

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

15 - 17 January 2014



Rainbow over the Levels

Report compiled by Dave Nevitt
Images courtesy of Tessa Williams



Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton Alresford Hampshire SO24 0NG England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour Leader:	Dave Nevitt
Participants	Tessa Wilkinson Philip Severs Tessa Williams Bridget Wilkinson Patricia Jones Warwick Jones Warren Woodcock Kate Woodcock

Introduction

This tour around the Somerset Levels in mid-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 milder weather throughout the winter so far, most of the wildfowl were present in good numbers although the extensive flooding that had affected the region for over a month had a major effect on their distribution. Normally concentrated in the small areas of water, they were distributed over a huge area. However it was very pleasing that we managed excellent views of all the expected Levels wildfowl as well as many small birds. The Starlings put on a fantastic roost display on the first evening that amazed us all with huge numbers of birds in close proximity. Fantastic!!

Day 1

Wednesday 15th January

The group assembled in the cosy setting of the Swan Hotel with Wells Cathedral glowing in floodlight in the evening of a warm Somerset winter's day. Expectations were high as Dave introduced himself and whet the group's appetite with the plan for the days ahead. The group members introduced themselves and said what they particularly wanted to see and shared their level of experience. As this tour was a Beginner's Tour, fortunately everyone was at a similar level of experience. We adjourned to sample our first of several delicious Swan Hotel meals before moving to the Oak Room where Dave gave a short talk giving an introduction to how the Levels were formed and the special species that now call it home. Having spent much of the day travelling, all took a welcome early night.

Day 2

Thursday 16th January

After a hearty cooked breakfast we set off across the low damp fields towards Glastonbury with the Tor on the skyline. Today we were to explore the valley of the River Parrett, the most southerly of the four main valleys that form the Somerset Levels. We alternated between crossing valleys and the intervening ridges, the latter giving us spectacular views of the extensive flooding that has plagued this area in the past few weeks. We were soon at our first destination, RSPB Swell Wood. Dave put out some seed and peanuts in the car park and despite the rain we were soon familiarising ourselves with a splendid variety of woodland species. Coal, Blue and Great Tits were soon on the list, joined by a smart Great Spotted Woodpecker. A Marsh Tit was calling and briefly came down to the peanuts but we needed to see him better than that!

We walked to the hide overlooking the heronry but it was a little too early in the year for them to have started nesting. However we did see Coal Tits and another Great Spotted Woodpecker on the feeders. Dave heard a Treecreeper and we squinted in the rain to try to see it. We tried the tapes but it was having none of it, presumably concentrating on finding food in the difficult conditions. We then heard a Marsh Tit and were exceptionally lucky as it sat in the top of a bare tree right above our heads so that everyone saw it well. This was a new bird for many in the group. We carried on down the footpath to the lookout across the valley. On the way, we again heard Treecreeper but sadly could not locate it. We came across two Goldcrests calling in the ivy-covered trees and a Raven honked as it flew over. The view of the massive flooding in the valley was indeed impressive and gave us a spectacular appreciation of its scale. Returning to the car park, some in the group again caught up with the Marsh Tits which were now coming down to the peanuts.

We moved on to RSPB Dewlands Farm, the centre of the West Sedgmoor Reserve. We set off up the hill and across the fields. We heard Goldcrest calling in the hedge which added to our frustration, until, a little further on, there were two more Goldcrests, including one singing. Finally we were able to get good views of this, our smallest British bird! We walked along the muddy drove to the edge of the floodwaters and had a spectacular view across the flooded valley. Great flocks of duck in the distance gave us our first views of Pintail, Wigeon, Shoveler and Teal through the telescope. Redwings and Fieldfares were also scoped as they searched for escaping worms in the grass at the edge of the flood. We needed some sustenance so we adjourned for lunch at the King Alfred pub which was very welcome.

Heartily refreshed, we moved on to Stoke St. Gregory where the rain remained unrelenting so the group stayed in the bus while Dave scanned the fields looking for the Cranes. Returning to the bus triumphant, it took some coaxing to encourage everyone to come and take a look! The Cranes were quite close and they all lifted their heads to look at us as we watched them. However the inclement weather discouraged them from taking flight and they continued feeding. As we were watching them, the heavy rain turned to hail and we turned our backs into it for protection. The Cranes had the same idea and huddled in a tight flock, much like the penguins in the Antarctic! We were all able to see birds of different ages in the flock of 53! What a special privilege to see them.

We returned to the bus, and then moved along to Greylake RSPB Reserve where we were restricted to the car park by the floods. Using the bus as a hide, we pulled up by the bird feeders and were soon enjoying a good selection of birds. As the sun finally came out, many Reed Buntings, Chaffinch, Goldfinch, Dunnocks and tits all entertained us. We then walked to the nearby lookout and found Teal as well as some very camouflaged Snipe sheltering in the bottom of the reeds that were very popular with the group. Several Little Egrets joined a Grey Heron on the floodwaters and a Pied Wagtail joined us in the car park.

It was then time to head for the much-anticipated Starling roost at Shapwick Heath. We drove to the Visitor Centre for a warming cup of hot chocolate before making our way along the disused railway line to the area of reeds and small bushes known as The Roughet. We waited with baited breath as not much happened, then the first of the Starlings arrived. Gasps of appreciation echoed around as flocks of tens of thousands poured in. We were fortunate indeed as they started to come down in the reeds only a few hundred metres away from us. It really was a spectacular show as the reeds in front of us turned black with up to two million birds. We were mesmerised as they slowly moved position like a big black river. A Great White Egret flew to roost in the distance and the huge numbers of Starling prey brought out a Sparrowhawk and up to six Buzzards in hot pursuit.

