

# The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

24 - 26 January 2013



Bittern in flight by Angus McGready



Water Rail by Angus McGready



Shoveler at rest by Ron Robinson



A blur of Starlings by Ed Drewitt

Report compiled by Ed Drewitt

Images by Angus McGready, Ron Robinson and Ed Drewitt



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## Introduction

After a week of heavy snow and cold temperatures, this trip was a chance to get out and see what wildlife was about. Wildfowl were present in large numbers, though spread over larger area – many more fields were flooded due to the winter rain than normal. Birds that had been struggling to find food were making the most of the now snow-free fields. Hundreds of Redwings, and Fieldfares were searching for invertebrates in fields between Greylake and West Sedgemoor, and many also contained Lapwings. Snipe were abundant at Greylake along with two Bramblings. 18 of the 52 reintroduced cranes were close to their feeding station – a mix of first-year birds and older birds from the 2010 and 2011 releases. Despite the cloud and Baltic wind, hundreds of thousands of Starlings came in to roost, mostly flying in low over the reedbeds. On our second day out we had brilliant views of Water Rails and Bittern, whilst amongst the waterfowl there was a few male Goldeneye, and two Black-necked Grebes.

## Day 1

Thursday 24th January

With excitement and anticipation, our group met for a pre-dinner gathering in the warmth of the lounge at the Swan Hotel to mingle and learn of the plan for the next few days. Just outside, the glow of Wells Cathedral provided a beautiful setting. After a delicious dinner the group enjoyed an illustrated talk by Ed introducing the Somerset Levels, a little about its history, and what we expected to see over the next two days. We retired around 9pm, ready for a full day ahead.

## Day 2

Friday 25th January

We drove to the RSPB's Greylake reserve for our first stop and from the car park some small birds flew away, one sporting a white rump. As we started our walk, the bird's identification was confirmed – it was a Brambling, and there were two in fact perched on a fence. They flew back to the ground, where they were feeding with Chaffinches, and a few Reed Buntings on the seeds left behind by the dropping water levels. In a field beyond, 20 – 30 Snipe were flying up and dropping down in succession, while small flocks sometimes flew overhead. From the hide, hundreds of Teal were lifting up, flying round, before settling down in to the sedges, almost disappearing. A nearby Buzzard, being mobbed by crows, flew over the flood reserve, no doubt making the Teal nervous. Mallards and a small group of Wigeon were also on the pool in front of us.

Back at the car park, Blue Tits, Great Tits, Chaffinches, a Robin, a few Reed Buntings, and a male Brambling were coming down to feed. Nearby, the Snipe were still making appearances – no doubt keeping an eye on a Kestrel perched above their feeding area.

As we passed Burrowbridge and headed to our next destination, we stopped to watch Redwings and Fieldfares feeding on the ground. Meanwhile, a Mistle Thrush was living up to its name and hovering to pinch the sticky berries of Mistletoe. Mistletoe was a common plant and we saw huge bunches growing on trees throughout the day. Two Little Egrets and a few Grey Herons were feeding on the River Parrett, while hundreds of ducks were sitting on the floodwater some distance away.

We drove down to Dewlands Farm, the HQ for the RSPB's staff on the Levels and set out across the fields to the drove – despite some flooding, we were just about able to make it as far as the bird hide fixed into a barn with the help of our wellies. There was plenty to see, and from the hide we were able to see hundreds of Teal, Wigeon and Mallard, smaller numbers of Pintail. Small numbers of Canada Geese were also out on the water along with some Mute Swans. In the barn, there were obvious signs a Barn Owl had been roosting in its box – lots of fresh white droppings and a few pellets. The adjacent fields were full of hundreds of hungry Redwings and Fieldfares, plus tens of Blackbirds. On our walk to the barn, three Bullfinches were flitting between brambles and willows but never allowed us to get very close.

Before lunch we drove between West Sedgemoor and Burrowbridge to spot cranes. On our way we slowly past flooded fields where Lapwings fed by the water's edge, a few Pied Wagtails were dipping their toes, and a Raven flew past. A little further along a flock of mainly juvenile Herring Gulls was feeding in the shallows. Black-headed Gulls were common while we only saw one Lesser Black-backed Gull. Moving along the road, we stopped to admire a male Stonechat – probably a bird pushed down from higher ground by the snow. A mile down the road we also spotted a female Stonechat.

