

# The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

1 - 3 February 2013

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Catcott Lows Reserve



The sky blackens with Starlings



Watching the Bearded Tits at Westhay Moor



Waiting for the Starlings

Report compiled by Dave Nevitt & David Tattersfield



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## Introduction

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 cold weather across Britain several weeks previously, many of the birds had escaped the cold weather and headed south. Fortunately for us, milder weather had ensued and they had all returned. The flooding that had been headline news for several months was certainly much in evidence but did not significantly hamper our progress. Indeed, the presence of so much floodwater ensured that we encountered huge numbers of birds throughout the trip. The Starlings gave a magnificent display on the first evening as they came in to their reedbed roost, accompanied by several birds of prey. The display the second evening was equally impressive but quite different, with the birds moving swiftly into the trees and reeds because of the strong wind. The massive “whoosh” as they repeatedly took flight will stay with us for a long time to come. Everyone agreed that whilst this is an impressive sight on television, on location it is quite fantastic...

## Day 1

**Friday 1st February**

The group assembled in the evening, 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 the leaders, Dave and David, 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 the elusive Bittern and Otter also popular; our leaders left us with no doubt that we would be lucky to encounter either of these last two!

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 all!

## Day 2

## Saturday 2nd 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 Swell Wood, where we put out seed and peanuts in the car park and we were soon joined by an eager selection of birds including Blue, Great and Coal Tits and Chaffinches. Dave explained the differences between the three Tits and we all studied the book to appreciate how to tell them apart. Great Spotted Woodpeckers were very much in evidence, calling in the treetops as they staked out their claims to territory.

Moving on to the hide, we were unfortunate to not see any nesting Grey Herons in the trees – obviously the recent cold weather had delayed the start of their nesting season by several weeks. We were however treated to two Nuthatches on the feeders and we enjoyed watching these endearing birds going both upwards and downwards on the feeders and tree-trunks. We then walked through the wood to the lookout over the flooded Levels. It was an impressive sight indeed as water stretched as far as the eye could see. Two Ravens flying overhead gave tantalising glimpses through the trees. On our return to the car park we picked out a Marsh Tit, lots of Coal Tits and Britain's smallest bird, a Goldcrest. Two Marsh Tits then showed to some of the group on the peanuts in the car park and we were able to see how these are predominantly brown rather than the yellows and blues of the previous three Tit species.

We then moved to Dewlands Farm, the headquarters for the RSPB in the area and the centre of its West Sedgemoor reserve. After using the facilities, we headed across the fields in the glorious sunshine towards the hide. On the way we spotted three Stock Doves in a tree, before a superb Peregrine flew lazily overhead towards the flooded meadows. Long-tailed Tits were in the hedgerows and Rooks coo-ed from their treetop nests. Making our way down to the water's edge, we were unable to get to the hide because of the flooding but we had views across the marsh of thousands of ducks. The telescope came into its own and soon we were enjoying views of several beautiful Pintails as well as Tufted Ducks, Shoveler and thousands of Wigeon. On the way back, a piping whistle call alerted us to the presence of several Bullfinches but sadly they didn't oblige us with good views.

We then headed for our last stop of the morning, at Aller Moor to look for the Cranes. We were nearly there when we screeched to a stop to admire a magnificent Barn Owl as it hunted along the water's edge just a few metres from the minibuses. How fantastic! We carried on to Aller Moor, where we were treated to the sight of 46 Cranes settled comfortably in a field. These birds are part of the Great Crane Project that is bringing eggs from nests on the Continent, rearing them at Slimbridge then releasing them here on the Levels with a view to establishing a self-sustaining breeding population in this wonderful wilderness. Several of them made short flights, when we were able to appreciate their huge size. We reflected on how lucky we were to see such a flock – it has been over 150 years since such a sight has occurred in Britain! We also saw hundreds of Golden Plover in a distant field.

We then moved on to the King Alfred pub for a well-earned lunch of delicious home-made food. Refreshed, we then proceeded to Greylake RSPB reserve, where we enjoyed superb views of very close Snipe, their camouflaged plumage making them disappear against the cut reeds. A Marsh Harrier entertained us as it hunted over the grass and rushes; a Buzzard kept a beady eye open for its next meal from a fence top perch. Little Egrets rose from distant channels, their white plumage very conspicuous in flight. By the car park we took advantage of the superb light conditions in the sunshine to admire the Fieldfares, Redwings and Lapwings that were busy feeding on worms in the meadow.

