

# The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

23 - 25 February 2012



Distant Common Cranes



Watching the Cranes



Wells Cathedral in winter sunshine



Common Coot

Report and images compiled by Ed Drewitt



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## Introduction

After a cold period of weather, our tour began at the start of a very warm spell, giving us the chance to explore the Somerset Levels and discover the many wildlife delights in glorious sunshine. From thousands of Golden Plovers to colourful ducks such as Wigeon, Teal, Pintail and Shovelers, we saw it all. Even the cryptically coloured Snipe finally revealed themselves! The group visited the full range of nature reserves across the region and highlights included displaying Great Crested Grebes doing their weed dance, a singing Marsh Tit, Bitterns and of course millions of Starlings coming in to roost in the reedbeds. We weren't just delighted by the sights either, the sounds of the Levels was cranking up with singing Cetti's Warblers, croaking Bitterns, bell-like Teal, squealing Water Rails and tinkling Great Tits. We finished the tour in glorious warm sunshine watching a large group of Common Cranes feeding together.

## Day 1

Thursday 23rd February

With some mild weather forecast, everyone was eager to immerse themselves on the levels and explore what was hiding in the reeds and wetlands. The group gathered pre-dinner 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 the evening floodlight. 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

## Friday 24th February

After a wholesome cooked breakfast we set off eagerly at 8.15am. It was a misty start and the levels felt atmospheric as the moisture hung between the trees and reeds. Our first stop was Natural England's Shapwick Heath which is a National Nature Reserve.

The reed beds and woodland were alive with birdsong especially Cetti's Warblers, Great Tits, Blue Tits, Wrens and the odd Reed Bunting. Meanwhile, Gadwall and Shoveler were feeding in the pools amongst the reeds. Water Rails were frequently calling or 'sharming', rather like a piglet in distress. As we walked along to the bridge, the subtle 'pinging' calls of Bearded Tits became evident and whilst they were distant at least three were seen flying up above the reeds before diving back down again. A little brown job moving around quite fast in the small bushes revealed itself as a Chiffchaff – perhaps an early arrival or a wintering bird?

We split into two groups and visited Noah's Hide and Meare Heath Hide. From Meare Heath hide the scene across the reeds was very peaceful and behind us in the woodland, Great Tits, Blue Tits and Redwings were busy singing.

On the way to the other hide, the first group found Siskins and a few Redpolls in the Alder Trees while Chaffinches and tits were feeding lower down. A Bittern was hidden in the reeds just off the path and after realising it had been seen, took off over the reeds. From Noah's Hide, the lake was busy with plenty of waterfowl. Hundreds of Wigeon were resting on the left of the lake while Tufted Ducks and Coots were feeding at the far end while a female Goldeneye rested on a tree stump. Little Grebes were filling the air with their laughing or 'whinnying' calls and a pair of Long-tailed Tits was building a nest close to the hide. A Great Spotted Woodpecker was drumming at the back of the woods. Cormorants in summer plumage were perched on flooded tree stumps and the odd Greylag Goose, Canada Goose and Mute Swan swam by. The odd Bittern could be heard revving itself up but not quite 'booming'. They sounded like a Chimpanzee pant hooting!

Two particular highlights included watching a displaying pair of Cormorants and a courting Great Crested Grebe couple. The Cormorants were especially ornate, showing off their erect crests, creamy-white throat patches and red-orange hues to the gape. The female was bending her head backwards over her mantle, showing off her throat and chattering her bill. The male crept closer and closer to her, his crest very evident before flying down to the water below. The Great Crested Grebes performed their elaborate courtship display – beginning with facing each other and preening their wing feathers before swimming away from each other, diving underwater and surfacing with some weed. They then swam towards each other and as they met, rose up with breasts touching, shaking their heads left and right in their super weed dance. A first for everyone who managed to see it!

We stopped briefly at the Avalon Marshes Centre for tea and comfort break before visiting the Somerset Wildlife Trust's Catcott Reserve where there were plenty of wild ducks to spot. The field, normally full of crows grazing during the summer was aplenty with Shovelers, Wigeon, Pintails and the odd Teal and Mallard. Wigeon were whistling and Shoveler making their nasally, sneezy calls. A Great White Egret was hunting at the back of the pool while to the right a Little Egret was bounding along looking for fish. Small numbers of Lapwings flew overhead and three Golden Plovers also made an appearance in flight. A Kestrel and a Buzzard were also spotted on the edges of the reserve.