The noise of the Starlings' wingbeats and their chattering were equally impressive. As they settled in for the night, we left for the buses, marvelling at the superb display we had witnessed. We returned to the Swan Hotel where we relaxed before another delicious dinner. We then caught up with our checklists for the day before retiring after a very successful day despite the weather.

Day 3

Friday 17th January

After another satisfying breakfast, we left Wells to explore the more northerly valleys of the Levels. We arrived at Ashcott Corner to a thankfully drier day than yesterday. We first explored the Alder trees near the car park and were soon rewarded with a flock of Lesser Redpoll that we all had great views of. A single Siskin in with the flock was a trifle more elusive. A Cetti's Warbler shouted his loud song from nearby vegetation and a Reed Bunting was also seen. We then retraced our steps to the bridge and onwards towards RSPB Ham Wall. On the bird feeders we caught up with Goldfinches and tits as well as Dunnocks. Reaching the railway bridge, we soon located a group of Cormorants perched up in some distant dead trees. Scanning the edge of the rhyne, we found a fine pair of Stonechats that we were all able to admire in the telescope. What pretty birds they are.

As we came across the first open water we picked out some lovely Teal and Tufted Ducks too. Further on, a flock of Lapwing were taking advantage of one of the few areas of mud still above water. At the main viewpoint we were greeted by a fine variety of duck. One by one, we got the telescope on Shoveler, Wigeon, Teal, Gadwall, more Tufted Duck and a Pochard. A fine Peregrine flew the length of the field of view, enabling the whole group to get great views in superb sunlight. We heard a Kingfisher as it flew past unseen along a hidden rhyne and Great White Egrets stole the show with at least two showing very well. We had distant views of a Marsh Harrier and then went to explore the three small hides. We saw a Snipe stood on a branch and Great Crested Grebes were starting to come into breeding dress as Cetti's Warblers treated us to their loud song in the reedbeds. Sadly the much sought-after Bitterns remained hidden in the reeds.

We returned to the buses and were soon at Catcott Somerset Wildlife Trust Reserve. Here we had excellent views of a multitude of ducks which enabled us to consolidate our earlier learnings as well as adding the beautiful Pintail to our repertoire. We also found Greylag Geese and Buzzards. A Great White Egret was very popular as it strutted amongst the sedges looking for food. Our lunch stop at the Crown was very welcome and we were well looked after before warming up in front of the log fire.

We then retraced our steps back to the Avalon Marshes Visitor Centre at Shapwick where we prepared for a good hike. We walked to the disused railway track and headed off to Noah's Lake. We were caught by a couple of showers as we walked along, but it didn't stop the Cetti's Warblers from singing, and we all heard the strange squealing noise of the Water Rails in the reedbeds. We saw some Fieldfares in the bushes in the reedbeds and then we were alongside Noah's Lake, which was full of ducks. Dave scoped them to look for anything new, but the heavy squall made the going tough. Reaching the bridge, we elected to go to Meare Heath hide and were soon in mature Silver Birch woodland. Great Tits called from the canopy and some Redwings flew over. In the hide, we were very relieved that the sun again came out. The orange hues of the low sun shone through the trees and the reeds, creating beautiful winter colours reminiscent of a beautiful painting. Cormorants flew the length of the valley and we became familiar with their distinctive silhouette. We continually scanned the tops of the reeds for Marsh Harriers or Bitterns but all was quiet apart from a few Teal and a flock of Common Snipe.

Time was pressing on so we left the hide and made our way back to the Roughet in good time for the Starling roost. After our amazing experience yesterday, expectations were certainly high. Soon the first flocks were appearing, cruising the area & amalgamating to make ever-bigger flocks. Then they started to move away to the back of the area we were overlooking and this was where they then performed most of their activity. The impressive flocks wheeled in from every direction, and when seen from a distance were all the more impressive. As the birds settled in for the night about a kilometre away, all were full of appreciation of just how lucky we were last night to have the whole flock descending into the reeds right in front of us! They are certainly a magnificent sight and we were very lucky to have witnessed them at their best.

We ventured back to Wells to say our goodbyes and parted after what we hope all in the group found a hugely enjoyable and fulfilling few days.

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Murmuration of Starling

Species List

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

	Common name	Scientific name	January	
			16	17
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>	3	✓
6	Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	1	2
7	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
8	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	2	
9	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	
10	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	✓	✓
11	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	✓	✓
12	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓
13	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
14	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	6	40
15	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	✓	✓
16	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		1
17	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓
18	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	1	4
19	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1	1
20	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
21	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		1
22	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		1
23	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓
24	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	53	
25	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	H	H
26	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
27	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓
28	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
29	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	12	5
30	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
31	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	
32	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
33	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓
34	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
35	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
36	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		H
37	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	
38	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓
39	Northern Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
40	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
41	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓

42	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓
43	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	✓
44	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
45	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
46	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		2
47	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	✓
48	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	H	H
49	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	1	2
50	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
51	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	4	
52	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>	✓	✓
53	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
54	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
55	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	H	H
56	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	✓	
57	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
58	Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓
59	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
60	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
61	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	H	
62	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
63	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓
64	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
65	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	✓	✓
66	Lesser Redpoll	<i>Carduelis cabaret</i>		50
67	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>		1
68	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
69	Common Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>		10
70	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		3
71	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓

Mammals

1	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓	
2	Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>	✓	
3	Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>		H
4	Stoat	<i>Mustela erminea</i>	✓	