Looking out across Aller Moor, by the River Parrett, we quickly found 18 Common Cranes. After weeks of feeding on invertebrates and plant matter (often in stubble fields), they had returned to feed on food put out for them by the RSPB. Most were first-winter birds with brownish heads and necks, while a few were older birds – lighter grey, with red crowns and black chests. We could hear some calling when we arrived. Above them a Raven called from a tree while a few fields back two or three Roe Deer were feeding. An adult Grey Heron was feeding in a ditch closer to us, while a field adjacent to the river was busy with lots of Redwings, Fieldfares, and Black-headed Gulls. With wintry showers (snow) upon us, we travelled a few miles down the road to the King Alfred pub at Burrowbridge for a fine lunch of soup, Somerset Smoky, a local smoked fish dish in a cheesy sauce, or delicious sandwiches made with freshly cooked bread.

We were soon off again and made our way to the Somerset Wildlife Trust's Westhay Moor – as we past Shapwick Heath, a Little Egret, Grey Heron and a Great Egret took off from the edge of the canal. A Water Rail was and heard by a few walking over a clump of brambles. The pools were largely frozen with a thin layer of ice. However, three male and two female Gadwalls were sitting on some ice-free water close to trees along with a few Coots. We spent half an hour in the hide, allowing the wildlife to reveal itself. A male and female Marsh Harrier were quartering the reeds, often spooking hundreds of Teal and Mallard into circling over the reserve before settling out of views. A probable Water Rail was seen scuttling quickly across a frozen water channel.

A few Cormorants glided low overhead, and two Great Egrets drifted over. Close by a pair of Mute Swans were quietly feeding. Over the next half an hour, we watched their young from last year fly over from the far pool and crash land in to the ice! They spent some time preening and looking around, before relaxing and feeding with their parents.

At just after 3pm we headed off to the Avalon Marshes Centre for a comfort stop and a hot cuppa, before arriving at the RSPB's Ham Wall reserve around 3.30pm. While we waited for the Starlings we looked at the various wildfowl including a few Tufted Ducks and Pochards, at least 60 Shoveler, Gadwall, Mallards, Wigeon, a Great Egret, and two Little Grebes. At 4.04pm, the first large group of Starlings arrived. Over the next half an hour, small groups containing around 100 birds, and huge groups containing 10,000 individuals flew over the reserve. The flocks were arriving in long ribbons extending across the reedbeds from all directions. The flocks looked like they may come to rest very close to the first observation platform, but a Marsh Harrier flying nearby made them nervous, and the million-strong flock settled at the far end of the reserve closer to Glastonbury.

Another Great Egret glided overhead with bowed wings, while a small flock of Little Egrets flew over to roost. Perhaps due to the cold winds and the dark skies, the Starlings were mainly flying in very low over the reeds. We saw some lovely 'shadows' when flocks moved across the sky in an evolving, dynamic shape as the Starlings kept changing position with the flock. Once the flocks had stopped coming we headed back to the vehicles to warm up. Many Water Rails were heard from the reeds, sounding like a squealing pig, while a Goldcrest called nearby.

With a little time to relax and shower, we met for a lovely 3-course meal at 7pm. After, the group reflected on the tour's delights by running through the checklist. This was followed by an illustrated talk by Ed Drewitt about his work on urban Peregrines.

## Day 3

**Saturday 26th January**

After heavy overnight rain, the morning was clear and bright. We set off to visit Natural England's Shapwick Heath reserve, which is adjacent to the RSPB's Ham Reserve we visited yesterday. The reserves all join together to form an important reed bed corridor for wildlife.

The Alder trees close to the car park were busy with a few Goldfinches, and small numbers of Redpolls and Siskins. A Treecreeper was calling from the trees too. Coots and Tufted Ducks were the main birds on the pools as we walked along the old railway track. The odd Cetti's Warbler gave a burst of song, and a Marsh Harrier flew high over the reserve. There was a regular sound of Water Rails 'sharming'. At the first hide, Noah's Hide, we looked out across a constantly flooded part of the reserve – there were hundreds of ducks, mainly Wigeon and Gadwall. However, as we spent the next half an hour scanning the waterfowl, we also found Mallards, a few Pochards, Tufted Ducks, 30+ Greylag Geese, a few Canada Geese and various Mute Swans. Cormorants were perched on old tree stumps and a few Great Crested Grebes were swimming amongst the ducks. Marian spotted a stunning male Goldeneye right at the back of the lake – it was tricky to find but the whole group managed to see him in the end. With some help from the Somerset Birder, James Packer, who was visiting the hide, we also spotted two Black-necked Grebes – a first for any of our Somerset Levels tours. They were right at the very back of the lake. Meanwhile, a Kingfisher made regular passes across the hide, and a Bearded Tit or two were calling from the reeds.

