

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

25 - 27 February 2011



Starling flock



The 2011 Naturetrek Group



Male Wigeon



Shoveler in flight

Report compiled by Ed Drewitt and Dave Nevitt

Images by Ed Drewitt



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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 significant numbers; Wigeon, Teal and Lapwing were especially abundant throughout the trip. The heron family put in an outstanding performance, with Great White and Little Egrets and Great Bittern did us proud with several booming males and a very showy fly-past on the final day! Raptors delighted the group with at least four Marsh Harriers, Buzzards and two Peregrines. The Starlings, coming towards their reed bed roost, put on a breathtaking display as they were scattered by several hungry birds of prey. What a fantastic experience for all in the group!

Day 1

Friday 25th February

The group converged on Wells from all parts of the country, and all were fortunate to have had reasonable journeys considering it was a Friday night. In the cosy setting of the Swan Hotel with Wells Cathedral glowing in floodlight opposite, expectations were high as Dave and Ed introduced themselves and whet the group's appetite with the plan for the days ahead. The group members introduced themselves and said what they particularly wanted to see. As well as the Starlings, it seemed that Bitterns booming and showing themselves extremely well were high on everyone's agenda, so that gave Dave and Ed something to aim for!

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 took an early night...

Day 2

Saturday 26th February

After a hearty cooked breakfast we left Wells across the low damp fields of the northern Levels. Today we were to explore the southern Levels, so the 40 minute drive to get there enabled the group to familiarise themselves with the Levels landscape of broad valley bottoms alternating with wooded steep hills.

We soon arrived at our first stop of 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, everyone managed to pin them down with their binoculars. A Great Spotted Woodpecker sat in an oak tree for all to see. We walked through the wood to the viewpoint to get a true impression of the scale of the West Sedgemoor reserve and we were rewarded with the characteristic song of the Stock Doves that live in the larger holes in the oak trees. But it was when we returned to the feeders near the car park that the birds really came out. Four species of Tit were there and we were very fortunate as tits and Nuthatches came down to feed right in front of us. Everyone was delighted with such fantastic views, which were then topped off by two very obliging Treecreepers. What a great start to the trip!

We moved on to Dewlands Farm, the heart of the West Sedgemoor reserve, and enjoyed the company of Buzzards and Ravens soaring overhead in the sunshine – a welcome change from the forecast rain! We walked along the drove 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 hundreds of Wigeon teemed on the open water and Lapwing covered the exposed islands. A distant flock of many hundreds of waders flashed silvery-white on their underparts, then golden on their upperparts – they were Golden Plover and we were lucky that some came closer so that we could see them well in the telescopes. They were in the company of a flock of Dunlin, and over 90 Black-tailed Godwits were a new bird for many as they probed the mud for food in a sewing machine-like action. Every now and then the duck and waders all took flight. There was obviously something bothering them but we could not find it despite many pairs of eyes looking.

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! The wind was quite chilly and we were just getting up to move on when up went the shout of "Peregrine!". Everyone quickly sat down again and we were treated to the fantastic sight of a large female Peregrine hunting Wigeon. Just as she had pinned one to the ground, she was joined by a male bird and they then proceeded to terrorise the ducks and waders with tandem hunting flights for the next five minutes. Everyone also had great telescope views as the Peregrines rested on a conveniently placed wooden gate. As we left the hide the air was filled with swirling massed of panicking ducks and waders. On the walk 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 had a brief stop at Aller Moor to scan the open fields. We were rewarded by some Roe Deer, a hunting Kestrel, Linnet and – our target bird – five of the Common Cranes from the new re-introduction Project (www.thegreatcraneproject.org.uk). We kept our distance so as not to disturb them, but everyone saw them through the assembled telescopes. Everyone was delighted to see these birds, the first resident cranes on the Levels since the 17th Century. With a keen wind having blown up, everyone was ready for a spot of lunch, and a nearby pub served the purpose, providing a warm-up opportunity for all.

Our next stop was the RSPB's Greylake reserve where we were hoping to see some snipe. In amongst the peat and newly cut reed stems we had to look mightily hard to spot the cryptically hidden snipe, but we successfully spotted three, right in front of the hide. So good was their camouflage against the cut reeds that some members of the group stared frustratingly through the telescopes for quite a while before the "OH! There they are!" eureka moment. Happily everyone saw them in the end. 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 and Teal.

As dusk approached, the inevitable flocks of Starlings amassed on the pylons before heading off north over the Polden Hills towards the roost. We returned to the buses as we needed to get there before them – our last stop was the Starling roost at Shapwick Heath. We parked at the Peat Moors Visitor Centre and there was time enough for a quick cup of tea before we headed off up the old railway track. Excitement was mounting as we saw the assembled throng of starling watchers but there were no starlings in sight yet – we had timed it perfectly!

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 Sparrowhawks, Marsh Harrier and Buzzards all looking for dinner.

As the Starlings settled down into the reed beds, it was time for us to return to the hotel. Ed was lucky indeed to see a Woodcock fly low over a wet field on the walk back. Back at 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 at the end of a superb day!