Time was pressing on and the Starlings would soon be roosting so we then headed for the Avalon Marshes Visitor Centre at Shapwick. After a warming cup of hot chocolate, we made our way along the raised path of the disused railway line to give us an elevated view across what we hoped would be the roost site. We used our local knowledge and moved further down the track from the assembled masses, and then at 16:45 the show began! Looking across the reeds and bushes towards the beautiful orange sunset, you could believe that nothing was happening. But a view through our binoculars revealed that huge throngs of tens of thousands of Starlings were amassing from the other side of the valley. Closer they came, to be joined by many other huge flocks from all directions. Swirling masses filled the sky. The group fell silent, in awe at the spectacle in front of us! We estimated that there were about 2.5 million Starlings present!!

Such a ready supply of food inevitably brought in the predators – two Sparrowhawks, several Buzzards and a Hen Harrier appeared to try to catch their supper. We also saw a Peregrine with a starling in its talons flying off to devour its meal. As darkness fell, the evening sounds of the reed bed were all around us – Water Rails screamed from near and far, Cetti's Warblers announced their presence with their loud outbursts of song; we were further treated to the distant boom of a Bittern and the 'ping' of a Bearded Tit as it went to roost. The show over, we walked back to the minibuses in amazement at the wonder that we had just witnessed.

Returning to the hotel, we enjoyed some time to relax before another lovely dinner. We retired with coffee to the Exmoor Room to do our checklist for the day and to brief the group on our plans for tomorrow, before retiring to bed.

## Day 3

## Sunday 3rd February

After a good night's sleep and a hearty breakfast, we headed out for the most northerly valley of the Levels today. Our first stop was at Westhay Moor National Nature Reserve, run by the Somerset Wildlife Trust. We were soon treated to superb views through the telescope of Gadwall, a dabbling duck that has been gradually spreading across Britain. We were able to see them "up-ending" to feed, and the amazing intricacies of their plumage. We heard the strident calls of the Cetti's Warbler but, true to form, they refused to reveal themselves! A little further along the path, and a slight movement in the reeds eventually showed a pair of stunning Bearded Tits! This rare bird, restricted to the reedbeds, is just starting to colonise the Levels but is still a prized find. We were amazed as these birds gave astonishing views from only a few metres away for 20 minutes!

Tearing ourselves away from the Bearded Tits, we pressed on to the hide. Here we saw more ducks, but this time as the water was deeper, they were diving ducks – Tufted Ducks. A female Marsh Harrier quartered the reeds and then perched up for all to see. Blue Tits moved through the reedbeds searching for insects and Reed Buntings perched atop bushes to proclaim their territory with their monotonous song.

We could not get to the Tower hide because of the flooding so we headed along the main track, encountering several more Bearded Tits before it was time to return to the minibuses.

Next stop was the pub for a comfort break, followed by Catcott Lows Reserve, another Somerset Wildlife Trust reserve. Here we were treated to large numbers of duck that included dabbling duck in the name of Teal, Shoveler, Mallard, Gadwall and Pintail, with the only diving duck being Tufted Duck. We were very lucky to see a Great White Egret giving excellent views – this species bred locally in 2012; the first breeding ever in Britain. This was obviously a major event that shows just how significant an area of unspoilt habitat the Levels provides. At least 70 Snipe were intermittently flying around as dry land to stand on was at a definite premium with the high water levels. We saw the lone Whooper Swan in the distance as it popped its head up out of the grass to check for predators! Then up went the cry of “Peregrine” and everyone’s eyes turned skywards to marvel at this top avian predator as he terrorised the duck and wader populations. He flew off this time without a kill, and this was our group’s cue that it was time for lunch, so we returned to the Crown pub, who served us very welcome home cooking to warm us up. We saw some Starlings amassing in a field by the pub – a sign that it would not be long before their thoughts turned to roosting...

