

# The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

24 - 26 February 2010

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Starlings going to roost - Hamwell



West Sedgemoor hide



Wigeon



Immature female Peregrine

Report and photos compiled by Ed Drewitt and Charles Martin

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## Introduction

This tour around the Somerset Levels in late 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, Pintail, Teal, Mallards, Golden Plovers and Lapwings were a highlight. All the expected raptors revealed themselves over the reedbeds on the second day 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 flocks came in on a beautiful sunny evening, swirling and twisting to avoid aerial predators.

## Day 1

**Wednesday 24th February**

Despite the rain showers, 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 Ed Drewitt about Peregrine Falcons.

## Day 2

**Thursday 25th 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. Now into late February, the heronry – one of the largest in the West Country- was busy as Grey Herons were calling harshly, standing at their nests and bringing in sticks to replenish their nests after the winter storms. In the car park the feeders were busily attracting plenty of Blue Tits, Coal Tits, Great Tits, a Marsh Tit and a Nuthatch. A Grey Squirrel was also nearby. Robins, Goldfinches and Great Tits were also singing. One member spotted a Treecreeper.

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.

There was 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. Excitement rose as a female Hen Harrier quartered the reserve, with a Carrion Crow in hot pursuit! The harrier later returned giving exceptionally close views and suddenly hovered over the water where a Little Grebe had been previously. We watched as she tried to catch the small waterbird. She flew off empty-footed. As the thousands of Lapwings rose across the sky, a huge flock of slightly smaller, thinner-winged Golden Plovers were also apparent, dropping from a great height. They appeared to have just come in, perhaps migrating up from further south from France or Spain. Later, a crow chased an injured bird thought to be the Little Grebe the Hen Harrier attacked earlier. Various Buzzards of different colour morphs resided on some dead trees and gateposts while the nearby hedgerows saw Blackbirds, Dunnocks, Robins and Tits busying themselves with feeding and some early singing. Rooks tended to their nests and snowdrops flowered down the lane. There were signs of active badgers near the farm and a piece of jaw from a young badger was found.

After a productive morning we drove to a pub in Curry Rivel for well-earned hot soups. Before our next stop, one member of the group had some local gen on the location of a tagged Great Bustard – one that was released into the wild from the Great Bustard reintroduction project on the Salisbury Plain. As we slowly drove along the lanes near Othery we were looking for Mute Swans, which the bustards often like to associate with. We weren't disappointed. There, perhaps 100 metres away, was the young male with his all grey neck and cryptically patterned back. He had a red wing tag with the number 28 on his right wing and was released in 2008. He was smaller than the Mute Swans and happily picking away at the grass stems in the field. The forecasted rain was moving in and we moved on to our next destination.

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 molehills – 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 and Grey Heron. The target bird was Snipe and we were rewarded with views of five or six different individuals. However, the real treat was when a disturbance on the reserve saw up to 30 Snipe flying and wheeling overhead for five minutes or more, their angled wings and long beaks clearly visible. Meanwhile, in the long distance, large flocks containing hundreds of Lapwings filled the air with their flickering wingbeats. On our walk back to the car park we caught a brief sight of a Cetti's Warbler.

We moved on for a comfort stop at the Peat Moors Visitors Centre. 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 on the RSPB's Ham Wall reserve. We parked at Ashcott Corner and ventured along the canal – despite the rain Wigeon, Gadwall, Tufted Ducks, Coots, Pochards and a few Great Crested Grebes were visible on the pools.

As we positioned ourselves ready for the Starlings, a few members of the group heard a booming Bittern. It wasn't until a little later that the booming became more regular and the whole group managed to hear at least two male Bitterns. Suddenly we turned our attention to a floating amoeba-shaped cloud moving across the reedbeds– it was the Starlings. In hurried excitement, further large cloud-like formations of Starlings made their way across the reserve. The rain had meant they were coming in early, and despite being more fragmented than usual they were still forming one huge flock in the distance. From behind us more Starlings streamed in and the distant, growing avian cloud moved in various patterns. The birds disappeared quickly and as the light faded we set off back to the cars a little wet but delighted to have seen the spectacle and heard the Bitterns.

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. Charles Martin gave a wonderful illustrated talk, 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 had seen.

## Day 3

## Friday 26th February

After another wholesome breakfast the group headed to Shapwick Heath. It was a much colder day and strong winds were whipping across the heath. Despite many of the birds bedding down in the reeds, we split into two groups and swapped between Meare Hide and Noah's Hide. From Meare Hide, Buzzards were tackling the winds as they hunted over the reeds. Later, a pair of Sparrowhawks performed in front of us. Small numbers of Gadwall, Mallard, Lapwings and Cormorants were spotted. Four Stock Doves flew overhead. A Water Rail was spotted as it dashed between some patches of reeds. The first group to this hide left early as some reedbed work was taking place – as they wandered along the canal they picked up a few Ravens, Goldcrest and two Mistle Thrushes. A Bittern was seen by both groups as it flew with its distinctive, almost raptor like profile over the reeds.

The lake from Noah's Hide was full of Wigeon plus some Shovelers, Mallards, Gadwalls, Tufted Ducks, a few Great Crested Grebes and three Goldeneyes. The wind was racing across the lake, causing waves and saw most of the birds sticking together in tight rafts. Alongside Mute Swans, two Whooper Swans fed on the edge of some reeds. A Long-tailed Duck was seen by some of the group but it was very distant. Meanwhile, Cormorants rested on the trees and Greylag Geese and Canada Geese joined the Mute Swans. Before we headed back to the vehicles we studied some fresh 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.

