

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

20 - 22 January 2017

Tour report & images compiled by Dave Nevitt



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Summary

This tour around the Somerset Levels in the midst of winter was a fantastic opportunity to witness two major British wildlife spectacles; the largest roost of Starlings in the country and the massive concentration of wintering waterfowl and other wetland species. With a recent cold snap following mild conditions, most of the wildfowl were presented in excellent numbers, congregating in unfrozen pools and feeding within open expanses of grassland. Fortunately, the recent dry weather ensured no extensive flooding had restricted access across the key sites. It was a joy to see excellent views of all the characteristic bird species that bring visiting bird enthusiasts to the area. The Starling roost display on the first evening gave us a taste of the sounds and sights of this unique spectacle, and on the second evening we were treated to huge flocks clouding out the sky as they made their way to and their night-time roosts. Quite simply a wonderful winter wildlife spectacle!

Day 1

Friday 20th January

After settling in to their rooms at the Swan Hotel, complete with views over Wells Cathedral and the quintessential surroundings of England's smallest city, the group assembled within the hotel bar and were greeted by Dave and Simon. After a short introduction session, individuals announced which avian stars across the Somerset Levels they most wished to see, and a short duck-themed quiz indicated levels of experience to help out the leaders in the coming days. Being an RSPB group, with birding clearly a key hobby, the level of experience across the group was high, allowing for a good level of knowledge for the approaching birding trips.

Following introductions, the group adjourned to the hotel restaurant for a delicious evening meal, joined with more getting to know each other. From here the group walked over to the Exmoor room where Dave gave a presentation on the Somerset Levels, including its geological history, modern-day formation and conservation management and, of course, the rich variety of species which can be seen throughout the year. With excitement and anticipation the group left for an early night, ready for the day ahead.

Day 2

Saturday 21st January

After an early breakfast, the group boarded the two minibuses and set off for the first destination on the itinerary. It was the first visit to the area for a number of the group members; as we drove through the countryside, we were treated to a glorious winter sun-drenched morning with frost-encrusted fields and hedgerows surrounding Glastonbury and the Tor. Whilst driving through the southern stretches of the Avalon marshes along the Polden ridge, a scattering of early foragers were seen among the surrounding trees, fields and hedgerows, such as groups of Starlings, a busy flock of Goldfinch and a Buzzard classically perched on top of a roadside tree.

Arriving in the car park at the RSPB Greylake reserve, the group equipped themselves and began with a quick scan of the frost-clad view across King's Sedgemoor, where small numbers of Lapwing and Golden Plover were seen feeding in the distance and a Fieldfare sat perched within a close Sallow tree.

Barely walking into the reserve, we soon spotted our first 'wish-list' bird as a Water Rail gingerly walked along the edge of a frozen rhyne looking for a meal. At first shy, the bird scatted back into the bank vegetation, before slowly revealing itself, its bright red bill and slate-grey plumage standing out in the morning sunshine. To our delight, on re-positioning ourselves, we then saw two more Water Rail within the same stretch of frozen water, ensuring that everyone in the group had a good view of this iconic, but normally secretive, wetland bird.

Strolling along the main access path, which led through icy reeds, we heard and saw several Reed Buntings and heard the characteristic and punchy call of a Cetti's Warbler. Further along, another frozen rhyne showed several Moorhen walking out across, whilst much to the delight of the group, a couple more Water Rail darted across the icy water surface.

On becoming settled in the main hide, the group were presented with a mass of ducks swimming in the unfrozen channels before us, with Wigeon and Teal making up the bulk, along with small numbers of Shoveler and Pintail. Just as we were getting comfortable, the shout of "Peregrine" went up and everyone scrambled over to the right side of the hide to scan up to the distant pylon where a male Peregrine was feasting on a small prey item held tightly between his talons.

No sooner had we seen this than we saw a Marsh Harrier, perched conveniently on a fence post located at the back of the duck-filled pools. Another keen-eyed observer soon pointed out the first Snipe of the day among a clump of low reeds, whilst a wave of excitement rippled through the hide as a Bearded Tit made its way through the reeds and rushes within metres of us.

Strolling back along the track, more Water Rail displayed their winter 'ice-skating' tricks as they darted over the water between thickly vegetated banks. In the far distance a large flock of Lapwing were seen up in the air, which eventually came down to feed in a distant field, joined by several Dunlin. Off to a fantastic start, with several target birds spotted, the bar was set high so we left Greylake to make our way to our second destination.

En route, a quick loo stop at the rural town of Langport provided a chance to add a few urban birds to the day's list, including a Collared Dove travelling over the car park filled with Saturday shoppers, and Black-headed Gulls in the surrounding fields.

On our arrival at RSPB Swell Wood we parked within the tree-clad car park and, within what seemed like seconds, we spotted one of the highlights of the woodland as a Marsh Tit dashed into the open to alight on one of the feeders. No sooner had it arrived than it darted off into the thicker vegetation to eat its prize. As we waited for another Marsh Tit to appear we were certainly kept entertained, as the feeders and nuts and seed spread across the ground were frequently visited by Nuthatch, Coal Tit, Long-tailed Tit, Blue and Great Tit.