Lunch beckoned and we visited the characterful Crown Inn at Catcott where we received a warm welcome, a roaring fire and delicious variety of homemade lunches including soups and jacket potatoes.

As we headed down to the RSPB's Ham Wall Reserve a Buzzard, Kestrel and a male Sparrowhawk were all viewed from the vehicles within metres of each other!

At Ham Wall we met with Chris Griffin from the RSPB who chatted with the group about the birds coming to some feeders by the Ashcott Corner car park – it was busy with Goldfinches, tits, a Robin and a few Dunnocks. On the reserve itself we enjoyed being immersed at the reedbed level, amongst the sounds from Water Rails, Cetti's Warblers and ducks. Paul spotted a Bittern rise up over the reeds while the pools were busy with lots of Pochards as well as Tufted Ducks. The main lake had Shovelers feeding close to the reeds while three male Pintails were upending in the deeper waters. Coots were abundant and many were raising their wings and turning their backs on each other in territorial disputes. One Coot was even collecting some weed, probably as nest material, before it disappeared amongst the reed stems. Walking around the Loxton's Marsh Trail, we found the feather remains of at least ten Starlings, evidence of predation from raptors. The Starlings are either taken when they come in to roost or birds of prey such as Marsh Harriers and even Bitterns pick up any dead birds which don't survive the night the next morning.

We sat at the farthest viewpoint and waited for half an hour or so watching what may fly past. Paul and Fiona spotted a female Marsh Harrier quartering the reeds and a Great White Egret flew low across the landscape before disappearing down. The odd Cormorant flew past and Blue Tits and Great Tits fed on the fluffy bulrushes, with bits of seeds floating away. A pair of Bullfinches also flew past alongside some Chaffinches.

We ventured back along to the main viewpoint and visited the small hides watching the Coots, Pochards and other waterfowl. At 4.30pm we gathered to listen to Chris's enthusiastic and fascinating insight into the lives of the Starlings and by 5pm the first flocks of Starlings, containing thousands of birds started to fly past and gather together. Suddenly, a huge dark cloud containing millions of Starlings moved across the distant landscape towards the edge of the reserve. The Amoeba-like presence just kept coming! And with the presence of the odd Kestrel, Sparrowhawk and Marsh Harrier, the Starlings frequently twisted and turned to create the tightly-packed swirls and changing shades of black we often see in photos or on tv. As they gathered at a pre-roost location they turned the trees of nearby farms black. It soon became obvious they were going to roost some distance away but we still enjoyed thousands more as they flew past in large, long ribbons. As we watched, small numbers of Pied Wagtails flew over to roost and another Bittern flew across the lake in front with a Grey Heron in tow for good comparison. We left the Starlings to warm up and finished off with a flock of 500 birds or so swirling around an area of reedbeds closer to the track.

We all had a chance to relax and refresh before meeting for a delicious dinner at 8pm before doing our checklist for the day and hearing all about Ed's research on Peregrines locally in the West.

## Day 3

## Saturday 25th February

After breakfast and checking out, we left the hotel at 8.30am and headed for the RSPB's Greylake Reserve. 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.

We spent an hour watching sleeping Snipe which were virtually invisible. Gradually everyone was able to see them stood amongst some reedy vegetation resulting in some wonderful 'oos and ahhs' from our group as the birds revealed themselves. Shovelers were busy feeding in the shallow waters across the reserve, often taking off with their distinctive humming sound of their wings. A few male Pintail were upending while a few hundred Wigeon were busy grazing in the shallow pools. Teal were also numerous, many sleeping near the Snipe and almost hidden, only their bright, green shiny wing feathers giving them away. A distant Buzzard was stood on a post and a Cormorant was perched on a gate. One or two Little Egrets were hanging around the edge of the pools and just before we left a Water Rail made a brief appearance by the hide, skulking below a patch of willow trees.

Before lunch we set off to Swell Wood, part of the RSPB's West Sedgemoor Reserve, to watch the Grey Herons busy tending to their nests up in the tops of the Oak trees and displaying in their pairs. Everyone had the opportunity to see these normally aquatic birds beginning their nesting season in the woodland which always starts early in the year. The adults had bright yellow-orange bills and pinkish legs, while their gargles and croaks added to the sounds of the tits and finches singing in the trees. A small pond in front of the hide proved fruitful with a few Goldcrests and a Nuthatch coming down to drink and wash. One of the Goldcrests was an obvious male with a bright, orange crest. A walk through the woods revealed a Marsh Tit which was calling and a little later singing, the latter a first experience for everyone in the group including the leaders! Four Ravens 'croaking' overhead was a highlight while a second helping of the herons before we left also meant a chance for a few to hear and briefly see a Treecreeper. The warm temperatures saw a Red Admiral butterfly coming out for the spring, flying through the woodland. A pool below on the West Sedgemoor Reserve was busy with lots of Wigeon.

