

# The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

23 - 25 May 2011

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Common Cranes by Graham Dorgan



Great Crested Grebe family by Ed Drewitt



Greylake by Ed Drewitt

Report compiled by Ed Drewitt



Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton Alresford Hampshire SO24 0NG England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: [info@naturetrek.co.uk](mailto:info@naturetrek.co.uk)

W: [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk)

Tour Leader:	Ed Drewitt
Participants:	Steve Gilliard Robert Badcock Vanessa Harrison Joe Toole Helen Toole Rosemary Caton Graham Dorgan Tony Charles

## Introduction

This tour around the Somerset Levels towards the end of May was a brilliant opportunity to see the diversity and abundance of wildlife using the wetlands during the spring. With spring up to a month early, the trees and herbs were in full foliage, turning the countryside a vibrant, bright green. Touring across the many reserves we were able to soak up the spring atmosphere and absorb the magical sounds and vibes that the Levels uniquely provide. At the end of May everything, especially the warblers, was busy nesting and providing obliging views. The wildlife certainly didn't disappoint and we had excellent views of Bitterns and Hobbies while hearing many Cuckoos. The Somerset Levels are one of the best places in the UK to see Bitterns and the only reliable place see and hear Cuckoos in the West of England. Other highlights included singing Garden Warblers, Spotted Flycatchers, a female Red-footed Falcon and young, stripy Great Crested Grebes. The weather was on our side and despite being breezy on Day 2, the sun was shining and birds were busily finding food and feeding chicks.

## Day 1

**Monday 23rd May**

Despite a rainy day, the sunshine prevailed in the evening allowing the oolitic limestone of Wells Cathedral to shine golden. Everyone met for a drink before a delicious dinner.

During the meeting afterwards, we found out more about what was ahead for the next few days, reflecting on some photos from the 2010 trip and finding out more about the ringing of Peregrine chicks which Ed had been doing in the past week, including the nearby Cheddar Gorge. We retired early evening ready for a very early dawn start!

## Day 2

**Tuesday 24th May**

We met at an almost silent hotel at 4.30am as the sunlight slowly filtered from the sky and the odd Lesser Black-backed Gull flew over overhead. We headed out to the RSPB's Ham Wall Reserve and spent an hour and a half catching the dawn chorus before the birds switched their activities to finding food for chicks. As we arrived a hobby dashed past the car park! As a Roe Deer quietly nibbled the grass by the reeds, Blackbirds, Chiffchaffs, Whitethroats, Blackcaps, Willow Warbler, Garden Warbler, Dunnock and Wrens sang loudly across the reserve, many giving brilliant views as they sang from an ideal vantage point to make their presence known. Meanwhile, Bitterns boomed all around, their fog-horn like call resonating across the reserve. We heard at least five different Bitterns!

Tufted Ducks flew around in pairs, grunting as they flew and the odd Pochard, the males with their bright rusty-coloured heads, took flight low across the reeds. As we listened and watched, a Bittern, oblivious of our presence, glided past us over 50 metres away before disappearing behind some reeds! An adult Great Crested Grebe took her chicks around a pool, and while leaving the young in the water, decided to stand out of the water on a nearby raft. It looked very ungainly as its legs, positioned far back on the body, held it rather wobbly before sitting down. This didn't last long and it joined the chicks to continue feeding – the young, around three weeks old still had very stripy heads and a soft pink patch near the base of the beak. Nearby Cetti's Warblers revealed their presence with their explosive song while a pair of Gadwall mated before gently washing. Over 500 Swifts flew across the reedbeds, sticking close to the trees to feed on thousands of tiny gnats. We ventured back to the hotel for a well earned cooked breakfast and to stoke up ready for the rest of the day ahead.

