

# Somerset's Summer Wildlife

Naturetrek Tour Report

12th – 15th June 2023



Grey Heron



Green Hairstreak



European Eel



Privet Hawk Moth

Tour report and images by Jonathan Mycock



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Tour participants: Jonathan Mycock (Leader) with eight Naturetrek clients

## Introduction

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. We visited the newer Somerset Levels and Steart Marshes, along with walks in the hills of the Mendips, Polden and Quantocks.

The tour was very general and not focussing on any single wildlife group, although birds factored highly. The group had a range of interests, so all invertebrate groups and flora were covered too, making this a diverse and interesting tour. Highlights included booming Bittern, Great Egret and several Hobbies at Ham Wall, Large Blues on the Polden Hills, Redstart and Wood Warbler in the Quantocks, and lastly, two species of Owl and a broad selection of moths in the Hotel grounds!

## Day 1

**Monday 12th June**

The group met their Naturetrek Leader, Jonathan Mycock, in the restaurant of the Batch Country Hotel for dinner. Jonathan gave an outline of the itinerary for the week. After dinner we explored the very attractive grounds of the hotel and set up the moth trap in anticipation of viewing a selection of moths the following morning.

## Day 2

**Tuesday 13th June**

A pre-breakfast inspection of the moth trap revealed a varied catch of moths, and in the short time available we were able to identify 17 species. Highlights included the lovely pink Elephant Hawk Moth, Poplar Hawk Moth, Buff Ermine, Heart and Dart, and Light Emerald.

After breakfast we headed to Ham Wall RSPB reserve, in the wonderful Somerset Levels. It was a warm, sunny day, so lots of the colourful *Vanessid* butterflies were on the wing, including several Small Tortoiseshells, a species which sadly has undergone a steep decline in recent years. The marshes and reedbeds either side of the main trackway, which follows an old railway line, were alive with birds, many coming and going to feed hungry youngsters. A distant booming Eurasian Bittern was heard, and several Great Egrets and hunting Marsh Harriers were seen. 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. We even obtained brief views of the usually skulking Garden Warbler!

A Barred Grass Snake was seen swimming across one of the larger wet ditches, ending up lying across the fringing vegetation and enabling photos to be taken. The loud croaking of introduced Iberian Water Frogs could be heard from down below. 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, and Glastonbury Tor to the east. The squealing, pig-like call of a Water Rail was heard several times, and a few Bearded Tits were also heard, but remained frustratingly hidden among the tops of the reeds!

In the midday heat, eight species of Odonata were active, including Emperor, Broad-bodied and Four-spotted Chasers and Black-tailed Skimmer dragonflies, together with Banded and Beautiful Demoiselles. The numerous dragonflies on the wing attracted the attention of several Hobbies, which we observed catching these quick-flying insects, before biting off their wings and eating them, whilst held in one foot.

As the temperature soared to the high 20s, we headed back to the visitor hut and stopped for ice creams and cold drinks, before winding our way to Holford, where we had an enjoyable lunch sitting outdoors at The Sheppey Inn. Afterwards we headed east to the Polden Hills and the National Trust reserve at Collard Hill. Unfortunately, the hot dry summer had resulted in a dearth of orchids in the meadows, but we were compensated by good numbers of Marbled Whites and Meadow Browns.

We slowly searched the chalk grassland on the steep-sided escarpment, along with a few other Lepidopterists, for the enigmatic Large Blue. Eventually our perseverance paid off as we saw three individuals between us, although they were difficult to photograph as it was quite windy. Small Heath butterflies were common here, while Pyramidal Orchids were frequent amongst the grassy sward. Birds included Linnet in the Hawthorn scrub and Swifts and Swallows along the ridge.

After dinner we set the moth trap in a slightly different location within the hotel grounds, hoping to attract some different species. A Barn Owl was seen flying past the bedroom window of one of the clients and was later seen by other members of the group, doing a circuit of the grounds. Bat detectors were deployed, and we managed to pick up two or three Common Pipistrelles.

## Day 3

Wednesday 14th June

A pre-breakfast inspection of the moth trap produced 12 species, highlights of which included Brimstone, Buff Tip, Ribboned Wave and White Ermine.

