

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

23 - 25 February 2011



Starling flock



Pair of Common Teal



Male Wigeon



West Sedgemoor

Report compiled by Ed Drewitt and Charles Martin

Images by Ed Drewitt



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Summary

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. Seeing fifteen of the reintroduced cranes was a real highlight for the group while large numbers of Wigeon, Teal, Pintail, Gadwall and Shoveler delighted us across the different reserves. Great White Egrets were seen well with Little Egrets while a Bittern put in a brief appearance and others were heard booming in the background. The group were delighted by the millions of Starlings which are now famous for their huge gatherings as they come to roost in the reed beds. The group marvelled as large flocks joined the main murmuration forming a dark shadow across the countryside. The main group of Starlings went to roost and when we thought that was the end, another flock of a million or so birds moved across the sky to join them!

Day 1

Wednesday 23rd February

With a promising weather forecast for the following day 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

Thursday 24th February

After breakfast we set off to Swell Wood, part of the RSPB's West Sedgemoor reserve, where many of the woodland birds were cranking up their song – Dunnocks, Robins, Blue Tits, Coal Tits, Chaffinches and Great Tits were singing away. We watched the Grey Herons now busy at their nests where at least two birds were sitting low and incubating eggs. Meanwhile, other herons were still courting and making their nests. When they took off their long, curved wings carefully manoeuvred them through the trees. An RSPB volunteer filled up the bird feeders while we were watching and Nuthatches provided brilliant views as they came to the peanuts, showing off their orange-red chests and blue-grey backs. They were very vocal too, calling throughout the woodland. Chaffinches fed on the woodland floor, the males looking smart and fresh, ready for attracting a mate. A bold, little Bank Vole scurried out from a log to collect nuts – scuttling back in quickly before poking its head back up again. A Marsh Tit was heard and seen a few times while the Treecreepers remained elusive but could occasionally be heard. A Great Spotted Woodpecker also called deeper into the woodland. Back at the car park the tits were all busy feeding on the freshly filled artificial feeders.

We moved onto Dewlands Farm, the heart of the RSPB's West Sedgemoor reserve and walked along the drove to the large barn hide, looking out across the managed wetlands – this paid off as thousands of ducks were sat resting and feeding across the flooded fields in front of us. The real surprise came relatively soon as, after a brief scan, the flock of recently re-introduced Common Cranes came into view (www.thegreatcraneproject.org.uk). Fifteen were busily feeding and interacting with each other – some wing displaying and dancing in the air was most probably hierarchical behaviour (rather than courtship). Everyone was delighted to see these birds, the first resident cranes since the 17th Century. A team of three volunteers were also in the hide with their transmitter receiver, rather like a tv aerial, to check on all the cranes – each individual crane has a colour ring with a transmitter giving off a radio signal unique to that bird.

Hundreds of Wigeon were spread out across the water, in amongst them half a dozen Black-tailed Godwits at the back spotted by Sara. In the sunshine, a thousand plus Golden Plovers graced the skies, shimmering golden in one direction and then pure white in another. Lapwings were also mixed in with the Golden Plovers. Some Pintail, Shoveler, Teal and the odd Coot were also spotted while some Cormorants sat on a bank in the middle of the wetlands. A field far beyond the reserve was full of Mute Swans looking rather like sheep from a distance! In the nearby fields to the left of the hide one and then two Hares were spotted, chasing each other. The female was doing a little boxing, warning the advancing male to keep away! A few very pale buzzards were perching on nearby posts and a single Raven flew overhead. From the reserve and nearby roads we were able to see the 140 feet (43 m) Burton Pynsen Monument – built in 1757 it is made from Portland Stone and was restored in the 1990s.

We ventured to a site down the road where we were originally going to try for the cranes. Various fields had Mute Swans tugging away at the vegetation and there was a large group of 8 Roe Deer in a ploughed field. We caught lovely views of their sandy brown winter coats and white bottoms showing up clearly, in contrast to the dark peaty soil of the ploughed field. Sky Larks also sang from the adjacent fields while others could be seen flying off from the grassland.

