

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

16 - 18 January 2013



Reed bunting by Reg Smart



Willows by Reg Smart



Starlings twisting by Stuart Elsom



Winter scene by Stuart Elsom

Report compiled by Ed Drewitt
Images by Ed Drewitt, Stuart Elsom and Reg Smart



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Introduction

On this, the first of our Beginners Tours, we had an exciting first day enjoying identifying all five common thrushes, the tit family including the scarcer Marsh Tit, and a variety of ducks from the tiny Teal to the colourful Shoveler. Reed Buntings were seen at close quarters feeding on a bird table, and Little Egrets couldn't be missed by a ditch or rhyne. We finished the day delighted by the sight of millions of Starlings coming in to roost – some of the large flocks contained tens of thousands of birds, and long ribbons of Starlings stretched across the sky. The flocks at one point twisted and rolling, moving like a wave, no doubt in response to an aerial predator. The final highlight was a male Marsh Harrier quartering the reedbeds. Despite heavy snowfall the next morning, we abandoned our plans to visit the Levels and spent the morning exploring the centre and adjacent countryside of Wells by foot, enjoying a real winter wonderland. There was a large winter movement of birds, particularly Redwings, Fieldfares, and Sky Larks overhead, and we were treated with the sight of a Dipper and a Grey Wagtail.

Day 1

Wednesday 16th January

With excitement and anticipation, our group met for a pre-dinner gathering in the warmth of the lounge at the Swan Hotel to mingle and learn of the plan for the next few days. Just outside, the glow of Wells Cathedral provided a beautiful setting. After a delicious dinner the group enjoyed an illustrated talk by Ed introducing the Somerset Levels, a little about its history, and what we expected to see over the next two days. We retired around 9pm, ready for a full day ahead.

Day 2

Thursday 17th January

After breakfast we set off to Swell Wood, part of the RSPB's West Sedgemoor reserve, where many of the woodland birds were visiting a feeder that had just been filled. This was a chance to study the Blue Tits, Great Tits, Coal Tits, and a Marsh Tit, finding out how to tell the difference between each species. On arrival a Great Spotted Woodpecker was feeding here too. A walk through the oak woodland revealed a few Goldcrests feeding in Ivy, more Blue Tits and some distant Jackdaws. Chaffinches were common and we often heard their 'pink pink' calls. We looked out across West Sedgemoor – an area of the Levels managed by the RSPB and used by local farmers to graze cattle during the summer. Today the whole area was completely flooded and it was remarkable seeing just how extensive the water was. Back at the car park we watched the tits, ensuring everyone saw the scarce Marsh Tit which was shyest out of them all.

We drove down to Dewlands Farm, the HQ for the RSPB's staff on the Levels and set out across the fields to the drove – we were unable to make it quite as far as the bird hide fixed into a barn due to the floods. However, there was plenty to see, and at a good vantage point we studied the different ducks including hundreds of Teal and Wigeon, smaller numbers of Pintail, Shoveler, Gadwall, and Mallard. Small numbers of Canada Geese were also out on the water along with some Mute Swans. A huge Raven flew past and Rooks were already gathering at their traditional nesting site down by a group of willows. Blackbirds were common on the edges of the field along with a few Redwings, while a Mistle Thrush was standing guard over a tree full of Mistletoe. Just off the drove we slowly walked towards a few Song Thrushes on the edge of the track, while a Bullfinch remained elusive in the brambles. The odd Dunnock was also hopping along the track.

On our walk back we had brilliant views of a very pale, almost white Buzzard – it moved between some favourite tree perches to nipping down to the ground to look for food, probably earthworms. Back at the farm buildings a pair of Kestrels had shown well before we set off, and one was nearby on our return, along with a darker coloured Buzzard. A Jay was calling in the nearby woods while a small flock of Long-tailed Tits were moving through the trees with their distinctive 'see see' calls.

Before lunch we drove across Aller Moor, by the River Parrett looking out for cranes. No luck, but lots of Lapwings and a chance to dive through the low, flooded landscape. We travelled a few miles down the road to the King Alfred pub at Burrowbridge for a fine lunch of soup, Somerset Smoky, a local smoked fish dish in a cheesy sauce, or delicious sandwiches made with freshly cooked bread. Ed also made a quick call on the Starling hotline to find out where the Starlings may be coming to roost that evening – they had been at the RSPB's Ham Wall reserve the evening before.

We were soon off again and briefly visited the RSPB's Greylake Reserve. Once fields full of potatoes, these wetlands are now full of shallow pools and Phragmites reeds, that play host to a variety of colourful and entertaining birds. We stayed close to the car park, and had excellent views of at least three Reed Buntings feeding on a bird table, allowing for comparison between them and the Chaffinches. A few Dunnocks, Robins, and a male Pied Wagtail were also feeding here. Meanwhile, the adjacent field was busy with Lapwings, Fieldfares, and Redwings. A Peregrine flew over, but disappeared off incredibly quick, perhaps after some prey.

