

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

23 - 25 February 2013



Wells Cathedral



Catcott Lows Reserve



Wrapped up to watch the Grey Herons nesting



Descending Burrow Mump

Report and images compiled by Dave Nevitt and David Tattersfield



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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 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 had significantly abated and did not hamper our progress. Indeed, the fact that the floodwater had receded meant that the huge numbers of water birds in the area were concentrated on the remaining watery areas. The weather was cold throughout the trip but everyone came well prepared and wrapped up well. We also arranged a couple of extra coffee stops to keep everyone well fuelled. The Starlings gave a magnificent display on the first evening as they came in to their reedbed roost. Although they were rather distant, our excellent vantage point enabled us to get panoramic views of the whole event. The display the second evening was equally impressive and greater in scale, with the birds moving swiftly into the trees and reeds because of the strong wind. Their chattering in the reedbeds was audible for miles. Everyone agreed that whilst this is an impressive sight on television, on location it is quite fantastic!

Day 1

Saturday 23rd 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 Oak 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

Sunday 24th 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 at Westhay Moor National Nature Reserve, run by the Somerset Wildlife Trust. As we arrived, a Reed Bunting was giving its monotonous song from a tree near the car park. 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 we briefly heard the call of the Bearded Tit. We stopped to listen and even tried to lure him out with a recording. Unfortunately, with a bitter north-easterly wind blowing, he was staying well down in the base of the reeds, and we couldn’t blame him for that!

We pressed on to the shelter of the first 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 looking for its next meal. We then moved on to the Tower Hide, and we were indeed fortunate to actually SEE a Cetti’s Warbler in the reeds – a rare sighting and no mistake! Some Snipe circled around, looking for somewhere dry to land. Then a few small ripples appeared at the back of the pool – an Otter! Sadly he didn’t stay around but several in the group managed to see him. Standing around in the open hide, many were getting cold so we kept moving and tried the track further up the drove to look for Bearded Tits. Sadly the cold, windy weather was against us and we returned to the vehicles without seeing them.

Next stop was the pub for a comfort break, and because of the cold weather we had also arranged for coffee to be available at the pub. Despite the temptation to stay there until lunch, everyone then returned to Catcott Lows Reserve for a bird-filled 45 minutes before lunch. We saw hundreds of Wigeon, Teal, Shoveler and some splendid Pintail, resplendent in their chocolate-coloured heads. A single Whooper Swan gave us strange views as it popped its head up from the sedges at the back of the reserve and a smart Kestrel used the convenience of a nearby telegraph pole to devour its meal and was admired in the telescope. Finally, two small specs in distant sedges turned out to be Stonechats.

“Time for lunch” was greeted by a stampede of frozen birdwatchers rushing to the buses! As always, the Crown Inn served up lovely home-made food including delicious soups and jacket potatoes that made us feel heartily refreshed. 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 parking spaces. We headed west to Shapwick Heath along the disused railway line and were soon enjoying a Great Spotted Woodpecker in the telescope as well as Long-tailed Tits in the bushes. We scanned the reedbeds for the hoped-for Bittern or Marsh Harrier but they weren't coming out in this cold wind! 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. David explained that these had been crushed by the otters.

At the bridge the group split in to two to visit the hides in turn. On the way to the Meare Heath hide several Goldcrests were enjoyed and Lesser Redpolls showed in amongst the flocks of feeding Chaffinches. At the hide itself, one group was lucky in seeing not one but two Marsh Harriers – a sub-adult male and a female – hunting together over the reeds.

The path to Noah's Lake hide again produced Lesser Redpolls, but this time a sizeable flock including a splendid male with a pink breast. A badger set was very obvious next to the path, quite a surprise as it was only 60cm above the water table! From the hide itself, many duck were on view, including diving duck as the water is deeper here. These included Tufted Ducks, Pochard and an elusive Goldeneye. We enjoyed watching the Cormorants, some in fine breeding plumage, sitting on the dead trees which would soon become their nest sites. One of these dead trees also housed a Great Spotted Woodpecker that appeared to be excavating a nest hole. It certainly seemed like a secure location for one! But the highlight for many was the Kingfishers. On entering the hide we had been hearing at least two of them calling repeatedly but it wasn't until much scanning of the trees that Simon found one perched up. We were then treated as it flew in front of the hide for all to see before being joined by a second bird. What stunners they are!

