

Somerset's Summer Wildlife

Naturetrek Tour Report

13th – 16th June 2022



Grey Heron



Elephant Hawkmoth



Ragged Robin



Quantocks landscape

Tour report & images by Jonathan Mycock



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Tour participants: Jonathan Mycock (Leader) with seven Naturetrek clients.

Summary

Somerset is home to a wealth of habitats and species, partly comprising the various hill formations, coastline and woodland. The urban centres of Taunton, Minehead and Weston-Super-Mare are surrounded by villages and large areas of open countryside. The focus of the tour was to cover many areas of the county, to capture enigmatic or special species for the region. The newer Somerset Levels and Steart Marshes were visited, along with walks in the hills of the Mendips, Poldens and Quantocks. The tour was very general and not focussing on any particular wildlife group, although birds featured highly. The group had a range of interests, so all invertebrate groups and flora were covered too, making this a diverse and interesting tour.

Day 1

Monday 13th June

The group of seven clients met the leader Jonathan in the restaurant of the Batch Country Hotel for dinner. Jonathan gave an outline of the itinerary for the week. Unfortunately, due to unforeseen circumstances, Jonathan was late arriving, so it was not possible to go out further afield after dinner. Instead, we focussed on setting up the moth trap in anticipation of a selection of moths before breakfast the following day.

Day 2

Tuesday 14th June

A pre-breakfast inspection of the moth trap revealed a varied catch of moths, although in the short time available we were only able to identify 10 species (Jonathan being a novice 'Moth-er!'). Highlights included the lovely pink Elephant Hawk Moth, along with Buff Ermine, Blood Vein, Heart and Dart, and Willow Beauty.

After breakfast we headed south then east to Ham Wall RSPB reserve, in the wonderful Somerset Levels. It was a warm, sunny day, so lots of the colourful Vanessa butterflies were on the wing, including a profusion of Small Tortoiseshells, a species which sadly has undergone a steep decline in recent years. The marshes and reedbeds either side of the main track, which follows an old railway line, were alive with birds, many coming and going to feed hungry youngsters. A total of six Eurasian Bitterns were seen in flight, along with several Great Egrets and over ten Marsh Harriers. The Hawthorn and Willow bushes lining the trackway held good numbers of Blackcap and Willow Warbler, and we were able to obtain good views of both, unlike the Cetti's, which we heard regularly, but remained elusive. Eventually we reached the Avalon Hide, and we climbed up to the 'top deck', which gave elevated views of the pools and reedbeds in three directions. A Water Rail was seen briefly, although we heard its squealing, pig-like call several times. A few Bearded Tits were also heard but remained frustratingly hidden among the tops of the reeds!

After a full morning wandering around this wildlife-rich reserve, we headed up the road to the Avalon Marshes visitor centre café, where we had lunch of sandwiches and paninis, finished off with tea and cake or ice cream. We then set off for the Polden Hills, but got stuck in heavy traffic. A decision was made to return to the Levels and maximise our time in the field. We spent the afternoon at the Shapwick Heath National Nature Reserve (NNR), to the west of Ham Wall. In the heat of the afternoon, several species of Odonata were active, including Emperor, Brown Hawker, Four-spotted Chaser and Black-tailed Skimmer dragonflies, together with Banded

Demoiselle and Large Red Damselfly. The pools on Meare Heath held large numbers of Gadwall, which appeared to be an aggregation of numerous family groups, with Little Egrets actively feeding around the margins. After dinner we set the moth trap in a slightly different location within the hotel grounds, hoping to attract some different species.

Day 3

Wednesday 15th June

A pre-breakfast inspection of the moth trap produced 16 species, highlights of which included Poplar Hawk-moth, Magpie Moth, Snout and White Ermine.

After breakfast we headed south-west via Bridgewater to Steart Marshes. We passed through lovely pastoral countryside, before coming across the huge Hinkley Point nuclear power station complex. Further on we reached the marshes car park, then explored the reserve, visiting various hides, each named after the view in front of it. The first was Quantock hide, where several islands were in the foreground. Young of various wader species, including Oystercatcher, Avocet and Lapwing, were trying to remain camouflaged amongst the pebbles and weedy vegetation. Their noisy parents were constantly on the alert and taking wing to chase off marauding Crows and raptors, including Buzzard, Marsh Harrier and Sparrowhawk.