After a wholesome breakfast we headed to the southern levels to the RSPB's Greylake Reserve – a decade ago its fields were full of potatoes! This wetland reserve was busy with the varied, rasping songs of the Sedge Warblers and the more strident, regular song of the Reed Warbler, with territories at predictable location along a straight band of reeds! The star birds were Reed Buntings, with at least five singing males singing, many giving excellent views of their black head, white collars and warm, chestnut brown backs. One was even feeding on the ground in front of hide, where a pair of Shelducks, a few Lapwings and some Starlings also fed. Meanwhile, a pair of Wigeon flew onto the water and a pair of Gadwall dabbled nearby. Some Carrion Crows sat on their watchpoints, carefully sussing out any nesting birds. On the walk back, a Raven, with its distinctive 'finger-like' feathers, was chased off by a much smaller Carrion Crow which looked dwarfed.

After a comfort stop at the market town of Langport we ventured on to the RSPB's West Sedgemoor Reserve and in particular Swell Wood. The wood was full of baby birds, especially Chaffinches, Great Tits, Blue Tits and Song Thrushes. Meanwhile, from the hide we watched and heard the squawking, gurgling baby Grey Herons and Little Egrets. Two of the latter were sat in the nest with a parent while the other adult sat above in its splendid white, breeding plumage - two plumes dangled from the head and the extravagant 'aigrattes' were being preened along the back. The odd Grey Heron chick was taking its first flight, branching out and clumsily moving between the oak tree branches. A pool in front of the hide was a hot spot for birds coming down to drink – a family of Chaffinches, Great Tits, Blue Tits, Nuthatch and even two different Great Spotted Woodpeckers, a male and a female. A Goldcrest sung nearby. We walked around the woods catching up with a least two different, 'squeaking' Spotted Flycatchers. We watched them fly round in circles as they fed on insects near the trees. Stock Doves called from the woods while Blackbirds and Song Thrushes dashed away from the path. A pair of Bullfinches was also spotted and a Chiffchaff sang high above.

Before we knew it, it was the middle of the day and we stopped off in Curry Rivel for a pub lunch where a Greenfinch called from the pub garden. A few families of Starlings flew around nearby, the young giving out their constant begging call. Feeling energised for the afternoon we drove back to Swell Wood and spent the afternoon walking along the farm track, lined with hedgerows and adjacent to the wide expanse of the open West Sedgemoor drain. On our way down the hill a new family of Blackcaps moved through the trees and herbs. A Hobby flew straight overhead giving excellent views while the trees were abound with Long-tailed Tits, Chiffchaffs busily collecting food for chicks and the odd Robin or Wren. We stopped in a beautiful meadow full of Common Spotted Orchids and Southern Marsh Orchids alongside hundreds of Yellow Rattle and knapweeds. Years of careful management, cutting for hay and lack of grazing is paying off for the RSPB.

In the distance at least four Hobbies were busily hawking for dragonflies high in the sky. Linnets were busy near the farm where House Sparrows and Goldfinches were also living. The odd Four-spotted Chaser Dragonfly, Common Blue Butterfly, and various moths also helped make the walk even more colourful and summery. After rising up the steepish hill (and picking up those who decided to wait for a lift) we drove to our last destination for the day, some fields nearby to look for cranes! As we looked around plenty of Mute Swans were busily feeding in fields while a pair of Brown Hares chased each other along the drainage bank. Then suddenly Steve and Joe shouted ‘cranes’ as all 18 of the reintroduced (Common Crane) gang flew in front of us – aided by the strong breeze we had excellent views as the flock circled around, uttering their beautiful trill, fluty call ([www.thegreatcraneproject.org.uk](http://www.thegreatcraneproject.org.uk)). They glided down to a few fields away, wings bowed as they gently dropped height and landed before parading along the grass to forage. Ending on such a positive note we ventured back to the van, not before checking out the River Parrett as the whistle like calls of an Otter could be heard. It turned out to be a Kingfisher, which gave brief views to a few of the group – a sound that’s evolved to sound so similar and is well adapted to pierce such a watery habitat.

After such a busy, exciting day we drove back to the Swan Hotel full of stories and memories of the various habitats and abundant wildlife. After a delicious meal we gathered to reflect on some photos of the birds and landscape from the day. We then looked through our checklist – a total of 70 birds for the day! A great total indeed!