We drove to Ashcott Corner and were very lucky to get the last two parking spaces! We headed out towards the RSPB Ham Wall reserve and were soon all getting fantastic views of an adult male Marsh Harrier! Several years ago this would have been an extremely rare sight here, but as the reedbeds mature these birds have been colonising and there are now at least four birds wintering this year. As if to prove this point, this bird was then joined by a second bird – an immature male! Dave heard a Kingfisher calling its high-pitched whistle but we couldn’t pin it down. Then, a little further on, there he was – perched up in a willow tree. All the group members finally got excellent views through the telescope, plus views of his mate who joined him in the tree. It was a special moment because seeing such a beautiful and iconic bird was a first for some and others hadn’t seen one for decades!

Pressing on to the viewing platform, we did some more revision of what we had learned about identifying the ducks whilst waiting in vain for that Bittern! We had further views of Marsh Harrier and, from the three small hides, Great Crested Grebes resplendent in their summer finery. A lone Cormorant also looked splendid in his summer coat. We didn’t want to miss the spectacle of the Starling roost, so we returned to Ashcott Corner and then walked on towards Shapwick Heath. We witnessed the varied habitat of long deep pools, reed-fringed edges and willow-topped banks left by the peat extraction and then we found large quantities of Freshwater Mussels on the banks of the rhynes. Dave explained that these had been crushed by the otters and said “this is as close as you will come to seeing an otter on this trip!”. 100 metres further on, Dave checked another long pool for the elusive Bittern but to no avail. David, following 20 paces behind, thought the pool was worth another look, and, by gum, so it was...for there he spotted an OTTER, not 75 metres away, and it proceeded to come and go from the edge of the reeds several times!! Gary selflessly rounded up other members of the group as the Otter came out again and swam across the open water. What a sighting! And a first for Naturetrek Somerset Levels Trips... Well done David!

We pressed on in the increasingly cold wind to Noah’s Lake, where the throngs of duck were quite impressive and a flock of Greylag Geese in a distant field were new for the trip.

By now the Starlings had started to come in, but it was obvious that their behaviour was going to be completely different from yesterday. The chilly wind meant that instead of large swirling flocks, today they kept low and streamed in along “Starling Motorways” just above reed-top height. The roost site was in a similar location to yesterday but a little closer to our path and the birds dropped quickly into the surrounding trees or directly into the reeds. We watched through the telescope at the throngs that blackened the vegetation that they descended upon. A feature that we hadn’t appreciated so well yesterday was the sound that they made. Cupping our hands round our ears to amplify the sound, there was a massive “whoosh” as Buzzards made repeated passes at the birds. It sounded like a plane’s jet engines revving up for take-off! We were very lucky to not only witness the roost very well both nights, but also to have two completely different experiences.

Alas it was now time to leave so, still buzzing with excitement, we made our way back to the minibuses and on to Wells, where the trip came to a close. As we said our goodbyes, all agreed that we had been treated to two fantastic days of the very best that the Somerset Levels has to offer.

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## Species Lists

Birds (H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			2	3
1	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		H
2	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		✓
3	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	10	5
4	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	6	5
5	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	15	6
6	Great Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>	2H	1H
7	Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		4
8	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
9	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		1
10	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		15
11	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	20	
12	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	✓	✓
13	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>		30
14	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓
15	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
16	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	6	10
17	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	10	30
18	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	2	20
19	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	20	40
20	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	2	4
21	Eurasian Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	1	
22	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	2	2
23	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
24	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	1	1
25	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	2	1
26	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		✓
27	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>		46
28	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	4H	6H
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>	200	
33	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	50	70
34	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓
35	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓
36	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓
37	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
38	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓
39	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	3	
40	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			2	3
41	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
42	Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>	1	
43	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		2
44	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	6	1
45	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	1	
46	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓
47	Northern Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
48	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
49	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		2H
50	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	50	20
51	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	1000	2000
52	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
53	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
54	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	2	
55	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	2H	6H, 1S
56	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	1	
57	Bearded Tit	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>	1H	6
58	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
59	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	2	
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>	2	
64	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	1H	
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>	3	
70	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	2.5M	2.5M
71	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
72	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
73	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>	6	
74	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
75	Common Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	3	
76	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	10	2

## Mammals

Eurasian Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>		1
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Red fungus growing on decaying twigs at Ashcott Corner – Scarlet Elf Cup – *Sarcosypha austriaca*