Next, we moved onto Mendip hide, which overlooked a large area of grazing marsh, which in winter would be inundated by the tides. Few birds were visible in mid-summer, apart from a family of Stonechats, but three Brown Hares were entertaining, dashing about between the cattle. On the reserve, large areas had been sown with wildflower species, and these attracted a variety of butterflies, including Common Blue, Small Heath and Large Skipper. On our return journey to the car park, we stopped to admire a family group of Goldfinches feeding on thistle heads, whilst the hedgerow bordering the car park held two singing Sedge Warblers, which we all eventually managed to see.

It was then time to head west to the Quantock village of Holford, where a table at the Plough Inn awaited us. We had an excellent lunch, after which we headed down to the start of our walk at Hodder's Combe. Our route took us through deciduous woodland, eventually opening out onto a heathland ridge, with wondrous views to the Bristol Channel to the west, and onto the high moorland to the east. At the woodland edge we had fleeting glimpses of a juvenile Green Woodpecker, and in the scattered scrub Whitethroats sang their scratchy warble. Family groups of Linnets flew over, and Stonechats were encountered at regular intervals in gorse bushes amongst the tall Heather. In the distance a Cuckoo was heard, and a tall post supporting some fire beaters also hosted a splendid male Redstart. We reached a small knoll called Lower Hare Knap, where sheep and lambs were grazing and sheltering under groves of Holly bushes, which also held a few Lesser Redpoll. Crossing the Bracken covered moorland, we came across singing Meadow Pipit and Yellowhammer. We then walked down the side of the next Combe (valley), through cool Sessile Oak woodland, with an understorey of Bilberry. Amongst the Oaks we saw or heard Nuthatch, Treecreeper, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Marsh and Coal Tits and Goldcrest. Eventually we reached a swift-flowing stream, which held a pair of handsome Grey Wagtails. Two mares with foals – commoners' ponies - were feeding on the lush grass by the water's edge and remained unperturbed as we quietly passed by. Arriving at our minibus, we embarked for the journey back to the hotel, having greatly enjoyed our afternoon in The Quantocks.

Day 4

Thursday 16th June

Before breakfast we held our final inspection of the moth trap. A total of 15 species were identified, including the previous two hawk moths, and a few new species such as Burnished Brass, Flame Shoulder, Peach Blossom and Cream-bordered Green Pea. After breakfast we headed east to Cheddar Gorge, stopping en-route to purchase our picnic lunch items. Parking the van, we walked uphill through the gorge. Birds of rocky crags included Ravens and flocks of Jackdaws, their calls echoing off the steep rock faces. Tame Blackbirds, Robins and Pied Wagtails were encountered feeding along the roadside. At the top of the gorge, we reached the Blackrock NNR and walked through this limestone grassland and ash woodland reserve. The grassy slopes were very herb-rich and covered in ant hills, with Wild Thyme and Marjoram attracting butterflies, including Common Blue and the moth-like Dingy Skipper. An old quarry held numerous Common Spotted Orchids, while a Red Kite soared overhead.

In need of comfort and facilities, we headed back to the town and had our picnic lunch in the lower part of the gorge, by a stream. Although it was very touristy, we enjoyed a good cup of coffee and an ice cream!

Suitably refreshed, we headed for the Polden Hills, south of Glastonbury and Street. Our destination was Collard Hill, a National Trust reserve with calcareous grassland, and one of a few locations where the Large Blue butterfly has been introduced under license from Natural England. Upon arrival, we found Pyramidal and Greater Butterfly Orchids in the tall grassland on the dip slope of the limestone ridge. Marbled Whites were in abundance. Further on we walked along the top of the ridge. Below us, on the steep-sided escarpment, there were a few Lepidopterists, all searching for the same quarry – Large Blue! Eventually our perseverance paid off as we saw three individuals between us, although they were difficult to photograph as it was so windy. Birds included Bullfinch in the hedgerow, and close views of Red Kite, Buzzard and Kestrel along the ridge. This was a rewarding end to what had been a wonderful three days in Somerset.

We drove back to the hotel and said our goodbyes. A few of the clients stayed on for an extra night.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only, I = Introduced)