After a welcome warm lunch in Ashcott comprising homemade hot soups and wholesome baguettes, our next visit was to the Somerset Wildlife Trust's Catcott nature reserve. As we left Catcott village itself a Merlin dashed across the road while Lapwings and Starlings fed in nearby fields. Despite the cold wind, the February sunshine and earlier rain, which cleared the air enhanced the colours of the countryside and indeed all the birds. Here the group had brilliant views of hundreds of Wigeon, followed by large numbers of Shovelers and Pintails in all their splendour. Smaller numbers of Mallards, Teal, Tufted Duck, Lapwings, Black-headed Gulls, Common Gulls, Lesser Black-backed Gulls and Mute Swans were also seen. Many of the ducks were flying around, enabling everyone to really compare the different species in flight and at close view.

We moved on to the Peat Moors Centre for a comfort stop and a quick tea and cake before spending the afternoon at the RSPB's Ham Wall reserve. The following two hours were like an action film, and once the evening drew in, spectacular events kept following one after the other. As we wandered round the loop walk we came across a tit flock with lovely views of feeding Long-tailed Tits, a few Great Spotted Woodpeckers, Reed Bunting, Chaffinches, Blue Tits and Great Tits. Water Rails 'squealed' throughout while the song of various Cetti's Warblers exploded out from the reeds. Fresh Otter spraint and food remains were evident on the edge of the footpath. As we positioned ourselves by the second platform on the reserve, the low setting sun shone through the *Phragmites* seed heads giving the reserve a soft, golden hue. Some Teal fed on the cleared reeds in front and two Little Egrets arrived and entertained as one caught a fish and was quickly pursued by the other. Little Grebes were 'whinnying' behind us but remained elusive to see. Suddenly a Peregrine, fully lit in the golden light flew straight overhead and was followed a few minutes later by a larger, immature female. Not long after a Marsh Harrier hunted over the reeds alongside a Buzzard allowing for great comparisons. A flock of Lapwings flickered on the horizon and then suddenly, a huge, dark moving form appeared from nowhere. Meanwhile, Pied Wagtails flew past in small groups on their way to roost. The Starlings had arrived!

To begin with the flock was only 300 – 500 birds large but gradually more flocks arrived in even bigger numbers. A few flocks containing thousands of birds flew in from behind us, and the birds congealed together. With an abundance of raptors the Starlings flew silently (apart from the rush of their wings), twisting and turning to form the most amazing patterns and shapes in front of us. A Peregrine was chasing the flock and singled out a bird. As it flew off the rest of the birds relaxed and went back to a much looser flock shape. It wasn't long before the huge numbers – now hundreds of thousands of Starlings - began to trickle into the reeds, moving like quicksand down an invisible funnel into the *Phragmites*. As they bedded down, the Starlings began chatting away to each other. A fox sat on the edge of the reed beds looking straight at us. After five minutes or so it wondered into where the Starlings were roosting – it wasn't long before the whole flock took flight and moved spectacularly a little further along away from the ground predator. A Roe Deer briefly revealed itself before disappearing back into the reeds. As the light faded and the sun set we headed back off to the car park, still hearing plenty of Water Rails and Cetti's Warblers. Just as we were leaving the reed beds, a Bittern flew low across the reeds, its golden streaky plumage just visible before it disappeared. A few of the group heard one booming too. A fitting end to an amazing few days! We had our final drive back to Wells, still with Glastonbury Tor in view – a landmark that had been partly visible from most sites during our tour and journeys. The light was hanging in the sky and a full moon shone down with its grey tones. Back in Wells we said our farewells and parted after a hugely enjoyable and fulfilling few days.

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## Species List

### Birds

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			25	26
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	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
7	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		✓
8	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓
9	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓
10	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	✓	
11	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	✓	✓
12	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	✓	✓
13	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓
14	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
15	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	✓	✓
16	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	✓	✓
17	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	✓	✓
18	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
19	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>		✓
20	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>		✓
21	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		✓
22	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	✓	
23	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	✓	✓
24	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
25	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓
26	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		✓
27	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		✓
28	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓
29	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	✓	✓
30	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
31	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
32	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>	✓	
33	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
34	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	✓	
35	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	✓
36	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	✓	
37	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓
38	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
39	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			25	26
40	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
41	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	✓	✓
42	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
43	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
44	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		✓
45	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	✓	✓
46	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓	
47	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓
48	Northern Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
49	Duncock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
50	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	✓	✓
51	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓
52	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓
53	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
54	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
55	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		✓
56	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	✓	✓
57	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
58	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	✓	
59	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓	✓
60	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
61	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
62	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	✓	
63	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	✓	
64	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
65	Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓
66	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
67	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
68	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓
69	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
70	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
71	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
72	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	✓	✓
73	Lesser Redpoll	<i>Carduelis cabaret</i>		✓
74	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
75	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			25	26

### Mammals

	Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>	✓	
	European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓	
	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	✓	✓
	European Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	✓	✓

### Fresh signs of

	European Badger	<i>Meles meles</i>	✓	✓
	European Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>	✓	✓