

# The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

14 - 16 February 2012

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The sky blackens with the starlings coming to roost

Report and image compiled by Dave Nevitt



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Participants	David Anderson Karen Anderson Liz Booth Tony Booth John Fuller Hilary Fuller Madeleine Slater-Vaughan Paul Slater-Vaughan Jean Songhurst Carol Bevan Betty Baggett Andrew Baggett Jennifer Draper Elaine Turnbull Joan Ford Susan Fearn

**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 in recent weeks, most of the wildfowl had returned from their brief sojourn to warmer climes and were present in large numbers; Wigeon, Teal and Lapwing were especially abundant throughout the trip. The Starlings, coming towards their reedbed roost, put on a breathtaking display as they were scattered by several hungry birds of prey. Everyone agreed that whilst this is impressive on television, on location it is quite fantastic.

## Day 1

**Tuesday 14th February**

The group assembled on Valentine's Day, in the romantic setting of the quaint town of Wells. With the floodlit Wells Cathedral opposite, we settled in to our very comfortable accommodation at the Swan Hotel. Everyone met Dave and Andrew for a pre-dinner introduction where, after normal formalities, each member of the group introduced themselves and highlighted their aspirations for the trip. Starlings were most definitely top of the list, with Bittern and birds of prey also popular. We then enjoyed the first of our sumptuous evening meals before adjourning to the Exmoor Room. Here the leaders gave a short slideshow to give some background on the history of the Levels and how they have formed into what we see today. Maps of the area gave everyone context for where we were going tomorrow. With many having spent the day travelling, an early night was enjoyed by us all!

## Day 2

## Wednesday 15th February

Starting the day with a welcome cooked breakfast we set off by 08:15 in order to make the most of the winter daylight. Our first stop was Ashcott Corner, where we left the minibuses and walked towards the RSPB Ham Wall Reserve. A look from the road bridge gave us all good scope views of two Kingfishers performing well on the bank of the rhyme – what an excellent start! The ivy-clad trees along the path soon gave us excellent views of Goldcrests, followed by Coal Tits. Redpolls called as they flew overhead, a pattern that was to repeat itself many times over the next couple of days, to the frustration of many!

Moving out of the trees, we were entering Bittern territory and all kept their eyes peeled for this elusive denizen of the reed bed. The pools in the reeds gave us Tufted Ducks and Pochard, and we were able to examine the differences between the sexes for both. Reaching the lookout, we had good views of the rare Great Egret, a species that has been present at this site for some time now and it is hoped that when the birds mature, they will stay to set up a breeding colony.

The chilly wind forced us off the exposed bank and down into three small hides. Here we had superb views of Snipe as they sat motionless in the cut reed stems. Water Rails screeched around us and the Cetti's Warbler gave his loud song to convince us that Spring is not long around the corner! Gadwall and Shoveler enabled us to see their amazingly patterned plumages. On the way back to the buses we had a close encounter with another singing Cetti's Warbler but sadly he didn't show himself to us, probably because the sun wasn't out and because of that wind.

After a quick comfort break at the pub, we headed to the Somerset Wildlife Trust Catcott Lows Reserve. The marsh by the car park gave us great views of a Stonechat feeding away – they are always full of character and this was enjoyed by all. Meanwhile the comfort of the large hide enabled everyone to get superb views of the ducks assembled in front of us. Wigeon, Teal, fabulous Pintail and Gadwall – all were studied in detail. Those who had braved the weather outside the hide were rewarded with a fly-over Peregrine but she didn't stay around to be admired! Lunch was then taken at the Catcott Inn – fuel to warm us for the afternoon!

Up to seven Short-eared Owls had been seen recently on nearby marshes at Chilton Polden so we spent a while here waiting for them to show. Sadly the owls weren't reading the rule-book and didn't come out of the grassland, but we were treated to views of the many Buzzards present.