| Common name | Scientific name | June 2022 | | | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------|------|----|----|
| | | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 |
| Canada Goose - I | <i>Branta canadensis</i> | | ✓ | | |
| Greylag Goose | <i>Anser anser</i> | | | ✓ | |
| Mute Swan | <i>Cygnus olor</i> | | ✓ | | |
| Common Shelduck | <i>Tadorna tadorna</i> | | | ✓ | |
| Gadwall | <i>Mareca strepera</i> | | 100+ | | |
| Mallard | <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i> | | ✓ | | |
| Common Pochard | <i>Aythya ferina</i> | | ✓ | | |
| Common Pheasant - I | <i>Phasianus colchicus</i> | ✓ | | | |
| Common Swift | <i>Apus apus</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Common Cuckoo | <i>Cuculus canorus</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> | | ✓ | | |
| Little Grebe | <i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i> | | ✓ | | |
| Great Crested Grebe | <i>Podiceps cristatus</i> | | ✓ | | |
| Avocet | <i>Recurvirostra avocetta</i> | | | 20 | |
| Oystercatcher | <i>Haematopus ostralegus</i> | | | ✓ | |
| Northern Lapwing | <i>Vanellus vanellus</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Little Ringed Plover | <i>Charadrius dubius</i> | | | ✓ | |
| Black-headed Gull | <i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Great Black-backed Gull | <i>Larus marinus</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> | | 6+ | | |
| Grey Heron | <i>Ardea cinerea</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Great Egret | <i>Ardea alba</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Little Egret | <i>Egretta garzetta</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Western Marsh Harrier | <i>Circus aeruginosus</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Common Buzzard | <i>Buteo buteo</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Western Barn Owl | <i>Tyto alba</i> | H | | | |
| Great Spotted Woodpecker | <i>Dendrocopos major</i> | | ✓ | | |
| European Green Woodpecker | <i>Picus viridis</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Common Kestrel | <i>Falco tinnunculus</i> | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Eurasian Hobby | <i>Falco subbuteo</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Eurasian Jay | <i>Garrulus glandarius</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Eurasian Magpie | <i>Pica pica</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |

| Common name | Scientific name | June 2022 | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------|----|----|----|
| | | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 |
| Western Jackdaw | <i>Coloeus monedula</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Rook | <i>Corvus frugilegus</i> | | | | ✓ |
| Carrion Crow | <i>Corvus corone</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Coal Tit | <i>Periparus ater</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Eurasian Blue Tit | <i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Great Tit | <i>Parus major</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Bearded Reedling | <i>Panurus biarmicus</i> | | H | | |
| Eurasian Skylark | <i>Alauda arvensis</i> | | | ✓ | |
| Barn Swallow | <i>Hirundo rustica</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Common House Martin | <i>Delichon urbicum</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Cetti's Warbler | <i>Cettia cetti</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Long-tailed Tit | <i>Aegithalos caudatus</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Willow Warbler | <i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Common Chiffchaff | <i>Phylloscopus collybita</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Sedge Warbler | <i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i> | | | 3 | |
| Eurasian Reed Warbler | <i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Eurasian Blackcap | <i>Sylvia atricapilla</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Garden Warbler | <i>Sylvia borin</i> | | 1 | | |
| Common Whitethroat | <i>Curruca communis</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Goldcrest | <i>Regulus regulus</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Eurasian Wren | <i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Eurasian Nuthatch | <i>Sitta europaea</i> | | | ✓ | |
| Eurasian Treecreeper | <i>Certhia familiaris</i> | | | 1 | |
| Song Thrush | <i>Turdus philomelos</i> | | | | H |
| Mistle Thrush | <i>Turdus viscivorus</i> | | | ✓ | |
| Common Blackbird | <i>Turdus merula</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| European Robin | <i>Erithacus rubecula</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Common Redstart | <i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i> | | | ✓ | |
| European Stonechat | <i>Saxicola rubicola</i> | | | ✓ | |
| House Sparrow | <i>Passer domesticus</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Dunnock | <i>Prunella modularis</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Grey Wagtail | <i>Motacilla cinerea</i> | | | ✓ | |
| Pied Wagtail | <i>Motacilla alba</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Meadow Pipit | <i>Anthus pratensis</i> | | | ✓ | |
| Common Chaffinch | <i>Fringilla coelebs</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Eurasian Bullfinch | <i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i> | | | | H |
| European Greenfinch | <i>Chloris chloris</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Common Linnet | <i>Linaria cannabina</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Lesser Redpoll | <i>Acanthis cabaret</i> | | | ✓ | |
| European Goldfinch | <i>Carduelis carduelis</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Yellowhammer | <i>Emberiza citrinella</i> | | | ✓ | |
| Common Reed Bunting | <i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | |

Other species

| Common names | Scientific names | June 2022 | | | |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------|----|----|----|
| | | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 |
| Mammals | | | | | |
| European Hare | <i>Lepus europaeus</i> | | | 3 | |
| European Rabbit | <i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Long-tailed Field Mouse | <i>Apodemus sylvaticus</i> | | ✓ | | |
| Grey Squirrel | <i>Sciurus carolinensis</i> | | | ✓ | |
| Butterflies | | | | | |
| Large White | <i>Pieris brassicae</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Brimstone | <i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Large Blue | <i>Phengaris arion</i> | | | | ✓ |
| Common Blue | <i>Polyommatus icarus</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Speckled Wood | <i>Pararge aegeria</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Small Heath | <i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Meadow Brown | <i>Maniola jurtina</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Marbled White | <i>Melanargia galathea</i> | | | | ✓ |
| Red Admiral | <i>Vanessa atalanta</i> | | ✓ | | |
| Painted Lady | <i>Vanessa cardui</i> | | ✓ | | |
| Peacock Butterfly | <i>Aglais io</i> | | ✓ | | |
| Small Tortoiseshell | <i>Aglais urticae</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Dingy Skipper | <i>Erynnis tages</i> | | | | ✓ |
| Large Skipper | <i>Ochlodes sylvanus</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Grizzled Skipper | <i>Pyrgus malvae</i> | | | | |
| Large White | <i>Pieris brassicae</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Brimstone | <i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Common Swift | <i>Korscheltellus lupulina</i> | | | | ✓ |
| Heart and Dart | <i>Agrotis exclamationis</i> | | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Dark Swordgrass | <i>Agrotis ipsilon</i> | | | ✓ | |
| Blood-vein | <i>Timandra comae</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Maiden's Blush | <i>Cyclophora punctaria</i> | | | ✓ | |
| Willow Beauty | <i>Peribatodes rhomboidaria</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Brimstone Moth | <i>Opisthograptis luteola</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| White Ermine | <i>Spilosoma lubricipeda</i> | | | ✓ | |
| Buff Ermine | <i>Spilosoma lutea</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Poplar Hawk-moth | <i>Laothoe populi</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Elephant Hawk-moth | <i>Deilephila elpenor</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Peach Blossom | <i>Thyatira batis</i> | | | | ✓ |
| Dark Arches | <i>Apamea monoglypha</i> | | | | ✓ |
| Straw Dot | <i>Rivula sericealis</i> | | | | ✓ |
| Snout | <i>Hypena proboscidalis</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Clouded Border | <i>Lomaspilis marginata</i> | | | ✓ | |
| Magpie | <i>Abraxas grossulariata</i> | | | ✓ | |

| Common names | Scientific names | June 2022 | | | |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------|----|----|----|
| | | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 |
| Common Wainscot | <i>Mythimna pallens</i> | | | ✓ | |
| Black Collar | <i>Dichagyris flammata</i> | | | ✓ | |
| Delicate | <i>Mythimna vitellina</i> | | ✓ | | |
| Flame Shoulder | <i>Ochropleura plecta</i> | | | | ✓ |
| Setaceous Hebrew Character | <i>Xestia c-nigrum</i> | | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Large Yellow Underwing | <i>Noctua fimbriata</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Hebrew Character | <i>Orthosia gothica</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Burnished Brass | <i>Diachrysia chrysitis</i> | | | | ✓ |
| Cream-bordered Green Pea | <i>Earias clorana</i> | | | | ✓ |
| | | | | | |
| Dragons & Damsels | | | | | |
| Banded Demoiselle | <i>Calopteryx splendens</i> | | ✓ | | |
| Common Blue Damselfly | <i>Enallagma cyathigerum</i> | | ✓ | | |
| Small Red Damselfly | <i>Ceriagrion tenellum</i> | | ✓ | | |
| Red-eyed Damselfly | <i>Erythromma najas</i> | | ✓ | | |
| Large Red Damselfly | <i>Phyrrhosoma nymphula</i> | | ✓ | | |
| Common Hawker | <i>Aeshna juncea</i> | | ✓ | | |
| Brown Hawker | <i>Aeshna grandis</i> | | ✓ | | |
| Emperor | <i>Anax imperator</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Four-spotted Chaser | <i>Libellula quadrimaculata</i> | | ✓ | | |
| Black-tailed Skimmer | <i>Orthetrum cancellatum</i> | | ✓ | | |
| | | | | | |
| Beetles | Coleoptera | | | | |
| Bloody-nosed Beetle | <i>Timarcha tenebricosa</i> | | | | ✓ |
| | | | | | |
| Orchids | | | | | |
| Common Twayblade | <i>Neottia ovata</i> | | | | ✓ |
| Southern Marsh Orchid | <i>Dactylorhiza praetermissa</i> | | | | ✓ |
| Common Spotted Orchid | <i>Dactylorhiza fuchsii</i> | | | | ✓ |
| Pyramidal Orchid | <i>Anacamptis pyramidalis</i> | | | | ✓ |