After tearing ourselves away from the high-octane feeding frenzy around the car park, the group strolled along to the view point overlooking West Sedgemoor. En route the high-pitched call of a Treecreeper gave away its presence, and we focused in to see the bird carrying out its characteristic feeding behaviour of climbing up and along branches in search of small invertebrates within the cracks and crevices of the bark.

Apart from a distant flock of grazing Mute Swan, and a Buzzard gliding past, there wasn't a great deal to spot so we continued on along the woodland trail and came across a pair of Goldcrest foraging around a mature oak

covered with ivy. Among the canopy all around the woodland the sights and sounds of Great Spotted Woodpecker, Stock Dove, Jackdaw and Greenfinch were added to the daily totals.

After a fruitful morning in the chilly conditions of a Somerset winter's day, lunch beckoned, so the group boarded the minibuses and made our way to the King Alfred Pub in Burrowbridge. Driving down the hill and over the bridge at Oath, the vans pulled up to have a scan around the surrounding fields and, to our delight, a flock of 52 Cranes were seen foraging within a field on the edge of Aller Moor. Among the group was a juvenile bird clearly standing out within its light brown plumage. Curious at what had caught our attention, several passing cars also pulled up to enjoy the spectacle, including a family with a keen young boy who was thrilled to take a look through the group's spotting scopes, to get a closer view of these large and majestic birds.

Pulling ourselves away from the Cranes, we drove up to the pub and were greeted by a warming open fire and a delicious lunch. From here we back-tracked on ourselves and headed over to RSPB West Sedgemoor where the group was booked into a viewing session within the converted barn hide (which also appeared on Springwatch a few days later). West Sedgemoor consists of a huge open expanse of wetland comprised of marsh, wet grassland and open water, renowned for attracting large numbers of wildfowl, and the views before us didn't disappoint. Flocks of Wigeon, thousands strong, could be seen feeding before us mixed with Teal, Pintail and Shoveler. With so much potential protein here, it didn't take long to see our first predator in the form of a perched Peregrine, later followed by another bird dashing into the fray and making off with its catch.

Travelling along a vegetated rhine, we saw the neon flash of a Kingfisher darting along before it flew up onto a fence line. A Stonechat was also seen between the fields, whilst Meadow Pipits passed overhead, and obliging Pied Wagtails and a friendly Robin searched for food within the barn around us.

With time ticking by, we left to allow time to reach Ham Wall, the location for the UK's largest Starling roosts. On our arrival it seemed that many weekend visitors also had the same idea, with the car park jam-packed, forcing us to park on the roadside along with dozens of other vehicles.

As we made our way across the car park, we soon began to see large flocks of Starlings heading towards their preferred roosting location. Whilst weaving through the crowds along the old railway track, we were surprised to see that flocks of Starlings had already begun descending down onto the reeds around the western edge of the Waltons, the reed stems beginning to appear black with their presence. Looking elsewhere we also noticed a few Snipe feeding on the reedy island edges.

Surprised by the earlier-than-expected timing of the spectacle, we made our way on to the main roosting spot, known as the Loxtons, as more and more birds piled into the reed with splinter groups providing brief murmuration displays as they approached. Coming to an agreed viewing point, close to the View Point 2, we could see the sky across the horizon filled with black specks, and flock after flock headed towards us, the cacophony of calls of hundreds of thousands of birds filling the air all around. As more birds headed in, it appeared that the birds that had settled earlier along the Waltons stretch had become restless and, like an avian conveyor belt, made their way in our direction, flying low over to the area of reedbed before us. With darkness falling all around, and the incessant sound of Starling chatter beginning to drop as they settled into their roost, we retraced our steps back to the minibuses and headed back to the hotel.

After the opportunity to rest before dinner, we reconvened in the restaurant to enjoy another meal together, followed by a short checklist and recap session in the Exmoor room. Here the group were invited to see the Starlings leave their roost the following morning, and after what was hugely successful day, we all retired to our rooms.

Day 3

Sunday 22nd January

Early the next morning, those who wished to rise before dawn gathered and made our way back to RSPB Ham Wall - this time minus the crowds - on to the same spot we had left the Starlings the night before. In the chill of the dark winter's morning, as light began to slowly emerge from the direction of Glastonbury Tor, the circadian clock of the Starling murmured as the sound of chittering emanated from within the reeds before us. Before we knew it the sound of hundreds of thousands of birds singing, in what has to be one of the noisiest dawn choruses, was heard from all around. As the light slowly grew, a few splinter groups broke free from their night-time ranks and flew up and over our heads. Then, without warning, as if someone or something had waved a green flag, huge congregations of birds took to the air and flew low over the reeds before wafting up in enormous flocks. Over the next 20 minutes or so, more and more birds rose in dense clouds and flew off, producing a bespeckled morning sky.