We headed back east to Ashcott Corner car park then on to RSPB Ham Wall for the Starling roost. On the walk there we started to see ever larger flocks of Starlings accumulating in the distance. We were also very pleased to see two Great White Egrets flying over. 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.

On reaching the viewpoint at Ham Wall, the Starling flocks were amassing in their thousands. Although quite distant at the back of the reedbed, through binoculars and the telescope, the scale of the spectacle became clear as trees were turned black with tens of thousands of birds perched on them. As there was a biting north-easterly wind, the birds kept low and weren't up for the hoped-for swirling flocks flowing across the sky. Instead they poured along "Starling Motorways" low to the reeds to reach their intended roosting locations. Despite being some way off, we could still hear the chatter from the huge flocks in the reeds. We estimated that there were over 1 million birds present – an amazing spectacle truly worthy of standing out in the cold to witness.

As the show came to a close with the fading light, we headed back to the buses. Returning to the hotel, we enjoyed some time to relax before another lovely dinner. We retired with coffee to the Oak Room to do our checklist for the day and to brief the group on our plans for tomorrow, before an early bed.

Day 3

Monday 25 February

After a good night's sleep and a hearty breakfast, we headed out for the most southerly valley of the Levels today.

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. We had just got to grips with these three Tit species when our main quarry arrived – the elusive Marsh Tit. He came down repeatedly to pinch a peanut and gave the whole group great views. We were able to see its mainly brown plumage, in contrast to the blues and yellows of the other Tits. Moving on to the hide, we had excellent views of the Grey Herons nesting in the oak trees above our heads. Their croaks and gargling calls certainly went well with their ungainly appearance in the tree tops.

We then walked through the wood to the lookout over the Levels. The woodland was quite quiet, no doubt because the birds were keeping their heads down and feeding quietly in the cold wind. We did hear a Nuthatch and a Treecreeper but neither blessed us with views. At the lookout we could start to get a sense of scale of the Levels habitat as it stretched for miles!

We then moved to Dewlands Farm, the headquarters for the RSPB in the area and the centre of its West Sedgemoor reserve. After meeting our contact Trish and using the facilities, we headed across the fields, all wrapped up against the cold. Overhead we picked up Buzzards using the updraughts to soar, and 3 Ravens glided by as they gave their characteristic croaks. A single Stock Dove flew away into the hillside woodland, Long-tailed Tits were in the hedgerows and Rooks coo-ed from their treetop nests.

Making our way down to the Barn Hide, we had views across the marsh of huge numbers 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. The water had receded considerably in the last few weeks, this concentrating the duck on the remaining water. Chris's sharp eyes were the first to spot three Cranes feeding amongst the sedges. We soon had the scopes on them and everyone had good views. 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.

We scanned the fence posts for raptors but without any luck – astonishing, considering the food supply available to them. They must have fed already this morning. Then up went the shout “Cranes flying” and we were all treated to the marvellous spectacle of the three Cranes in majestic flight. Then we spotted another group of Cranes flying in – 13 this time, then another 4. They flew back and forth before four settled in a field in front of us. They clearly thought that Spring was in the air as they displayed to each other, dancing, leaping in the air and calling excitedly. What a superb event to witness! Dave said we should use our binoculars to scan the marsh from one side to the other and it was absolutely choc-a-bloc with ducks from horizon to horizon. What a brilliant memory of the Levels to take away.

Then it was time to head back to the buses and onwards. We had planned on another stop for the Cranes but with such superb experiences already, there was no need. We did, however, have a brief stop at Aller Moor, where we saw a Black Swan in amongst the Mutes and another 8+ Cranes.

We were just about to adjourn for lunch when Dave said “Anyone want to see a Merlin?” A juvenile female was perched inconspicuously on some fallen branches and, despite moving several times, stayed for all the group members to have repeated excellent views through the telescope. What a spectacular bird to finish the morning with, especially so, as there haven’t been many Merlins around this winter...