Day 3

Sunday 27th February

After another satisfying breakfast, we checked out of our rooms before we set off on our exploration of the northern Levels. Our first stop was Ashcott Corner, and we were greeted by lovely sunshine and a Mistle Thrush singing merrily on a treetop. However we wrapped up well against the forecast rain and headed west along the old railway line towards Meare Heath. We saw the dry banks and strips of shallow water left by the peat extraction process that has made this such a special place. The belt of Alder trees alongside the path soon became alive with bird calls as we saw a wonderful mixed flock of Siskins and Lesser Redpolls feeding on the Alder catkins and seed cones. The ivy on the Alders then produced several Goldcrests, a Treecreeper and Long-tailed Tits.

A little further on and the woodland gave way to open reed beds. As all eyes scoured the reeds for the much hoped-for Bittern; one did show itself in flight briefly but only Sybil was lucky enough 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 a second-year male Marsh Harrier was being 'scoped by all.

Walking directly into the cold wind, we were all keen to reach the haven of the hides. We split into two parties as the hides were only small. Those going to the Meare Heath hide were entertained by many Chaffinches and Tits in the Alder and Silver Birch woodland carr, with Teal, Gadwall and Tufted Duck all from the hide. A Sparrowhawk hunted over the reeds and Cormorants performed regular fly-pasts. Noah's Hide was facing directly into the wind but despite the cold, we were treated to many nesting Cormorants in fine breeding dress. The many ducks on the lake included female Goldeneye. Nearby, we were fortunate indeed when a family party of six Whooper Swans sneaked out of a reedy rhyne. This was a good demonstration of the excellent breeding season that many of our wintering swans and geese had enjoyed in 2010. A Cetti's Warbler that had been frustrating many with its strident song yet secretive habits gave further frustration as it flew across the rhyne when most of us were looking the other way!

On the way back to the buses, Pat found a male Goldeneye that showed off its beautiful plumage to us all. We then took an early lunch of hot soup and carvery meat rolls in a welcoming local pub before driving to the hide at the Somerset Wildlife Trust reserve of Catcott Lows. We were treated to 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. A very pale Buzzard was perched on a post and proved very popular through the telescopes whilst Canada Geese were feeding on a nearby bank.

Having our fill of the many ducks on display, we then returned to Ashcott Corner. This time we headed east towards the RSPB Ham Wall reserve. From the raised path 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. Some recently cut reeds had created the ideal feeding habitat for some Snipe, and we eventually found ten birds. In the distance we were tantalised by glimpses of many birds taking flight over the reeds. As we got closer, their identity became clearer. Confirmed, by their colour rings, as arrivals from France, a superb total of four rare Great White Egrets were also accompanied by their smaller cousins the Little Egrets. Barbara kept inspecting each one to try to find the lone Cattle Egret but without luck! A squally hail shower had everyone diving for the small hides, and from here we were surprised by two finds. Firstly, an adult Kittiwake – normally a sea-going gull – sat on an island looking rather forlorn. Then, as the hail stopped, Ed found an adult Mediterranean Gull that had been forced down by the weather. It stayed just long enough for everyone to see it before it was off again.

We were just preparing to leave the hides when the dreams of many in the group were answered. A magnificent Bittern climbed up the reed stems only 100m from the hides, then just as we all got onto it, it treated us to a superb fly-past, with gorgeous evening light from behind making it even better. What a very special sight, and one that the whole group had longed for... We then returned to the minibuses; some had to return to the hotel in Wells to make their way home but half the group took up Dave and Ed's offer of an additional extra Starling show.

The numbers coming in to the Shapwick Heath roost were, if anything, larger than the night before and the sky was full of the gathering thousands. Buzzards and a Sparrowhawk pursued their prey and made for another spectacular display before the starlings gratefully nestled down in the reed beds for the night. What a magical sight to finish on, and as we walked back, the group mused on how special a display we had been treated to.

On the drive back, Ed's bus was lucky enough to have a Barn Owl fly across the road in front of them – yet another target bird for many in the group!

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

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Species Lists

Birds (H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			26	27
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>	1H	2H, 1 seen
5	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓
6	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	2	9
7	Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		6
8	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
9	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		6
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>		2
21	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	2	3
22	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	3	2
23	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
24	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	
25	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	2	
26	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	H	H
27	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	4	
28	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	H	H
29	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
30	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
31	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
32	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis aprocaria</i>	✓	
33	Eurasian Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>	1	
34	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	✓
35	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	✓	
36	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	✓	
37	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓
38	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
39	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓
40	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			26	27
41	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Larus melanocephalus</i>		1
42	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>		1
43	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓
44	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	H	H
45	Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>		1
46	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	✓	✓
47	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
48	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
49	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	✓
50	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	H	
51	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓
52	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓
53	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	H	H
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>	✓	H
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	✓
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>	✓	✓
71	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
72	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		H
73	Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓
74	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
75	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
76	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	
77	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgarised</i>	✓	✓
78	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
79	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
80	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	✓	✓
81	Lesser Redpoll	<i>Carduelis cabaret</i>		✓
82	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>		✓
83	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			26	27
84	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>	✓	
85	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓

Mammals

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			26	27
1	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	∅	
2	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓	
3	Mole	<i>Talpa europaea</i>	Signs	Signs
4	Badger	<i>Meles meles</i>	Signs	Signs