Lunch beckoned and we enjoyed some local recipes courtesy of the King Alfred Pub at Burrowbridge, including the Somerset Smokey, smoked Haddock in a yummy, cheesy sauce with freshly made bread. Outside in the sunshine a Small Tortoiseshell butterfly was flying around by the River Parrett while Angela and Elizabeth spotted a Kingfisher which flew past.

After a rest, we drove down to Dewlands Farm, the HQ for the RSPB's staff on the Levels and set out across the fields to a bird hide fixed into a barn. We had a relaxing spring walk and the sunshine was bringing out the Buzzards and at least five were hanging in the air above the woodlands along the escarpment. One was incredibly pale and white. Before we reached the hide we could hear the cacophony of ducks and Lapwings calling across the reserve. A Chiffchaff was singing nearby, perhaps a wintering bird or an early spring migrant. From the hide we watched thousands of Golden Plovers, many in the sky, forming cloud-like flocks in the sky while thousands more lined up tightly packed along the shallow, ridges above the flooded reserve looking incredibly cryptic. Smaller numbers of Lapwings were also flying around, although many were spread across the pools feeding. Teal were numerous dabbling in the shallow waters alongside Shoveler, Pintail and Mallard. Starlings were also flocking with a few thousand or so flying in dark swarms over the reserve. Cormorants were resting on some banks of the pools while a few Dunlin scuttled between the feeding Lapwings.

On our walk back to the vehicles the Buzzards continued to soar overhead while a female Sparrowhawk flew across the fields into the woods. Stock Doves showed well in the sunshine, their blue-grey plumage, lack of white on the head and wings and the black outline to their wing feathers was the best giveaway to their identity.

As we were almost back a huge flock of Golden Plovers flickered in the sky in front of us, shining golden as they turned with their backs and tops of wings facing us. Visibility was excellent and we could see the whole way across the southern Somerset Levels with the Quantocks to the west and the Mendips to the north.

Our final destination for the day was Aller Moor on the River Parrett to look for the reintroduced Common Cranes ([thegreatcraneproject.org.uk](http://thegreatcraneproject.org.uk)). In the warm afternoon sun, 24 Common Cranes (of the 32 reintroduced onto the Levels) were busy feeding near a stand of Poplar trees and amongst bunches of rushes. These hatched in 2011 still had their brownish heads while those hatched in 2010 has more defined black, grey and white heads with some red patches. Many were feeding under a feeding station which releases grain for them to eat. Nearby a Mistle Thrush sang – like short bursts of Blackbird song, while a Greenfinch and some Chaffinches flew overhead. A pair of Magpies was hanging around close by and as we got back to the vehicles three Fieldfares flew overhead.

As we headed back to Wells in glorious, warm sunshine we stopped near Greinton as a few thousand Starlings adorned some trees by a farm, turning them black. When they took off they flew over the fields in a swirling, glittering mass and as we left they covered the grass below the legs of a flock of grazing sheep.

We arrived back late afternoon and said our farewells after two days of fully seeing and sensing the Somerset Levels and all the habitats and wildlife it has to offer.

Flickr link to photos from the trip: <http://flic.kr/s/aHsjyqbcqG>

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## Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted: h = heard only)

	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>	4	4
6	Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	3	
7	Great Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>	3	
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	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1	1
21	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	1+	
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>		24
26	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	h	1
27	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
28	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
29	Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		5,000+
30	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
31	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	10+
32	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		2
33	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		h
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	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	4	
38	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
39	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			24	25
40	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
41	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	h	
42	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>		h
43	Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	l	l
44	Eurasian Sky Lark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		2
45	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	8	l
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>	2	l
50	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	
51	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>		3
52	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
53	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
54	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	h	h
55	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	l	h
56	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	✓
57	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
58	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓	✓
59	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
60	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
61	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>		l
62	Bearded Tit	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>	3	
63	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		✓
64	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>		✓
65	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
66	Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓
67	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
68	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
69	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		4
70	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
71	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
72	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
73	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	l	l
74	Lesser Redpoll	<i>Carduelis cabaret</i>	3+	
75	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>	8+	
76	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
77	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓

### Mammals

1	European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		✓
2	Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>		✓

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			24	25

Butterflies

1	Small Tortoiseshell			1
2	Red Admiral			1

