

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

2 - 4 February 2010



Starling Roost



Watching Starlings



Greylake



Shoveler at Greylake



Widgeon at Catcott



Lapwings at Catcott

Report and photos compiled by Ed Drewitt and Charles Martin



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Introduction

This tour around the Somerset Levels in early February was a brilliant opportunity to see the diversity and abundance of waterfowl using wetlands during the winter. Touring across the many reserves large numbers of Shovelers, Wigeon, Teal, Gadwall, Mallards and Lapwings were a highlight. Marsh Harriers graced the reedbeds while Cetti's Warblers sang explosively and Water Rails squealed from the reeds. Otter spraints and diet remains were easily found. The group weren't disappointed by the million of starlings which are now famous for their huge gatherings as they come to roost in the reedbeds. The group gasped as the whole flock moved overhead darkening the sky and only the 'swoosh' of their wings to be heard.

Day 1

Tuesday 2nd February

Despite the late afternoon rainfall, spirits were high as the group gathered pre-dinner for everyone to mingle and learn of the plan for the next few days. This was all in the cosy setting of the Swan Hotel with Wells Cathedral glowing in floodlight opposite, easily viewable from the bar. After a delicious dinner the group enjoyed an illustrated talk by Charles Martin, exploring the human and natural history of the Somerset Levels over the past 10,000 years and an insight into some of the wildlife we hoped to see over the next two days.

Day 2

Wednesday 3rd February

After a wholesome breakfast to keep us stoked up for the day, we set off at 8.30am to Swell Wood, part of the RSPB's West Sedgemoor Reserve to look for woodland birds. Despite being early February, a few Grey Herons were calling harshly, no doubt investigating their nests at the heronry in the wood – one of the largest in the West Country.

Light rain didn't put a dampener on seeing plenty of Blue Tits, Coal Tits, Great Tits and a Nuthatch on the feeders in the car park. Robins and Great Tits were also singing while two Great Spotted Woodpeckers jostled in the trees.

We then drove down to Dewlands Farm, the RSPB HQ for West Sedgemoor and our base for setting off through the fields to a bird hide in a semi-converted barn. The rain eased and visibility became clearer revealing a plethora of waterfowl across the unique landscape of the levels – in particular good numbers of Shovelers, Lapwings, Wigeon, Pintail, Gadwall, Teal, Mute Swans and Canada Geese. A few Buzzards resided on some dead trees while the nearby hedgerows saw Blackbirds, Dunnocks, Robins and tits busying themselves with feeding and some early singing. The unmistakable, explosive 'pitch-oo' call of Marsh Tit was detected as it moved quickly through a band of trees. On our walk back to the vehicles a pair of Ravens flew overhead; Rooks tended to their nests and much needed sign of spring, snowdrops, flowered down the lane.

After a productive if damp morning, we drove to a pub in Curry Rivel for well-earned hot soups. The cloud began to lighten and by the time we were ready to move on the weather was brighter. Collared Doves and Starlings were very obvious on the television aerials of surrounding buildings.

Our next stop was RSPB Greylake – throughout the journey many of the trees were cloaked in berry-laden Mistletoe while the fields were erupting in Mole hills – both common features throughout the tour. At Greylake the group had an opportunity to see many of the duck species even closer. Once fields full of potatoes, these wetlands now full of shallow pools and *Phragmites* reeds played host to a variety of colourful and entertaining birds. The reeds hide away gems such as Water Rails and Cetti's Warblers, but their distinctive calls meant they didn't go completely undetected on our visit. Meanwhile, from the hide, a few Little Egrets shone out from the marshes like pure white beacons. A closer inspection of the pools and mounds revealed many Teal, Wigeon, Mallard, Shovelers and the odd Pintail. The target bird was Snipe and we were rewarded with stunning views of at least six different individuals showing off their cryptic plumage, dainty size and ability to preen and feed with such a long beak. Meanwhile, across the reserve, large flocks containing hundreds of Lapwings filled the air with their flickering wingbeats. On our walk back to the car park we heard more Water Rails and Cetti's Warblers, while a Reed Bunting and an accommodating Kestrel was a rewarding finish to visiting this splendid reserve.

We moved on for a comfort stop at the Peat Moors Visitors Centre – the brief break enabled us to see our first Redwings and Fieldfares of the day, accompanied by some Chaffinches and a Greenfinch in the trees behind the main buildings. Already on our journey through the local villages, flocks of Starlings were gathering momentum and becoming very obvious in large numbers on telephone wires and rooftops, prior to their spectacular finale of the day.

The spectacular and popular Starling roost was our next port of call. A quick call to the Starling Hotline revealed their latest roosting position was Shapwick Heath. We parked at Ashcott Corner and ventured along the canal – Long-tailed Tits, Great Tits and Blue Tits were calling and flying in nearby trees while Cetti's Warbler sung their explosive notes from the reeds while remaining unseen. Hidden Teal and Wigeon called out from the reeds whilst in nearby pools, Tufted Ducks, Pochards, Gadwall and Coots were seen. As we positioned ourselves ready for the Starlings, a female Marsh Harrier was spotted in the distance quartering the reeds. Some Little Egrets flew low over the water.