## Day 3

## Wednesday 25th May

After a later start and another wonderful breakfast we set off for the Avalon Marshes, focusing our efforts on the RSPB’s Ham Wall Reserve and Natural England’s Shapwick Heath. The morning was spent at the former.

Despite a light breeze, thousands of Four-spotted Darter Dragonflies were everywhere! Lifting off from the nettles, herbs and trees – it was a dragonfly fest! Meanwhile, warblers were busily commuting between reeds, nettles and nest sites to feed hungry chicks. Whitethroats and Blackcaps gave very obliging views. Meanwhile a newly fledged family of Blue Tits flew across the path in into the reeds. Some second summer Black-headed Gulls perched on wooden benches while Pochards, Gadwall, Mallards and Tufted Ducks rested in the vegetation. The two young Great Crested Grebes and their parent were back again – often preening and showing off their white bellies as they rotated round to get to even the most awkward of feathers! Bitterns continued to boom across the reserve. We were quickly alerted to a Lesser Black-backed Gull gulping down a sizeable young Coot – before you could blink just the feet were sticking out before it disappeared leaving a huge bulge in the neck of the gull. Other gulls quartered the reed beds looking for a similar opportunity.

Meanwhile we were entertained by a stunning male Marsh Harrier, slowly gliding and flapping across the reeds showing off his silver-grey wing patches, dark wing tips and warm, russet-brown body. We continued walking, catching the odd glimpse of a Hobby. At one point we watched three or four dashing and diving through a section of alder trees in the distance, no doubt making short work of the Four-Spotted Darters. We often saw the Hobbies bringing their talons to their beak in flight to devour their dragonfly quarry. We sat for some time studying the Hobbies, looking carefully for a rare female Red-footed Falcon which had been over the Levels for a few days. With some eye-straining concentration one Hobby moved away from the rest of the group and dived on a few occasions, showing off not a streaked chest and belly but a cream-coloured one. With everyone carefully watching it, the bird’s flight was cross between a Kestrel and a Hobby. And then its pale head was in view.

This was a female Red-footed Falcon! – a bird that would have travelled thousands of miles from its wintering grounds in Namibia and diverted west from its normal stomping grounds in Hungary and Bulgaria. As we ventured on we saw more Hobbies. The herbage along the paths was excellent for insects – hundreds more darters, ladybirds, damselflies hoverflies and most stunning of all, two Cream-spotted Tiger Moths. It had bright cream spots, almost glowing, orange inner wings and a deep cinnamon red body. The local Carrion Crows or Mink made short work of various bird eggs – mainly ducks but also a Water Rail too, left empty by the footpath. A Garden Warbler sang from a bush, keeping itself concealed – however, with some patience, Tony saw his first good views of such a cryptic and shy bird.

We made it back for half past midday and drove into Ashcott for a well earned pub lunch before spending the afternoon at Shapwick Heath. The open, muddy pools here were ideal for wading birds – 30 fresh, summer plumaged Black-tailed Godwits fed energetically. One was colour-ringed – it was a first summer male caught and ringed back in March on the Axe Estuary in Devon. Due to poor weather in Iceland the flock of godwits was most probably returning back to the UK after failed breeding attempts. Meanwhile two black-bellied Dunlins potted along the edge of the closest island and nearby, a Little Ringed Plover slowly walked, one stride forward before stopping to look and listen for prey. The odd Lapwing and Redshank was also present while at least 20 Gadwall fed nearby – many were males, beginning to turn into their eclipse plumage, ready for moulting. A pair of Shoveler was in amongst them – the male's bright white plumage sticking out like a bright white handkerchief! Meanwhile in the adjacent canal Mute Swans busily fed while the odd one relaxing held one foot out of the water. A close inspection of the lilies revealed lots of resting Red-eyed Damselflies.