After the majority of birds had lifted and the reeds were clear once again, we watched for other early morning risers along various view points, and were treated to several Great Egrets passing through, along with Marsh Harriers, Lesser Redpoll and scores of Tufted Duck and Pochard.

We shortly returned back to the hotel for another fine cooked breakfast and joined the rest of the group who had decided to opt for a weekend lie-in. Deservedly re-fuelled, the group once again left the hotel and headed back to the Avalon Marshes; however, this time our destination was Shapwick Heath National Nature Reserve. Situated within the heart of the Avalon Marshes, this reserve has become a beacon for birdwatchers from far and wide, and this morning's trip was not to disappoint. Having an inkling that a special bird might still be present along the discovery trail, the group made their way along the broadwalk path into a patch of carr woodland. Up in the canopy several Blue Tit, Great Tit and Goldcrest were seen and, much to our delight, a Firecrest turned up almost on cue. The entire group managed to see this stunning but tiny bird, before strolling on up towards the railway path into the centre of the reserve.

Walking past the brand new Tower Hide, we were treated to the views of another Kingfisher and a Marsh Harrier. Moving on, we headed towards Noah's Lake where, due to the small nature of the hide, the group split themselves between the hide and open view point below. Winter is one of the best times to visit the lake as large groups of wildfowl including Wigeon, Teal, Shoveler, Pintail and Gadwall can be seen, as was the case today, along with Goldeneye. The highlight was, however, was having long-awaited views of a Bittern flying low across the lake in full view. Strolling back to the car park, small flocks of Goldfinch and Siskin were seen feeding high up within the canopy of Alders standing on the edge of the a reedbed.

With time once again flowing by, lunchtime approached and we made our way to the Crown Inn at Catcott where the group enjoyed a warming and wholesome lunch. Before popping back into the minibuses, a Sparrowhawk darted by over the surrounding trees, adding some raptor diversity to the trip. From here it was a

short drive up to the Somerset Wildlife Trust's Catcott Lows reserve; en route a Kestrel and Bullfinch were spotted.

Arriving at a convenient car park placed next to the main hide, the group were treated to views out over the open water and wet grassland. Wildfowl were once again the dominant feature, along with distant Lapwing and secretive Snipe. The group were also treated to good views of handsome Pintail and busy Stonechats.

Wanting to get into place with plenty of time to spare, we made our way back to Ham Wall and settled into the Tower View hide. The temperatures overnight ensured that the edges of the open water were still frozen, allowing us wonderful views of a Water Rail walking out in the open for short brave spells, before darting back into the reeds. The ice and close reeds even provided fantastic views of Cetti's Warbler that worked its way through the fallen vegetation, and a Snipe that stood feeding within metres of the hide, oblivious to our presence.

With the light beginning to fade, a fused red hue appeared in the distant sky, out towards the western horizon, and almost one by one the Starlings made their way back to their familiar night-time spot. This time the entire event, it seemed, was observed: from a huge flock flying in and swirling and spiralling in front of us, to birds filling up the reeds and small isolated trees in front of us, their bodies turning the vegetation black with their sheer abundance. Like a rocking boat, the group dashed between the viewing windows, as it was difficult to know which side of the hide was best to look from, as huge flocks appeared from the east towards the Tor, the reeds also slowly but surely filling up with birds. At one point, for as far as the eye could see, the sky all around was filled with a cosmos of Starlings. A sense to the eye was also an impression to the ears as the sounds of birds, literally a million strong, engulfed us. All in all, it was a fantastic show-stopper, representing the Somerset Levels at their best.

With night upon us, we ventured back to Wells and said our goodbyes, and parted after what we hope was a very enjoyable and fulfilling weekend.

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Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	January	
			21	22
1	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		✓
2	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		✓
3	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓
4	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓
5	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	6	✓
6	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	2	✓
7	Eurasian Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>		✓
8	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
11	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓
12	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	
14	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	✓	✓
15	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	✓	✓
16	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓
17	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
18	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	✓	✓
19	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	✓	✓
20	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	✓	✓
21	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
22	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>		✓
24	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	2	✓
25	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		✓
26	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
27	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓
28	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	3	✓
31	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	52	
32	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	14	✓
33	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
34	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
35	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	✓	✓
36	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
38	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	25	✓
39	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		✓
41	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	✓	
46	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
47	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	
48	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
49	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia domestica</i>	✓	✓
50	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	✓	✓
51	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
52	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	
56	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	✓	✓
57	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	
59	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓	
60	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓
61	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓
63	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
64	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	January	
			21	22
65	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓
67	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓
68	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
69	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	✓
70	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓
71	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
73	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	✓	✓
74	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓
75	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	✓
76	Bearded Tit (Reedling)	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>	✓	
77	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
78	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	2	
79	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓	✓
80	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
81	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
82	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	✓	
83	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	✓	
84	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	✓	
85	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
86	Western Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓
87	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
88	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
89	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	
90	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
91	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
92	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
93	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓	✓
94	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
95	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		✓
97	Lesser Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea cabaret</i>		✓
98	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	✓	✓
99	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