The wind was pretty chilly so we left the buses and went for a short walk to warm up. Fieldfares and Redwings were a treat as they fed on the levels and sat up in nearby trees. A pair of Stonechats entertained us along one of the ditches, and a large flock of Lapwings kept our pulses racing as they kept taking flight, our eyes then scanning the skies to try to find what raptor had spooked them!

Then it was time to depart as we didn't want to be late for the Main Event – the Starling roost. We parked at the Peat Moors Visitor Centre and walked the raised old railway line so that we could all get a great 360 degree view across the reed beds to see the birds coming from all around us. It is always a bit of a gamble trying to predict where to stand, but we selected our spot and waited.

Dave started to look rather agitated as we all scanned the horizon and saw no starlings, but it was still quite light and we just had to bide our time. Then they arrived...and boy, did they arrive! Starlings came in from all directions, in flocks large and small, merging then swirling across the sky. We were extremely fortunate that they seemed in no hurry to drop into the reeds; the wind had dropped and the conditions were good. Then the atmosphere was made electric as two Sparrowhawks darted through the flocks, trying to select their prey. The Starlings reacted with amazing turns and patterns as they desperately tried to avoid being snatched. Then, as the sky seemed to be just black with birds against a golden sunset, the icing on the cake arrived – a peregrine, also hungry. The Starlings twisted and turned once more but sadly it was the end for one poor bird as it was plucked from the flock and carried away in the Peregrine's talons. What a dramatic end to a superb show! We debated how many Starlings we had seen coming to roost and agreed that a figure of 1.5 million birds was about right.

We then walked back to the buses, getting brief views in the gathering darkness of a Bittern and a Woodcock before returning to our hotel in Wells. After freshening up and relaxing before dinner, we enjoyed another delicious dinner before retiring to the Exmoor Room to do our bird list for the day and to outline the plan for tomorrow. Andrew then thrilled us with his slideshow of a recent trip to the Galapagos Islands before we took to our beds after a thoroughly superb day.

## Day 3

## Thursday 16th February

After another satisfying breakfast, we left Wells to explore the more southerly valleys of the Levels today. Our first stop was Swell Wood, part of the RSPB's West Sedgemoor Reserve. As we pulled into the car park, birds gathered excitedly around the many feeders. We were entertained by their antics before moving the short distance to the hide. This site is notable for its large heronry and since they start nesting early, there was plenty of activity despite it being only February. With the trees being bare, we were able to see them sat on their nests crooning, croaking and clucking at each other. We were treated to Goldcrest, Treecreeper and Marsh Tit coming down to bathe in the pool in front of the hide.

Outside the hide, we had great views of Nuthatches climbing up and down the tree trunks, close Goldcrests, Treecreepers and further views of the now uncommon Marsh Tit. We then walked the short distance to the viewpoint that gave us a breathtaking appreciation of the sheer scale of the Levels and the reserves on them. A Jay screeched in the distance to give away its presence deep in the wood.

Moving on to Dewlands Farm, the head of the RSPB operation in the area, we left the minibuses and walked across the fields to the sounds of the Buzzards mewing in the sunshine on the wooded slope above us. We found some Reed Buntings on a stubble field and had some excellent views of plentiful Stock Doves flying around us. On reaching the hide, the numbers of birds present were staggering. Many were quite some distance away, but somehow this made the spectacle all the more impressive as you took in the flocks of birds stretching almost from horizon to horizon when they were put up by birds of prey. Lapwings numbered in their thousands, but it was the huge flocks of Golden Plover that caught your eye more as their colours flashed from golden to silver at they pitched and turned.

In the distance, keen eyes picked out one of the star birds – a superb flock of Cranes. Many in the group had been keen to see them so they were a welcome find indeed! The maximum count was 23 but there could well have been the full compliment of c36 that have been in the area. “Peregrine!!” was the next shout and everyone scanned the skies to try to find it. We needn’t have worried as we were treated to an amazing display as a male and a female sat on fence posts for our delectation before making repeated forays out across the marsh in search of prey. What a sight to behold!