At just after 3pm we headed off towards the RSPB's Ham Wall reserve, and while we waited for the Starlings to come in we had a closer look at the wildfowl including Tufted Ducks, Shoveler, Gadwall, Little Grebes, and Great Crested Grebes. A Kingfisher was heard. The air suddenly felt colder, no doubt a sign of the cold air moving in and snow yet to come. At 3.55pm, the first large group of Starlings arrived, heading towards the far end of the reserve. Over the next half an hour, small groups containing around 100 birds, and huge groups containing 10,000 individuals flew over the reserve. Many were landing in a huge tree on the edge of the reedbed turning it black. The flocks were arriving in long ribbons extending across the sky, and one in view provided all the 'oohs' and 'ahs' on cue from our group, as the Starlings reacted to a predator, making some incredible twists and turns in the sky. Another flock switched between looking jet-black against the cloud, and translucent as they changed direction. Over a million birds must have past us, and once it was clear they were going to roost away from our viewing point we headed back to the vehicles to warm up. A few Water Rails were heard from the reeds, sounding like a squealing pig.

With a little time to relax and shower, we met for a lovely 3-course meal at 7pm. After, the group reflected on the tour's delights by running through the checklist. This was followed by an illustrated talk by Ed Drewitt about his work on urban Peregrines.

Day 3

Friday 18th January

After heavy snow in the early hours of the morning, we awoke to at least three or four inches of snow covering Wells (and the West Country). After breakfast we decided to not attempt to visit the Levels, as the minor roads would be inaccessible. Instead we went for a two-hour walk from the hotel, past the cathedral and the Bishop's Palace, out across the fields, through some woodland, and back in to the city via a farm.

It was still snowing but despite the snow and cold temperatures, the water in the moat surrounding the Bishop's Palace was ice free and busy with Black-headed Gulls facing into the southwest wind, Mallards dabbling and even diving under water for food, a Moorhen, and a Grey Wagtail. Near the cathedral, pairs of Jackdaws were sitting in the trees, while Black-headed Gulls and the odd Lesser Black-backed Gull flew overhead. Walking across the snowy fields we met various friendly dogs, and watched a Sparrowhawk flying low across the white landscape before perching briefly on a farm gate. Nearby, a huge Raven was flying over a wood on a hill.

We ventured through some woodland where it was like something from *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*, with snow sat on top of the branches of Beech and Ash trees. Even the ferns growing on one tree branch were delicately holding the snow in place. The occasional Robin 'ticked' or flew across our path. We continued walking through a winter wonderland, and when we came out of the woodland we began to see the start of some cold weather movements – large flocks of birds migrating overhead in response to the sudden snow. Groups of Redwings, Fieldfares, Lapwings, Starlings, Skylarks, a few Meadow Pipits, and finches were flying overhead. These species which seemed more elusive yesterday were suddenly very obvious and vocal.

Walking back towards the centre of Wells we passed by a farm with cows. Hundreds of hungry Starlings now with nothing to eat in the fields were visiting some nearby barns, cows, and silage to feed. Fences and gutters saw Starlings all lined up in rows, most facing in the same direction with the odd one facing the other way. Meanwhile, others were on the ground or probing in a huge mound of silage. Amongst them, small numbers of Chaffinches, and a few Sky Larks were busy searching for food.

As we moved on, we looked down into the fast-flowing stream from a small bridge where Ian spotted a lovely male Grey Wagtail showing off his lemon-yellow breast. Suddenly a Dipper came in to view – a first for the Somerset Levels trip ever! It didn't stay long, and flew a little upstream, dipping into the water before coming to rest out of view. Just a little smaller than a Starling, the Dipper is a chocolate-brown bird with a bright white breast. More Redwings and Fieldfares continued to fly overhead, while a few dropped in to nearby trees where some Great Tits and Long-tailed Tits were feeding.

Arriving back at the hotel around 11.30am, we met together for a hot chocolate or tea, before finishing the trip early as members of the group left early to get through the weather and roads home. The drive back to the M5 motorway was an incredibly snowy scene, and more flocks of Redwings, Fieldfares, Sky Larks, and also Lapwings were flying overhead

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2013 Naturetrek Group in the snow by Ed Drewitt

Species List

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	January	
			17	18
1	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	3	
2	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	3	
3	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	6+	
4	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	
5	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	10+	
6	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	
7	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	
8	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	✓	
9	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	✓	
10	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	
11	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	
12	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	✓	
13	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	✓	
14	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	
15	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		1
16	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	1 male	
17	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	
18	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	3+	
19	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	h	
20	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
21	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	
22	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
23	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
24	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		2+
25	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
26	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
27	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓
28	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
29	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	
30	Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	h	
31	Eurasian Sky Lark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		12+
32	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	8	1
33	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		2
34	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		2+
35	Northern Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	h	
36	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
37	Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>		1
38	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	2	
39	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	2+	
40	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	6+	100+

41	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>		100+
42	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
43	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
44	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	h	h
45	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	2	1
46	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
47	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>	✓	✓
48	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
49	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
50	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	1	
51	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	1	
52	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	h	
53	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
54	Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓
55	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
56	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
57	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	1	1
58	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	Million plus	500+
59	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
60	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
61	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	1	
62	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
63	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	3+	

Mammals

1	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	1	
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Group on the levels by Reg Smart