

# The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

14 - 16 February 2011

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Somewhere Over The Rainbow Are A Million Starlings!



Watching the cranes



Grey Herons nesting

Report and photos compiled by Dave Nevitt



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Participants	Robert Badcock Sheila Leishman Judith Clark Jane Welch Joyce Parsons Janet Binns Phil Shaw Dinah Williamson Bettie Sloane Robert Wiggins Kathleen Wiggins Tony Green Lesley Green Isobel Willis

## Summary

This tour around the Somerset Levels in late 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 waterfowl and other wetland species that winter in the area. With milder weather than at the end of 2010, most of the wildfowl had returned from their brief sojourn to warmer climes and were present in huge numbers; Wigeon, Teal and Lapwing were especially abundant throughout the trip. The heron family put in an outstanding performance, with three species of Egret and a brief Great Bittern. Raptors delighted the group with at least four Marsh Harriers, several Merlins and three Peregrines. The Starlings, coming towards their reedbed roost, put on a breathtaking display as they were scattered by several hungry birds of prey. The party cheered at the display put on in front of them!

## Day 1

**Monday 14th February**

The group assembled on Valentine's Day, hoping to fall in love with the Somerset Levels birdlife! In the cosy setting of the Swan Hotel with Wells Cathedral glowing in floodlight opposite, expectations were high as Dave and Mike introduced themselves and whetted the group's appetite with the plan for the days ahead. The group members introduced themselves and said what they particularly wanted to see.

We adjourned to sample our first of several delicious Swan Hotel meals before moving to the Exmoor Room where the leaders gave a short talk, giving an introduction to how the Levels were formed and the special species that now call it home. Most had an early night tonight, particularly those who had spent much of the day travelling...

## Day 2

## Tuesday 15th February

After a hearty cooked breakfast we set off across the low damp fields to our first stop at Ashcott Corner. As we headed off for Meare Heath the forecast rain didn't take long to make its presence felt but our spirits were high and the small birds came out to greet us. Before we had gone 100 metres we had already seen a Treecreeper, a flock of Redpolls and a Goldcrest. A little further on and much longed-for by many, the shout went up of "Bittern!" and there was much turning of heads to catch it, but all too quickly it was gone, and only a lucky few of the group members managed to see it.

A high-pitched teetering trill from the reed bed alerted us to the presence of a Little Grebe, and in one of the pools we had lovely views of Shoveler and Gadwall. With so much activity around, the group remained sharp-eyed and soon an adult female Marsh Harrier was being 'scoped by all. Reed Buntings called from the willows and Long-tailed Tits delighted as they skipped from bush to bush.

Approaching the hides, there was a mass twittering coming from a stand of Alders – our first Siskins. Dave tried and tried to find one in the scope, eventually finding a handsome male feeding completely upside-down.

The team split in two, to sample the two bird hides – Noah's Hide produced seven Whooper Swans – a good bird for here, together with Goldeneye and our first Cetti's Warbler. Some were also fortunate to see a Roe Deer run across the path just in front of them. Meare Heath Hide gave a good view over the reeds but precious little else! In the undergrowth, the whole group had superb views of several Goldcrests. One male was getting quite excited and raised his crest in spectacular fashion. For some of the group, this was their first encounter with Britain's smallest bird – what an introduction! Treecreepers also atypically performed very well for everyone.

Returning back to the buses, we took a comfort stop at the Burtle Inn and also ordered our choices for lunch. But before lunch, there was more birding to be done! We drove to the hide at the Somerset Wildlife Trust reserve at Catcott Lows and were treated to extremely close views of a dazzling array of duck species. Through binoculars and telescopes, we were able to study the incredible details of the patterns on these beautiful birds. Wigeon, Pintail, Teal, Gadwall and Shoveler were all studied in depth. The telescopes soon picked out a Black-tailed Godwit, probing energetically into the mud with an action like a sewing-machine. Greylag and Canada Geese were feeding on a nearby bank. A blue-grey bird sat on an Owl nest box a large distance away raised hopes that it may be a male Merlin, but later revealed itself as a Stock Dove – maybe it had taken over ownership of the Owl box.

A well-deserved lunch of hot soup or sandwiches gave us a chance to warm up by the fire, and then we were off back to Ashcott Corner. This time we headed east towards the RSPB Ham Wall reserve. Although Mike had gained permission for us to walk through the normally out-of-bounds reed beds, as the rain was still about we elected for the drier raised gravel path along the old railway line. Here we had splendid views across the huge reed beds in all directions. Despite much searching, sadly the bitterns kept their heads down but there was plenty of other activity. Identified by colour rings as arrivals from France, a superb total of six rare Great White Egrets were also accompanied by their smaller cousins the Little Egrets. Two Cormorants sitting on a gate enabled us to compare the plumages of adult and juvenile birds. And as we left, the tail-end of the group spotted a Cattle Egret flying in to join the Egret party. Also here a bright orange jelly fungus that was growing on an oak tree was later identified as Yellow Brain *Tremella mesenterica*.

We then returned to the minibuses to drive to Shapwick Heath to witness, for many, the highlight of the day – the Starling roost. What a spectacular display we were treated to, as huge flocks of tens of thousands came in from all directions. As they swarmed together, the flocks became hundreds of thousands, and then more. Everyone stood in hushed awe as each flock approached us silently, and then as they got nearer, a distant hum became a whoosh as the noise from their wings hit us. With so much food around, the predators were out in force, with 2 Sparrowhawks, Marsh Harrier, Hen Harrier, four Buzzards and a Merlin all looking for dinner. As the Starlings settled down into the reed beds, it was time for us to return to the hotel.