At Noah's Lake many baby Cormorants begged away – their strained calls almost Curlew like. Some more almost ready to fly while others were coated in a dark, woolly down but had some way to go before their flight feathers were fully grown. An adult usually stood overhead, keeping an eye on the two or three chicks per nest. The waters were busy with Coots, grebes and Canada Geese plus the odd Lesser Black-backed Gull and Herring Gull. A Grey Heron posed nearby, slowly edging forward as it watched carefully and waited for its moment to strike at an unaware fish. There seemed plenty as every so often they splashed out of the water.

Nearby in the Alder carr a family of newly fledged Blackcaps moved around and begged for food. Variable, Blue-tailed and Azure Blue Damselfies were hugging the nettles, escaping the relentless breeze. Back along the main track a family of Whitethroats were busy. As we neared the car park to finish for the day a Hobby was called. We looked up, and as we looked closer we realised it was the female Red-footed Falcon again, her pale chest and head clearly visible! As we went through the checklist for the day in the car park we finished off with excellent views of a Hobby directly overhead! Checklist completed and reflecting on the day's relaxing experience, we drove back to Wells before saying our goodbyes after a few days of absorbing ourselves in the unique atmosphere and environment that is the Somerset levels in spring!

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## Species Lists

### Birds

	Common name	Scientific name	May	
			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 Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>	✓2	✓2
7	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
8	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓
9	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	✓	
10	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	✓	✓
11	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
12	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	✓	✓
13	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
14	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	<i>Circu aeruginosus</i>		✓2
15	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
16	Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>		✓6+
17	Red-footed Falcon	<i>Falco vespertinus</i>		✓1
18	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓ (heard)	✓
19	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	✓ 18	
20	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
21	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
22	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
23	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓	✓
24	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓1
25	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>		✓1
26	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓ (1 heard)	
27	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		✓30
28	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
29	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓
30	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓
31	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	✓	✓
32	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
33	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
34	Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	✓ (3 heard)	✓ (2 heard)
35	Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	✓	✓
36	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	✓1	
37	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	✓
38	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	✓ (heard)	
39	Sky Lark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓	
40	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	May	
			24	25
41	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	✓	✓
42	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓
43	Northern Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
44	Duncock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
45	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	
46	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
47	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
48	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	✓
49	Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>	✓	✓
50	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	✓	✓
51	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓
52	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	✓	✓
53	Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>	✓	✓
54	Lesser Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia curruca</i>	✓ (heard)	
55	Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>	✓	✓
56	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>	✓	✓
57	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	✓
58	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	✓?	
59	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
60	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓	
61	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
62	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
63	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</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	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
74	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	✓	
75	Common Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>	✓	
76	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓

### Mammals

1	Brown Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	✓	
2	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓	✓
3	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	✓	✓
4	Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>	✓	
5	Shrew sp	<i>Sorex sp</i>	✓ (heard)	

	Common name	Scientific name	May	
			24	25

### Signs of

1	Badger	<i>Meles meles</i>	✓	✓
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### Butterflies

1	Holly Blue	<i>Celastrina argiolus</i>	✓	
2	Peacock	<i>Inachis io</i>	✓	✓
3	Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>	✓	
4	Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>	✓	
5	Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>	✓	✓
6	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>	✓	

### Moths

1	Long-horned Moth	<i>Nemophora degeerella</i>		
2	Cream-spot Tiger	<i>Arctia villica</i>		

### Orchids

1	Common Spotted	<i>Dactylorhiza fuchsii</i>	✓	
2	Southern Marsh	<i>Dactylorhiza praetermissa</i>	✓	

### Dragonflies and Damselflies

1	Four-spotted Chaser	<i>Libellula quadrimaculata</i>	✓	✓
2	Blue-tailed Damselfly	<i>Ischnura elegans</i>	✓	✓
3	Azure Damselfly	<i>Coenagrion puella</i>		✓
4	Red-eyed Damselfly	<i>Erythromma najas</i>		✓

### Other Taxa

1	Froghopper	<i>Cercopis vulnerata</i>		✓
2	Wasp Beetle	<i>Clytus arietis</i>		✓
3	Thick-kneed Beetle	<i>Oedemera nobilis</i>		✓

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