Our next stop was the Meare Hide, and recent clearance of the reed bed means the birds are easier to see. It wasn't long before we had incredible views of a Water Rail sneaking out to a pool of water formed on the reed stubble. As it gave out a loud 'squeal', a superb Bittern flew across the pool in front of us in gorgeous winter sunshine – its straw-coloured plumage with distinctive markings shone out before it disappeared back into the reeds. A male Marsh Harrier quartered the reserve, and at one point three Sparrowhawks flew over the reed bed, one flying right towards us. They appeared to be displaying, with shallow wing beats and undulating flight. Across the water, half a dozen Snipe were resting up, and an adult and a juvenile Cormorant were drying out their wings. The adult was in its breeding plumage, with white thigh patches, a white shaggy crest, a bright green eye and shiny, iridescent wing feathers. A Great Crested Grebe was quietly slipping under the water to forage while a few Gadwall, Teal and Mallard made brief appearances.

With some superb views of many of our target species, we made our way back to the car park and visited the Avalon Marshes Centre for a comfort stop and some hot teas.

We then moved on to Somerset Wildlife Trust's Catcott reserve – normally a meadow with grazing cows during the summer, it couldn't be more different today. Flooded and full of hundreds of ducks, it was a real winter wildfowl scene. Shovelers were sleeping amongst the tussocks of grasses poking through the water, while Wigeon and Teal were more awake. The Teal looked like small clockwork toys as they moved around the water. In the distance some swans were almost hidden. As they raised their heads, two were Mute Swans, but one, with a longer, bendy neck and distinctive yellow beak patches was a Whooper Swan. A distant Buzzard was mobbed by Crow and a Grey Heron, and two Little Egrets flew past.

Lunch beckoned, so we drove a little way up the road to the Crown Inn, on the edge of Catcott Village itself, for some warming jacket potatoes or Ploughmans. A roaring wood fire also helped take away the chill.

Fed, and watered, we ventured down to another part of Shapwick Heath – a more wooded area. It was relatively quiet apart from a few Blue Tits and Great Tits. We looked for Woodcock which had been seen but without any luck.

We moved on down the road to a bridge at Shapwick – a Kingfisher flew towards us, under the bridge, and perched on some low-lying branches close to the bank, giving excellent views. A nearby Alder tree was busy with Siskins and Redpolls which later flew past and off. A Goldcrest was also calling from the nearby trees.

Our final destination was exploring the pools and reeds around Sharpham, an area beyond the far end of the Ham Wall reserve. This area contains private land where peat is still extracted commercially. Some Whooper Swans had been spotted in the past few days, but not today. However, there were lots of Tufted Ducks, Coots, a few Moorhens and Mute Swans. Small flocks of Starlings were also present, feeding up before the daylight ran out. A male Stonechat gave obliging views on some dead plant stems.

As we headed back towards Glastonbury, we stopped by a field full of hundreds of thrushes and Starlings. There were at least 500 Fieldfares, searching for invertebrates, while a few thousand Starlings were feeding or washing in the nearby ditch or small puddles. A pair of Stonechats was flying out to catch insects from a big bush or fencing, and sometimes flying the width of the field.

As we watched the mass of birds, small groups of Starlings kept coming in to join them – it was fascinating to see how the large flocks of Starlings build up prior to coming in to roost. As the birds all took off, no doubt to head closer to Ham Wall, we headed back to Wells and said our farewells around 4pm. Some of the group stayed an extra night, and Brian and Rita managed to spot a few Waxwings in the nearby Lidl car park!

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Group birding by Ron Robinson

## Species List

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

	Common name	Scientific name	January	
			25	26
1	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	2	✓
2	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>		2
3	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		3
4	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	12+
5	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	
6	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	5	
7	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	10+	2+
8	Great Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>		1
9	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
10	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		1
11	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		30+
12	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓
13	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	✓	✓
14	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	✓	✓
15	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓
16	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
17	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	✓	✓
18	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	✓	✓
19	Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	3	2
20	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
21	Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>		2
22	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1	3
23	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	3	1
24	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
25	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	3+	
26	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	1	4
27	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	18	
28	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	2	1
29	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
30	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
31	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	50+	6+
32	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
33	Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	20	
34	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
35	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	1	1
36	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
37	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
38	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓
39	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
40	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		1

	Common name	Scientific name	January	
			25	26
41	Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		2
42	Eurasian Sky Lark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		2+
43	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	1	1
44	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		1
45	Northern Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
46	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
47	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	1	
48	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		2
49	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	1000+	100+
50	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	1000+	500+
51	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
52	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
53	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	2	3
54	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	h	h
55	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	h	h
56	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
57	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
58	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
59	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		1
60	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>		h
61	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	1	
62	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
63	Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓
64	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
65	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
66	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2	
67	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	Million plus	3000+
68	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
69	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
70	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>	2	
71	Lesser Redpoll	<i>Carduelis cabaret</i>		12
72	Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>		12
73	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
74	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	4	
75	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	3+	1

### Mammals

1	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	2+	
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