After breakfast we headed west to the Quantocks, passing through the quaint village of Holford to the start of our walk, up Hodder's Combe. After a short distance Jonathan picked up the distinctive song of a Wood Warbler, and everyone managed to hear its lovely descending song, though seeing it amongst the foliage of the Oak and Beech trees proved challenging. Eventually we crossed a stream, which held a pair of handsome Grey Wagtails. We walked up the side of the Combe (valley) through cool Sessile Oak woodland, with an understorey of Bilberry. Amongst the Oaks we saw or heard Nuthatch, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Marsh and Coal Tits, Goldcrest and a distant Pied Flycatcher. The narrow path opened 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 found a female Redstart, which appeared to be nesting in the Holly bushes and gave fleeting glimpses as it dashed out to catch insects. Family groups of Linnets flew over, and Stonechats were encountered at regular intervals in gorse bushes amongst the tall Heather. Across the valley a herd of 30 Red Deer was spotted, grazing on the heather or lying down on the slopes. Crossing the Bracken covered moorland, we came across singing Meadow Pipit and Yellowhammer. Along the edge of the footpath, several Green Hairstreaks were seen sheltering among the Bracken. We descended the ridge back to the minibus, then drove the short distance to the village, where a delicious lunch awaited us at the Plough Inn.

After lunch we headed to Steart Marshes, which lie between Bridgewater Bay and the estuary of the River Parrett, passing through lovely pastoral countryside and picturesque villages. An unexpected road closure led to a wide detour and some very skilled map reading. Eventually we reached the reserves car park, then visited the various hides, each named after the view in front of it. The first was 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, but a male Marsh Harrier flew past very close to the hide. Next, we moved onto Quantock hide, where several islands were in the foreground. Unfortunately, due to the very hot, dry summer, the pools had dried up. The warden informed us that the adult Avocets had taken their chicks down to the river edge, where they would be able to find insect prey. Some groups of duck had remained, including some splendid Shelduck. A family of four Ravens were perched on some large electricity pylons, detected by their "cronking" calls. Emergent plants growing from the wet ditches included Purple Loosestrife and Yellow Flag, whilst the songs of Reed Warbler could be heard from beds of *Phragmites* reed.

On the reserve, large areas had been sown with wildflower species, and these attracted a variety of butterflies, including Small Tortoiseshell and Small Skipper. The hedgerow bordering the car park held a singing Sedge Warbler, which we all eventually managed to see.

After dinner we ventured into the hotel grounds again with our bat detectors. Before long, a Little Owl flew across the garden, much to everyone's surprise, and then later the Barn Owl re-appeared. Bat activity was lower than the previous evening, possibly due to the drizzly weather, but one or two Common Pipistrelles were seen/'heard'.

## Day 4

## Thursday 15th June

Before breakfast we held our final inspection of the moth trap. A total of seven species were identified, including a stunning Privet Hawk Moth, a second Elephant Hawk Moth and a few new species such as Angle Shades, Scalloped Hook-tip, and Large Yellow Underwing. The resident Barn Owl also put in an appearance! After breakfast we headed east to Cheddar Gorge, stopping en-route to purchase our picnic lunch items. 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, Silver-Spotted Skipper and the moth-like Dingy Skipper. The footpath then entered the Velvet Bottom reserve, where there was much evidence of old lead mining works.

Beneath the shade of some Elder bushes, we found a fine colony of Common Spotted Orchids, while the Hawthorn scrub opposite held a singing Common Whitethroat. Further on, we managed to find a group of mature Sycamores, beneath which we sat and ate our picnic lunch. Higher up the valley we passed the remains of Roman lead mines, near the hamlet of Charterhouse. The group carried on to inspect the chapel in the hamlet, whilst Jonathan re-traced his steps at a rapid pace, in order to bring the minibus around to save everyone the long walk back. We then headed back down the gorge to Cheddar, where we enjoyed a pot of tea and an ice cream! The clear waters of the stream by the roadside held a large European Eel and a few Brown Trout.

We later drove back to the Batch Country Hotel and said our goodbyes. A few of the group stayed on for an extra night. Everyone agreed that they had enjoyed a wonderful few days observing some of Somerset's summer wildlife!

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## Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

I=Introduced		June 2023			
Common name	Scientific name	12	13	14	15
Canada Goose - I	<i>Branta canadensis</i>		✓	✓	
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		✓		
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>			✓	
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>		✓		
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</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>	✓		✓	✓
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>		✓		
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓	✓	
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		✓		
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Gull	<i>Larus canis</i>			3	
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			✓	

I=Introduced		June 2023			
Common name	Scientific name	12	13	14	15
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓		
Eurasian Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>		H		
Cattle Egret	<i>Bulbulculus ibis</i>		1		
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		✓	✓	✓
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		✓		
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>			✓	
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	✓			
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		✓	✓	
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>			✓	✓
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓	✓
Western Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>		1	1	1
Little Owl - I	<i>Athene noctua</i>			1	
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>		✓	✓	H
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>		3		
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		H	✓	✓
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>			✓	✓
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>			✓	
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>			✓	
Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</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>		✓	✓	✓
Wood Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus sibilatrix</i>			✓	
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓	✓	✓
Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>			✓	
Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>		✓	✓	
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		✓	✓	✓
Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>		✓		
Common Whitethroat	<i>Curruca communis</i>		✓		✓
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>			✓	
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓	✓