Suddenly we turned our attention to a floating amoeba-shaped cloud hurrying over the Polden Hills – it was a flock of one thousand or more Starlings on their way slightly further west. In hurried excitement, further large cloud-like formations of Starlings made their way over the hills. One flock appeared to our right, appearing out of nowhere and darkening the reeds before headed in the direction of all the others. A member of the group then pointed further back to the horizon – as we focused our binoculars, we were able to see millions of starlings swirling around and rising up like a blackening thunder cloud. The huge formation was some miles away but suddenly, out of the blue, the Starlings changed behaviour and headed right towards us. Within a few minutes over a million Starlings were above us – they were almost silent had it not been for the light pattering sound of their wings forming a ‘whoosh’ as they passed overhead. It took further minutes for the whole flock to pass over and disappear off towards the RSPB’s Ham Wall reserve.

With some light still left in the sky we split into two groups and spent some time in Meare hide and Noah’s Hide looking for otters. While no otters appeared, this was an opportunity to reflect on the sounds of dusk on the Levels – from Noah’s hide Rooks and Crows flew through on their way to roost while the local Cormorants sat leisurely on the dead trees. As the light faded we headed back to the hotel in Wells for a well earned rest before a delicious dinner. After, the group reflected on the day’s delights with a selection of images from the day’s excursion and checked through the wide range of birds seen. This was followed by an illustrated talk by Ed Drewitt about Peregrine Falcons.

Day 3

Thursday 4th February

After another wholesome breakfast the group headed back to Shapwick Heath. A pair of displaying Sparrowhawks just prior to parking up was a good omen for the day and the riches of the reserve slowly revealed themselves. Teal were ‘ringing’ from the reeds and numerous Great Tits sung out across the reserve. An early singing Chaffinch joined in with the other spring songsters including a Goldcrest and a Song Thrush as we set out. In a nearby copse a Treecreeper could be heard while Wigeon whistled and Gadwall coarsely ‘quacked’. Water Rails were noisily ‘squealing’ and various Cetti’s Warblers sung unexpectedly and regularly. Over three hundred Lapwings flew up in the distance, staying close to a stubble field on the edge of Meare. One or two Reed Buntings called nearby while Tufted Ducks and Pochards populated the pools. A flock of twenty to thirty Redpolls appeared with their bouncy flight, moving between various alder trees – a little later they chattered away and gave brief views.

We split into two groups and swapped between Meare Hide and Noah’s Hide. At least three Marsh Harriers, one adult female and two first winter females graced the reedbeds, quartering left to right and back. The adult female perched on a branch, holding her wings out for some minutes. Four Stock Doves flew overhead. The lake from Noah’s Hide was full of Tufted Ducks and Wigeon plus some Shovelers, Mallards, Gadwalls, a Great Crested Grebe and a Goldeneye. Alongside Mute Swans, two Whooper Swans and two Bewick’s Swans rested, while two further Bewick’s Swans took flight from the lake. A Long-tailed Duck was seen by a few members of the group. As the group scanned across the lake, a Great White Egret flew across – like an oversized Little Egret, the bird’s heron like posture and yellow bill was easily identifiable. The bird landed close to the Bewick’s and Whooper Swans. This is a rare bird in the UK with a few individuals increasingly making it across the Channel from France each year. Meanwhile, Cormorants rested on the trees and a Greylag Goose flew across the water. In some nearby trees, two Goldcrests gave excellent views and were a first sighting ever for many of the group.

Before we headed back to the vehicles we studied some otter spraints – they mainly contained fish bones and bird remains such as feathers and skin. All along the paths we found the food remains of the otters – the opened and broken fresh water mussel shells, plentiful in these waters. Before getting back to the car park the group had excellent views of a Grey Heron flying parallel along the canal.

After a brief comfort stop our next visit was to the Somerset Wildlife Trust's Catcott nature reserve. Here the group had excellent views of hundreds of Wigeon, followed by smaller numbers of Shovelers, Mallards and Pintails.

A variety of homemade hot soups at a nearby pub in Ashcott warmed everyone up ready for our final destination to the RSPB's Ham Wall reserve. Here the group caught up with some 'whinnying' Little Grebes which remained elusive to see. A Marsh Harrier hunted over the reeds and two Cormorants sat on floats, one with its wings outstretched. Pochards, Tufted Ducks, Coots Wigeon, Mallards and a Great Crested Grebe were seen on the water while a few Fieldfares flew overhead. A flock of 20 Goldfinches flew around some Alder trees. On our walk back to the car park, a dramatic sky stood before us with long, stretched out clouds.

We had our final drive back to Wells, still with Glastonbury Tor in view – a landmark which had been almost visible from most sites during our tour and journeys. Back in Wells we said our farewells and parted after a hugely enjoyable and fulfilling few days.

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Bird List

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			3	4
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	Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		✓
7	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
8	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		✓
9	Bewick's Swan	<i>Cygnus columbianus</i>		✓
10	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓
11	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓
12	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	✓	✓
13	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	✓	✓
14	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓
15	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
16	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	✓	✓
17	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	✓	✓
18	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	✓	✓
19	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
20	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>		✓
21	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>		✓
22	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓	✓
23	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		✓
24	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
25	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓
26	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		✓
27	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓
28	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	✓	✓
29	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
30	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
31	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
32	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	✓
33	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
34	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
35	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>		✓
36	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
37	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
38	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	✓
39	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	✓	
40	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓
41	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	✓	
42	Northern Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			3	4
43	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
44	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓
45	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	
46	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	✓
47	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
48	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
49	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	✓
50	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	✓	✓
51	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
52	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	✓	
53	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓	✓
54	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
55	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
56	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	✓	
57	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>		✓
58	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
59	Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓
60	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
61	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
62	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	.
63	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgarised</i>	✓	✓
64	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
65	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
66	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	✓	
67	Lesser Redpoll	<i>Carduelis cabaret</i>	✓	✓
68	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>		✓
69	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
70	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