

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

14 - 16 February 2013



Starlings by Patrick Morton



Waterfowl at West Sedgemoor by Patrick Morton



Group walking at Shapwick by Ed Drewitt



Starlings by Anita Bathurst

Report compiled by Ed Drewitt
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Introduction

With some warm winter sunshine, and a hint of spring just around the corner, this two-day tour lifted spirits, and provided a great chance to see thousands of ducks and waders, experience the sight of millions of Starlings, and to hear a reed bed soundscape. Small birds such as Chaffinches, Cetti's Warblers, and Coal Tits were now singing, while Grey Herons were busy at their nests at Swell Wood. The fog each morning added some atmosphere to the unique wetlands, and as the mist faded, good views of Snipe, Water Rail and Reed Buntings were had. The Starlings didn't disappoint, and their huge shadow-like flocks were spectacular against a colourful sunset sky.

Day 1

Thursday 14th February

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 Charles 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

Friday 15th February

With patchy sunshine and fog, we set off to visit Natural England's Shapwick Heath reserve. Birdsong was revving up with Chaffinches, Song Thrushes, Robins, Reed Bunting, and Cetti's Warblers all singing. There were also the regular screaming calls of Water Rails 'sharming'.

Along the main track we saw a small group of Goldfinches, and a few Chaffinches. The pools were busy with Coots, Gadwall, Tufted Ducks, Mute Swans, and Teal. Many of the Gadwalls were swimming around in groups of four to six birds, and a few males were mating with females. Spring wasn't far away! A Kingfisher also flew past us, and across the reed bed.

We split into two groups, either heading towards Meare Hide, or Noah's Hide. Redpolls were feeding on seeds on the water's surface in the Alder Carr, some males sporting their red foreheads chests. From Noah's Hide, we looked out across a constantly flooded part of the reserve – there were hundreds of ducks, mainly Wigeon, Teal, and Gadwall. With some further scanning, we also found Cormorants, Mallards, Pochards, Tufted Ducks, and a Great Crested Grebe. A few Snipe were sitting alongside some resting ducks and a Mute Swan. A flock of 20 Golden Plovers flew in, and circled around low over the reeds. Meanwhile, a Kingfisher was calling nearby, and Little Grebes were very vocal.

With the recent clearance of the reed bed, birds have been much easier to see from the Meare Hide. The first group had superb views of a Bittern as it flew across the pool in gorgeous winter sunshine, while a female Smew was swimming in the open water. Mallards, and Teal were resting on the banks, and a flock of Lapwings were flying into the distant mist. The woodlands were busy behind us with a few Jays 'screeching', and Great Tits singing. A Great Spotted Woodpecker was also heard 'drumming'. As we made our way back to the car park, two Kingfishers were perched together in a tree on the edge of the open pool before they flew across the reed bed.

After a few hours birding, we headed for the Avalon Marshes Centre where we stopped for a comfort stop, and Amy, who runs the café, served us fresh tea and coffee. Feeders nearby gave us close views of Reed Buntings, Great Tits, and Starlings. The sunshine was warm, and spirits were high. Even a local Buzzard was soaring on some low thermals nearby.

We then moved on to Somerset Wildlife Trust's Catcott reserve – normally a meadow with grazing cows during the summer, it couldn't be more different today. Flooded, and full of hundreds of ducks, it was a real winter wildfowl scene. Wigeon, Shoveler, Teal, and some Pintail were busy feeding and resting in front of us, some very close. For some reason, they all took off and circled round, but came down quickly. In good winter sunshine, everyone caught up with the various species, and there was particular delight in seeing male Pintail with their chocolate-brown heads. At the back of the pool we had good comparisons of Grey Heron, Little Egret, and a Great Egret, all very close to each other. A distant Kestrel was circling round, and a Skylark flickered past.

Lunch was calling, so we drove a little way up the road to the Crown Inn, on the edge of Catcott Village itself, for some jacket potatoes, impressive Ploughman's, and delicious homemade soups and bread. Nicely filled, warmed, and delighted with the food, we made headway to our next destination.

A little way down the road, we visited the Somerset Wildlife Trust's Westhay Moor. The pools were busy with Gadwall, and a small group of Wigeon. A Coot was taking some weed to make a nest, and Chris caught sight of a Great Crested Grebe. From the first hide, things were relatively quiet apart from a few ducks, and the odd Snipe flying over. However, it gave everyone the chance to appreciate the landscape, and get a feel of the reedbed habitat.

We walked along a little further to a hide embedded in the reeds. A pair of Gadwall was feeding close by, and the vegetation looked particularly yellow in the sunshine. A Kestrel was perched on a distance tree, while a few Great Tits passed by.

With time getting on, we popped back to the Avalon Marshes Centre for a comfort stop and a quick cuppa. After some good views of the buntings, tits (including Long-tailed Tits), and Starlings on the feeders, we headed off to the RSPB's Ham Wall reserve. We arrived around 4pm, and while we waited for the Starlings we looked at the various wildfowl including Tufted Ducks, Gadwall, Teal, Mallards, and a few Wigeon. A Great Egret, Grey Herons, and a few Little Egrets flew past at various times. Small flocks of Fieldfares and a flock of Redwings also passed over on their way to roost throughout the evening. A male Marsh Harrier quartered the reedbed.