We then moved on to the King Alfred pub for a well-earned lunch of delicious home-made food, including the fabulous Somerset Smokie for some! Most of the group climbed Burrow Mump, adjacent to the pub, which gave an excellent view over the expanse of King’s Sedgemoor. 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 very pale Buzzard entertained us as it hunted from fence posts and Little Egrets rose from channels, their white plumage very conspicuous in flight. We then found a pair of Peregrines on distant fence posts and were able to compare the dainty male with the huge female. Some of the ducks were very close and we had some awesome views of their intricate plumage vermiculations through the telescope. The Teal were especially impressive.

Time was pressing on and the Starlings would soon be roosting so we then headed for the Ashcott Corner car park. Some of the party had elected to return to Wells early, so we dropped off the five intrepid souls who had voted for a second Starling experience before taking the remaining members back to Wells. On the way back, impressive groups of tens of thousands of Starlings were amassing by one farm, creating a buzz of excitement. After farewells at Wells, David and Dave then returned to Ashcott Corner to meet the five Starlingers at RSPB Ham Wall. A Marsh Harrier showed itself briefly on the walk there as the Starling numbers grew and grew. There seemed to be more around than last night – we estimated them at over 1 million - and we watched them stream past at the back of the reedbed. The group had seen Great Crested Grebes doing their “Weed Dance” in front of one of the small hides so Dave went to check this out, vainly also hoping for a Bittern to show. A distant grunting from the reeds was a Bittern “tuning up” for his spring booming to soon start. As we craned our necks to hear him again, up went that cry that the group had longed for all weekend – “BITTERN – FLYING LEFT !!!”. Fortunately everyone had a great view of this elusive heron as it flew over the reeds, crossing the path in front of us before disappearing once again into the reeds. What an end to the day!

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 List

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted. H – heard. S – Seen. M - million)

	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>	6	4
5	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	1	10
6	Great Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>		1H, 1S
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>	12	
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>	20	40
17	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	✓	✓
18	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	✓	✓
19	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
20	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	4	
21	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	1	
22	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	3	1
23	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	2	2
24	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
25	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	2	1
26	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		1
27	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		2
28	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓
29	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>		28+
30	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	6H	8H
31	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
32	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
33	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
34	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	7	15
35	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓
36	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	5	
37	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓
38	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓
39	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
40	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			24	25
41	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>		1
42	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
43	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
44	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	4	2
45	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	3	2
46	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	3	
47	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓
48	Northern Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
49	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
50	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	2	
51	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓
52	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	40	40
53	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	100	200
54	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
55	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
56	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	2	
57	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	3	1
58	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	20H, 1S	4H
59	Bearded Tit	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>	1H	
60	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
61	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>		1+
62	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓	✓
63	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
64	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
65	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		1H
66	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>		1H
67	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
68	Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓
69	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
70	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
71	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		3
72	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	1M+	1M+
73	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
74	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
75	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>	4	
76	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	1	
77	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
78	Common Linnet	<i>Acanthis canabina</i>	100+	
79	Common Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	5	
80	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	30+	10

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			24	25

Mammals

	Eurasian Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>	1	
	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	1	3

Fungi

	Scarlet Elf Cup	<i>Sarcoscypha austriaca</i>	✓	✓
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Lepidoptera

	Winter Moth	<i>Operophtera brumata</i>		1
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Botanical Highlights

Hartstongue	<i>Phyllitis scolopendrium</i>	Snowdrop	<i>Galanthus nivalis</i>
Hazel	<i>Corylus avellana</i>	Lords and Ladies	<i>Arum maculatum</i>
Alder	<i>Alnus glutinosa</i>	Wood Sedge	<i>Carex sylvatica</i>
Osier	<i>Salix viminalis</i>	Pendulous Sedge	<i>Carex pendula</i>
Old man's Beard	<i>Clematis vitalba</i>	Greater Tussock Sedge	<i>Carex paniculata</i>
Lesser Celandine	<i>Ranunculus ficaria</i>	Bulrush	<i>Typha latifolia</i>
Dog's Mercury	<i>Mercurialis perennis</i>	Common Reed	<i>Phragmites australis</i>
Primrose	<i>Primula vulgaris</i>		