Lunch beckoned and we drove slowly along the lane below sea level (with the river above us) to the King Alfred pub in Burrow Bridge by the River Parrett. Here we warmed up and enjoyed a hearty drink and good food. Just outside from the pub was Burrow Mump, a historic site with the ruins of St Michael's church on top.

Our next stop was the RSPB's Greylake reserve where we were particularly hoping for Snipe - 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 gradually rose to a total of 9! 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 afternoon winter sunshine was perfect for spotting birds and the colours of the wintering waterfowl glistened and beamed out from the water and sedges. Hundreds of Wigeon fed on the pool including some very close to the hide. Teal and few Shovelers were also feeding close by offering excellent comparisons with each other. On the central bank lots of Golden Plovers, Lapwings and a small number of Dunlin rested. There was a mass of colourful spots from the backs of the Golden Plovers mixed in with some Starlings feeding nearby! The soundscape was full of the 'whinnying' by a pair of Little Grebes, the whistles of Teal and the grunts of Shoveler.

After a comfort stop at the Peat Moors Centre we finished off the day at Natural England's Shapwick Heath reserve for the starlings. The reed beds were busy with the explosive songs of Cetti's Warblers, squealing of Water Rails and the odd passing flock of Long-tailed Tits. As the sunshine gradually faded Black-headed Gulls, now in summer-plumage flew over in flocks to roost while Cormorants flew in and out of the reserve like a busy airport.

At just after 5pm everyone had their binoculars on a hunting Barn Owl being harassed by a Carrion Crow. The odd Lesser Black-backed Gull flew overhead while a single Sparrowhawk glided past. As day gave way to dusk a pair of Great Spotted Woodpeckers flew across the reed bed. As the light faded further a Tawny Owl 'twoo-ed' while Blackbirds and Wrens gave a little evening song. During this time, over a period of forty five minutes or so we watched various sized flocks of starlings ranging from 6 birds to over five thousand streaming low over the reed beds or moving as a globular shape across the sky. Meanwhile, a shadow of over a million starlings was building momentum over the nearby woods and began to funnel down into the trees, the light swoosh of wings changed to a cacophony of squacks and squills as the Starlings were busily chatting to each other now they were out of the sky. As light faded, more flocks of Starlings flew low over the reed beds and just as we thought it was all over, a flock of another million or so blackened the sky further and moved across the reed beds to join those already bedding down for the night. Just before leaving for the evening, a Bittern 'boomed', giving out its single, fog horn like song which resonated across the wetlands.

We headed back to vans and back to the hotel for dinner. Just out of Meare village a Barn Owl flew across the road, catching the light from the front vehicle's headlights. Back in Wells we had a rest before a lovely dinner. After, the group reflected on the tour's delights with a selection of images from the day's excursion and checked through the wide range of birds seen.

Day 3

Friday 25th February

After a wholesome breakfast and checking out we set out at 8.30am. We drove on to Ashcott Corner and walked along Shapwick Heath. A Mistle Thrush sang loudly from near the car park, its blackbird-like song easily heard. Redpolls and Siskins were calling in the nearby Alder trees while a Kingfisher was glimpsed as it flew along the canal. This was a rare sighting as most Kingfishers had disappeared for the winter. Many were now returning from the coasts. Further across the reed bed at least two female Marsh Harriers were quartering the reserve while four Snipe flew overhead. The occasional Reed Bunting flew overhead while males also sang their plaintive song from the tops of reed stems. The odd Cetti's Warbler also sang out its explosive song but remained elusive visually. A few Treecreepers could be heard from the small pockets of Alder trees.