At 5.10pm, the first small groups of Starlings arrived. Over the next 35 minutes, small groups containing around 100 birds, and huge groups containing 10,000 individuals flew over the reserve and disappeared. After 15 minutes or so, the small flocks turned into huge shadows filling the beautiful sunset sky. An aeroplane exhaust trail was bright white against the darkening sky, and in front of it, hundreds of thousands of Starlings moved across from the direction of Shapwick and past us. While over a million Starlings turned the trees and fields black at the far end of Ham Wall black, another huge cloud of Starlings moved in from the west. It was incredible to think there could be any more of these birds to arrive! A smaller, satellite flock of a few hundred birds decided to settle close to the first platform, turning the reeds black. Meanwhile, high above the reedbed, a dark moving dot turned out to be a Woodcock flying out to feed for the night. As the light faded, a Marsh Harrier flew over the reeds behind us. Gobsmacked at just how many Starlings we had witnessed, we ventured back to the vehicles with the odd sound of Water Rails to remind us of where we were.

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

Saturday 16th 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 play host to good numbers of Snipe, Reed Buntings and Teal. In the car park, a few bird tables were attracting a Robin, five Reed Buntings, and various tits. Despite the morning being foggy, and visibility poor, we still managed to see many Snipe, and appreciate the atmosphere of the reserve. A few almost invisible Snipe were spotted – they were incredibly well camouflaged. But when a crow flew past, many other Snipe suddenly appeared out of nowhere, either taking flight or running out of their hidey-hole! Once the crow had moved, the Snipe slowly walked back to their original resting places. Out of the fog we could hear the ringing calls of Teal – hundreds were out there, but we couldn't see one. However, a few Little Grebes, now in breeding plumage, were diving nearby and visible. To the left of the hide, Brian suddenly spotted a Water Rail – and as the group managed to see it pecking out around muddy puddles, another also appeared. They quickly skulked away, before re-appearing a little time later giving some lovely views of their plumage, and flicking tails. A few others could also be heard 'sharming' in the reeds.

After a brief comfort stop in Langport, 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. From the car park we could hear all sorts of squawks and gurgling sounds! Meanwhile, the birdfeeders scattered around the car park were busy with Blue Tits, Great Tits, Coal Tits and at least one Marsh Tit. With some patience, everyone got a good view of the latter species which is shy, and tended to visit the ground for food. Watching the herons, a pair of Nuthatches was feeding on another feeder close to the hide, while a Treecreeper was creeping up a tree and calling. Meanwhile, a Great Spotted Woodpecker was calling nearby. A short walk to a view across the West Sedgemoor Reserve also revealed a Goldcrest, and a chance to see volunteer's coppicing the hazel trees to help provide a better habitat for wildlife.

As we headed across the Levels, we stopped to watch a female Kestrel perched on a post, just metres away. With a little time before lunch we stopped at a site looking across Aller Moor on the River Parrett to look for the reintroduced Common Cranes (thegreatcraneproject.org.uk). Despite passing through some thick fog, the landscape here was clear of mist and it wasn't long before Anita found a few cranes. Three were seen in the end, probing into the ground for invertebrates and plant roots. Nearby a Buzzard was perched on fencing, and on the flooded field nearby Lapwings, Golden Plovers and a few Dunlins were foraging. Suddenly, a group of around 20 cranes took flight and landed close to their feeding station – they receive extra food during poor weather. There are 52 living on the levels, and in this smaller group we saw a mix of first-year birds and older birds from the 2010, 2011, and 2012 releases. A few Grey Herons, Little Egrets and two Roe Deer were also nearby.

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.

After lunch 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. The Barn Owl box in the barn showed recent signs of activity with various pellets on the ground below. Despite thick fog just before lunch, 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. The flooded fields in front of us were full of hundreds of Wigeon, Teal, Pintail, Shoveler, Mallards, Lapwings, and Canada Geese. With water levels high after a winter of heavy rain, the waterfowl were spread right across the landscape. At least 12 Little Egrets were feeding and resting together.

Hilary suddenly called out "Starlings", and far across, on the other side of the reserve, a few hundred were twisting and turning in response to a predator. Simultaneously, pretty much all the ducks, geese and some swans took to the air – whichever direction we looked in, flocks of all the various species were flying around. There must have been a Peregrines or another raptor around, but we were unable to see it. The spectacle lasted five to ten minutes, before everything slowly came down and landed again. We headed back to the vehicles in glorious afternoon sunshine. A flock of fifty or so Redwings flew out of the nearby woodland and off into the later afternoon sky.

As we headed back to Wells a small group of Little Egrets were sitting in a field, while a ploughed field was hosting some Lapwings and Golden Plovers. 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.

Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			15	16
1	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	✓	2+
2	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓	✓
3	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓
4	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓
5	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	2+	
6	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	6+	20+
7	Great Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>	1	
8	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
9	Whooper Swan or Bewick's Swan	<i>Cygnus sp</i>		1
10	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	h	
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	Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	✓	✓
19	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
20	Smew	<i>Mergus albellus</i>	1	
21	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1	
22	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	1	
23	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
24	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	3+
25	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓
26	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>		20+
27	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	h	2+
28	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
29	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
30	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
31	Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	20	40
32	Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>	1	
33	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	6	20+
34	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		h
35	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		10
36	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
37	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		1
38	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
39	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
40	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	2	

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			15	16
41	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓
42	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	2	2
43	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	
44	Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	3	
45	Eurasian Sky Lark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	1	
46	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	4	1
47	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		1
48	Northern Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
49	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
50	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	
51	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	20	40
52	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	100	20
53	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
54	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
55	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	h	h
56	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		2
57	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
58	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>		✓
59	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
60	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
61	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>		1
62	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		2
63	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	1	1
64	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	h	
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 Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	Million plus	500+
70	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
71	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
72	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	1	
73	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	6+	✓
74	Lesser Redpoll	<i>Carduelis cabaret</i>	12+	
75	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	4+	6+

Mammals

1	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>		2
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2013 Naturetrek Group on the Levels, and a Nuthatch - by Patrick Morton