We completed our bird lists before dinner, and then everyone enjoyed our well-earned feast. Retiring to the Exmoor Room for coffee, Dave whisked us all off to sunnier climes as he showed some slides of a recent Naturetrek tour of Morocco. After a briefing on the plan for tomorrow, we all said goodnight.

## Day 3

## Wednesday 16th February

After another satisfying breakfast, we left Wells to explore the more southerly valleys of the Levels. First stop was Swell Wood, part of the RSPB's West Sedgemoor reserve. This site is notable for its large heronry and since they start nesting early, there was plenty of activity despite it being only February. Indeed, it was easier to see the nests as there were no leaves in the way. There were at least six occupied nests – later in the season this number approaches 90. The whistling calls of Nuthatches drew our attention, and we were even lucky enough to see one through the telescope as it sat there motionless – another new bird for some of the group. A Great Spotted Woodpecker sat in an oak tree for all to see. We walked the loop through the wood, but it was when we returned to the feeders near the car park that the birds really came out. Four species of Tit came down to feed right in front of us, including the scarce Marsh Tit that we had been hearing but not seeing from the loop walk. Everyone was delighted with such fantastic views, which were then topped off by yet another Treecreeper. This was certainly the trip for seeing Treecreepers.

We moved on to Dewlands Farm, the heart of the West Sedgemoor reserve, and walked along the drove in the company of Fieldfares and Redwings to the large barn hide, looking out across the RSPB's huge expanse of managed wetlands. We were met with a carpet of birds as innumerable thousands of Wigeon covered the open water and thousands of Lapwings covered the wet grassy pastures. With so much prey on offer, it was no surprise to find a Peregrine tucking into a recently-caught meal, and a young male Marsh Harrier rested on a straw bale. Each time one of the raptors took flight, the air was filled with swirling masses of panicking ducks and waders. A distant flock of many hundreds of waders flashed silvery-white on their underparts, then golden on their upperparts – they were Golden Plover. A single Ruff and a small flock of Dunlin played hide-and-seek amongst the Lapwings. We looked in vain for the hoped-for Cranes, only succeeding in finding one of the plastic ones put there to convince the real ones that this was a safe place for them. As we walked back we saw a tall, limestone tower atop the hill – it was the 140 feet (43 m) Burton Pynsen Monument, built in 1757 from Portland Stone and restored in the 1990s.

We then enjoyed a warming lunch at Curry Rivel before driving to a nearby mystery location. Looking across the open fields, Mike found our quarry – the Cranes – from the new re-introduction project ([www.thegreatcraneproject.org.uk](http://www.thegreatcraneproject.org.uk)). All eighteen birds were busily feeding and interacting with each other – some wing displaying and jostling was most probably youthful hierarchical behaviour rather than courtship. Everyone was delighted to see these birds, the first resident cranes on the Levels since the 17th Century.

Our next stop was the RSPB's Greylake reserve where we were lucky enough to spot seven Bewick's Swans from the car park. But it was Common Snipe that we were especially hoping to see here – and we weren't disappointed! In amongst the peat and newly cut reed stems we had to look mightily hard to spot the cryptically hidden snipe, but the numbers rose from three to six to a final count of 25! Once fields full of potatoes, these wetlands are now full of shallow pools and phragmites reeds and play host to a variety of colourful and entertaining birds. After seeing so many duck at West Sedgemoor but at quite some distance, it was wonderful to be able to admire their plumage in detail at close quarters. Hundreds of Wigeon fed on the pools, alongside Shoveler, Gadwall and Teal. Two Peregrines, a male and female, were soon spotted as they rested on a gate. Buzzards gave close views as they loafed on posts, and a distant Merlin challenged our identification skills.

As dusk approached, the inevitable huge flocks of Starlings amassed on the pylons before heading off north over the Polden Hills towards the roost at Shapwick. As we headed back to the car park, some of the party were lucky to see another Merlin whoosh past, scattering ducks and waders into the air in its path. What a magical sight to finish on...as the sun went down and the air was filled with waterfowl.

We ventured back to Wells to say our goodbyes and parted after a hugely enjoyable and fulfilling few days.

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## Species List

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

	Common name	Scientific name	Feb 15	Feb 16
1	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	✓	✓
2	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓	
3	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓
4	Great Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>	1	
5	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓
6	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	1	
7	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	8	10
8	Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		6
9	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
10	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	7	
11	Bewick's Swan	<i>Cygnus columbianus</i>		7
12	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓
13	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>	✓	
23	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	3	1
24	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	1	
25	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	2	2
26	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
27	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	
28	Merlin	<i>Falco columbaris</i>	1	2
29	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		3
30	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓
31	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>		18
32	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	H	H
33	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
34	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
35	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
36	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis aprcaria</i>		✓
37	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		✓
38	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	✓	
39	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	H	
40	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	✓	✓
41	Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>		✓
42	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	Feb 15	Feb 16
43	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
44	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓
45	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
46	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓
47	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	✓	✓
48	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
49	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
50	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	✓
51	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>		H
52	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	
53	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓
54	Northern Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
55	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
56	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓
57	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓
58	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓
59	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	✓
60	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
61	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
62	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	✓
63	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	H	H
64	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
65	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>		✓
66	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓	✓
67	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
68	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
69	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		✓
70	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	6	4
71	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
72	Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓
73	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
74	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
75	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓
76	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgarised</i>	✓	✓
77	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
78	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
79	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	✓	✓
80	Lesser Redpoll	<i>Carduelis cabaret</i>	✓	
81	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>	✓	✓
82	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
83	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>		✓
84	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	✓	✓
85	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