I=Introduced		June 2023			
Common name	Scientific name	12	13	14	15
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓	✓	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula parva</i>			H	
Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>			1F	
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>			✓	
Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</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>		✓	✓	
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	
Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>			✓	
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>			✓	

## Mammals

		June 2023			
Common name	Scientific name	12	13	14	15
European Rabbit - I	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>			1	
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>			30	
Common Pipistrelle	<i>Pipistrellus pipistrellus</i>		2	1	
Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolensis</i>			2	

## Other vertebrates

		June 2023			
Common name	Scientific name	12	13	14	15
Barred Grass Snake	<i>Natrix helvetica</i>		1		
Iberian Water Frog	<i>Pelophylax perezi</i>		H		
<b>Fish</b>					
European Eel	<i>Anguilla anguilla</i>				1
Brown Trout	<i>Salmo trutta</i>				1



## Invertebrates

Common name	Scientific name	June 2023			
		12	13	14	15
<b>Butterflies</b>	<b>Papilionaceae</b>				
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>			✓	✓
Green-veined White	<i>Pieris napi</i>				✓
Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>				✓
Green Hairstreak	<i>Callophrys rubi</i>			4	
Holly Blue	<i>Celastrina argiolus</i>			✓	
Large Blue	<i>Phengaris arion</i>		3		
Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>		2		
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>			✓	✓
Small Heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>		✓	✓	✓
Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>		✓	✓	✓
Marbled White	<i>Melanargia galathea</i>		✓		
Comma	<i>Polygonia c-album</i>				✓
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</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>				✓
Small Skipper	<i>Thymelicus sylvestris</i>	✓		✓	
Essex Skipper	<i>Thymelicus lineola</i>			✓	
<b>Moths</b>	<b>Noctuidae</b>				
Mint Moth	<i>Pyrausta aurata</i>		✓	✓	
Large Fruit-tree Tortrix	<i>Archips podana</i>				✓
Common Swift	<i>Korscheltellus lupulina</i>		✓	✓	
Ghost Moth	<i>Hepialus humuli</i>			✓	
Oak Hook-tip	<i>Watsonia binaria</i>			✓	
Scalloped Hook-tip	<i>Falcaria lacertinaria</i>				✓
Riband Wave	<i>Idaea aversata</i>			✓	
Brimstone Moth	<i>Opisthograptis luteola</i>			✓	
Great Oak Beauty	<i>Hypomecis roboraria</i>		✓		
Light Emerald	<i>Campaea margaritaria</i>		✓		
Pale Prominent	<i>Pterostoma palpina</i>		✓		
Buff Tip	<i>Phalera bucephala</i>			✓	
White Ermine	<i>Spilosoma lubricipeda</i>		✓	✓	
Buff Ermine	<i>Spilosoma lutea</i>		✓	✓	
Poplar Hawk-moth	<i>Laothoe populi</i>		✓		
Privet Hawk-moth	<i>Sphinx ligustri</i>				✓
Elephant Hawk-moth	<i>Deilephila elpenor</i>		✓		✓
Straw Dot	<i>Rivula sericealis</i>		✓	✓	



Common name	Scientific name	June 2023			
		12	13	14	15
Snout	<i>Hypena proboscidalis</i>		✓	✓	
Cinnabar Moth	<i>Tyria jacobaeae</i>		✓		
Common Footman	<i>Eilema caniola</i>		✓		
Burnished Brass	<i>Diachrysia chrysitis</i>		✓		
Heart and Dart	<i>Agrotis exclamationis</i>		✓	✓	
Treble Lines	<i>Charancya trigrammatica</i>		✓		✓
Angle Shades	<i>Phlogophora meticulosa</i>				✓
Turnip Moth	<i>Agrotis segetum</i>		✓		
Large Yellow Underwing	<i>Noctua fimbriata</i>				✓
<b>Dragons and Damsels</b>					
Banded Demoiselle	<i>Calopteryx splendens</i>		✓		✓
Beautiful Demoiselle	<i>Calopteryx virgo</i>		✓	✓	✓
Common Bluetail	<i>Ischnura elegans</i>		✓		✓
Azure bluet	<i>Coenagrion puella</i>		✓		✓
Blue Emperor	<i>Anax imperator</i>		✓	✓	✓
Four-spotted Chaser	<i>Libellula quadrimaculata</i>		✓		✓
Broad-bodied Chaser	<i>Libellula depressa</i>		✓		
Black-tailed Skimmer	<i>Orthetrum cancellatum</i>		✓		

Plants noted – Common Spotted Orchid, Pyramidal Orchid