfowl, creating superb viewing opportunities throughout the trip.

This February tour coincided with a period of exceptionally high water levels across the region. A succession of winter storms moving through south-west England had resulted in widespread flooding, saturated landscapes, and at times challenging travel conditions. However, these conditions also enhanced the wildlife experience, spreading birds far and wide and emphasising the dramatic character of the Levels in winter.

Starling roost activity proved to be a major highlight of the tour, and was considered the best of the entire winter season. With the birds returning to roost at RSPB Ham Wall in exceptional numbers, participants were treated to truly spectacular murmuration displays that left a lasting impression on the group.

Day 1

Wednesday 4th February

The tour began in the lounge of the beautiful Swan Hotel in the historic Somerset city of Wells, where the group gathered in front of an inviting log fire. We then moved into the Garden Room, where Adrian introduced himself to the clients in a relaxed and informal manner. This provided an opportunity for everyone to get to know one another and to discuss hopes and expectations for the coming days. The weather forecast predicted a mixture of sunshine and showers, and all participants were well prepared with suitable clothing for a range of conditions.

As this was a tour designed for beginners to birdwatching, Adrian delivered a short introductory presentation covering many of the bird species likely to be encountered, along with an overview of the sites to be visited. This helped to build confidence and set expectations ahead of the field excursions.

Following the presentation, the group reconvened in the hotel restaurant for a relaxed three-course evening meal. After dinner, some participants retired to their rooms, while others remained in the lounge, continuing conversations and chatting informally about how the tour might unfold.

Day 2

Thursday 5th February

After a relaxed breakfast, we left Wells and headed for RSPB Ham Wall. Previous tours had often begun at RSPB Greylake; however, due to the recent severe weather, all access paths there were completely flooded, and the reserve was officially closed.

From the entrance at Ham Wall, we walked towards Viewing Platform 1, and were immediately rewarded with close-up views of Blue and Great Tits, Robin, Chaffinch and Song Thrush. As we approached the viewing area, a variety of wildfowl came into view, including Gadwall, Shoveler, Tufted Duck, Wigeon and Teal. Cormorants were

ever-present, whether perched on posts or flying overhead, providing excellent opportunities to learn their distinctive features.

Opposite Viewing Platform 1, we enjoyed excellent views of Black-tailed Godwits and Lapwings in good numbers, alongside Great and Little Egrets. We then continued towards the Tor Hide, stopping at several hides overlooking reed-fringed pools. Cetti's Warblers were heard singing on numerous occasions, although none showed itself.

Great Crested Grebes were beginning to show signs of pair formation, and from the Tor Hide we enjoyed superb views of nesting Grey Herons. At least six nests were visible in the reeds close to the hide, allowing prolonged and detailed views using binoculars and telescope.

Mid-morning, we left Ham Wall and headed south-west to RSPB Swell Wood. This small woodland supports a substantial heronry, with Grey Herons nesting at this time of year and Little Egrets arriving later in the season. Almost immediately, we spotted a Treecreeper in the car park, working its way up an oak tree. Further woodland species included Blue, Coal, Great, Long-tailed and Marsh Tits.

From the overlook above West Sedgemoor, we hoped to see Common Cranes. However, exceptionally high water levels meant very little exposed land was visible, and none were present on this occasion.

Leaving Swell Wood, we travelled to the King Alfred Inn at Burrowbridge for lunch. Due to flooding, the usual country lanes were impassable, and we took a longer route via Langport and Othery. The detour proved worthwhile, and everyone enjoyed lunch at this characterful country inn.

After lunch, we made a short journey to Burrow Mump, an iconic hill topped by the ruins of St Michael's Church. From approximately twenty metres up, we enjoyed panoramic views across the flooded Levels. We quickly picked up a pair of Bewick's Swans, Arctic-breeding migrants making use of the flooded meadows as an overwintering site.

Continuing to Catcott Lows, we were invited into the hide out of the rain by a kind birdwatcher, who pointed out a striking Glossy Ibis feeding alongside a pair of grazing Mute Swans. The reserve also held large numbers of wildfowl, including hundreds of Wigeons, and many Teals and Shovelers. A male Merlin was spotted perched on a distant telegraph pole, allowing excellent telescope views.

We returned to RSPB Ham Wall in the late afternoon to witness the Starling murmuration. Conditions proved ideal, and from Viewing Platform 2 we watched small groups build into vast flocks, swirling overhead in breathtaking formations until dusk. The display was completely absorbing, with the only sound being the beating of thousands of wings. It was widely agreed to be one of the great spectacles of the natural world.

Back at the Swan Hotel, we enjoyed our evening meal, before completing the day's checklist in the lounge.

Day 3

Friday 6th February

After breakfast, we headed west to Shapwick Heath National Nature Reserve. Walking beside the South Drain, we encountered Chaffinch, several tit species, and three Bullfinches feeding on tree buds. A pair of Stonechats was watched feeding on insects along the opposite bank.

From the hide overlooking the South Drain, we enjoyed prolonged views of Mute Swan families, still accompanied by last year's cygnets. On the way to Noah's Hide, Adrian pointed out a well-used Otter crossing, complete with Otter spraints containing fish bones and scales.

Noah's Lake was full of wildfowl, including our first Pintail of the tour. A Kingfisher made repeated passes in front of the hide before settling on a reed stem and giving excellent views. The still, misty conditions created mirror-like reflections on the lake. From a side window, we picked out Redpolls and Siskins feeding on Alder cones. Marsh Harriers were seen quartering the marsh and repeatedly flushing wildfowl.

After lunch at the Avalon Marshes Tea Hub, we walked towards Decoy Lake, where we were delighted to hear a Bittern booming. We also visited the Sweet Track, a replica of the Neolithic causeway once used to cross the marshes.

Our final stop was Westhay Moor Nature Reserve. Although some access tracks were flooded, we were rewarded with exceptional views of Cattle Egrets. Along North Chine Drove and nearby fields, we estimated a total of approximately 520 birds: an extraordinary number and a memorable highlight with which to end the tour.

We returned to Wells in the remaining daylight, and the tour concluded back at the Swan Hotel. Farewells were said, contact details were exchanged, and everyone agreed that the tour had been a great success. As a beginners' introduction to birdwatching, participants felt they had learned a great deal, and had thoroughly enjoyed an unforgettable few days exploring the Somerset Levels in winter.

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Species lists

Birds (H=heard only)

I=Introduced	Common name	Scientific name	February 2026	
			5	6
	Canada Goose - I	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓
	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓
	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
	Bewick's Swan	<i>Cygnus columbianus</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>	✓	✓
	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>	✓	✓
	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	✓	✓
	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓	✓
	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		✓
	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	✓	
	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	✓
	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓
	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	✓	
	Eurasian Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>		H
	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓
	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓	✓
	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Ardea ibis</i>		c.520
	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓
	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		✓
	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓	✓
	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	✓	✓
	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		✓
	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓
	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	✓	
	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	✓	
	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓
	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓

I=Introduced	Common name	Scientific name	February 2026	
			5	6
	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus 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>	H	H
	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	
	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	✓	
	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓
	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓
	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓
	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓
	Eurasian Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		✓
	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓	
	Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>		✓
	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		✓
	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓



Cattle Egrets