On a large pool to the right of the path we spotted lots of Tufted Ducks and Pochards. A splendid Great Crested Grebe and a male Goldeneye also put in an appearance. We ventured down to Noah's Hide and a nearby screen looking out across the reeds. Noah's Pool was busy with breeding Cormorants making nests and displaying – this behaviour is not often observed and watching Cormorants craning their heads back and raising their wings whilst others were bringing in sticks far too big for their nests was fun to watch. Across the water there were Wigeon, Tufted Ducks, Pochards, Gadwall, a female Goldeneye, Mute Swans and the odd Greylag Goose. A pair of Ravens flew past on a few occasions. Back near the car park two Goldcrests sang and came very close.

After a brief comfort stop at the Peat Moors Centre we headed for the Somerset Wildlife Trust's Catcott Lows. Normally a cow field during the summer months, these flooded fields are ideal for Pintail and so it was a relief to find over one hundred pintail alongside Shoveler, Teal and hundreds of Wigeon on the pools. A Kestrel perched on a distant nest box. In the middle of the water, some raised ground was ideal for a small group of Lapwings, a single Black-tailed Godwit and a Dunlin scurrying between them! 5 Golden Plovers flew overhead and a Lesser Black-backed Gull dropped in for a short while.

We headed to the Crown Inn, Catcott for lunch where a rabbit was nibbling on the grass in a nearby field. A Green Woodpecker called in the distance and a flock of Starlings busily fed down the road, blackening the fresh green colours as they moved around. Another field was full of Mute Swans sitting as they grazed around them!

All fed and watered, we finished off our final day at the RSPB's Ham Wall reserve. It was busy with plenty of Tufted Ducks, Shoveler, Gadwall, Coot, Mallards and some Wigeon which kept us occupied. Some special visitors from France, Great White Egrets were seen throughout our time here – we counted at least 2 although it was difficult to tell exactly how many as they couldn't always be seen at the same time! These are recent visitors, and with only twenty in the whole of the UK it was great to see so many on this special reserve. The affect of the Starling's droppings appears to have meant fish are more easily available to the Great White Egrets which have been favouring the more reedy parts of the reserve. The odd Grey Heron also glided over the reeds while at least 9 Little Egrets were seen flying up and down from the reeds, moving to their next feeding patch. We went up a path adjacent to the reeds to get further views of the long-necked Great White Egrets, now with their bright yellow beaks used for breeding. Suddenly, Charles (Kinsey) spotted a Bittern in the distance and most glimpsed the brownish-reed coloured bird flying low over the reeds before it dropped down. Water Rails were easily heard calling from the reed beds as were the 'whinnying' Little Grebes. We did a circular walk, seeing various tits and finches along the way before venturing back to Wells to say our goodbyes and parting after a hugely enjoyable and fulfilling few days

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Species Lists

Birds

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			24	25
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	Great Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>	H	✓
8	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
9	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	.	✓
10	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</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	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	✓	✓
21	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	.	✓
22	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
23	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓
24	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓
25	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	✓	.
26	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	H	H
27	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
28	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
29	Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	✓	✓
30	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
31	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	✓
32	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	✓	✓
33	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	✓	✓
34	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	.	✓
35	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓
36	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
37	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
38	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓
39	Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>	✓	✓
40	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			24	25
41	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
42	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	✓
43	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	.	✓
44	Eurasian Sky Lark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓	.
45	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	.
46	Northern Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
47	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
48	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	.	✓
49	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	.
50	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	.	✓
51	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	.	✓
52	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
53	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
54	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	.	✓
55	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	✓	✓
56	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
57	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	✓	.
58	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓	✓
59	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
60	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
61	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	✓	.
62	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	✓	✓
63	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
64	Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓
65	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
66	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
67	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓
68	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
69	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
70	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
71	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	.	✓
72	Lesser Redpoll	<i>Carduelis cabaret</i>	.	✓
73	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>	.	✓
74	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
75	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓

Mammals

1	Brown Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	2	.
2	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	8	3
3	European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓	✓
4	Bank Vole	<i>Myodes glareolus</i>	1	.

Fresh signs of

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

Other

1	Marsh Frog	<i>Pelophylax ridibundus</i>		✓
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