The persistent wind was beginning to get a bit chilly, and some well-prepared members of the group brought out their coffee flasks for some refreshment! But it was time to move on and we returned to the buses before driving across the Moor to Aller. Here we saw the site where the Cranes were originally released several years ago, but we had already caught up with them so of course they weren’t here! However we did spot 3 Hares in distant stubble, with two of them boxing. It is a little-known fact that boxing hares are not jousting males but a female fending off the unwanted amorous advances of a male! We left them to it as it was time for lunch. The King Alfred provided a welcome warm retreat and, after a little wait, a warming lunch too.

We then moved on to the RSPB Greylake Reserve for a brief stop. We reached the hide to learn that a Water Rail had been showing close to the hide, causing much excitement as they are notorious for skulking in the reeds and being elusive. It showed itself at the base of the reed tussocks to a few in the group but others were not so lucky! The pools in front of the hide gave us all a chance to do some revision on our duck ID class of yesterday; we marvelled at the Shoveler’s orange legs and its huge bill. More Snipe hid amongst the reed stems, and the more you stared at them, the larger the number of them you saw! As we left the hide, the Water Rail put in a further tantalising appearance from the boardwalk. Not all birds give themselves up to scrutiny, even on a Naturetrek trip, as the group learned on this occasion!

As time ticked on, we needed to get back to Shapwick for the Starling roost again. This time, we parked at Ashcott Corner and walked west towards where we hoped the roost would be. This meant a little longer walk but the greatest chance of seeing both Marsh Harrier and Bittern. It wasn’t long before we spotted a young male Marsh Harrier quartering the reedbeds at the back of Meare Heath and those at the rear of the group had good views. When we caught up with those who had gone on ahead, their disappointment at missing the Harrier was soon turned to elation as Andrew took them to Meare Heath hide and they had even better views of it.

Noah’s Lake was teeming with ducks, the vast majority of which were Wigeon. On the way to the hide we heard an Otter squealing in the reeds but sadly it didn’t show itself. From the hide we added Great Crested Grebe but sadly no Goldeneye. The cold wind encouraged us to press on as the thousands of Wigeon entertained us with their whistling calls and we were soon at the Starling roost site. The Starlings were coming in a little earlier tonight, and with the wind they weren’t keen on flying around to entertain us as they had last night. Most dropped straight in the reeds but, as the sun set, some swirled around as a lone Sparrowhawk spooked them.

Then, as we followed another huge flock of Starlings coming in, we were astonished to see a Glossy Ibis flying over us in the direction of Catcott Reserve. This is a rare bird indeed and quite a sighting. With the Starlings finishing off their massed ascent into the reeds, we marvelled at just how lucky we had been to see the spectacular displays of the previous evening.

We returned to the minibuses, still searching for the elusive Bittern but sadly with no luck on this occasion – a good reason for a return visit to this fantastic area. We ventured back to Wells to say our goodbyes and parted after a hugely enjoyable and fulfilling few days.

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## Bird List (✓ = recorded but not counted: H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			15	16
1	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	5	✓
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>		2
6	Great Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>	1	
7	Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	2	
8	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>		1
9	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
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	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	✓	
21	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		1
22	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	10	2
23	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
24	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓
25	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	2	2
26	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓
27	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>		23+
28	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	H	1+
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	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		H
36	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</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>	✓	✓
41	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			15	16
42	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	✓	✓
43	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
44	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
45	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	2	
46	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	✓
47	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	H	
48	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓	✓
49	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓
50	Northern Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
51	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
52	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	✓	
53	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓
54	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓
55	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	✓
56	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
57	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
58	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	3	
59	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	✓
60	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	H	H
61	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
62	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>		✓
63	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓	✓
64	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
65	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
66	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		✓
67	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>		✓
68	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		✓
69	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
70	Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓
71	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
72	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
73	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓
74	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
75	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
76	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
77	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	✓	✓
78	Lesser Redpoll	<i>Carduelis cabaret</i>	✓	✓
79	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
80	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	✓	
81	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