

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

22 - 24 January 2014



Starlings by Tony Maynard-Smith



Pintail by Tom Mabbett



Wells Cathedral by Tom Mabbett

Report compiled by Dave Nevitt

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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 mild 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 woodland species put on an excellent show and were very much appreciated by the group, as well as a great selection of Levels waders. The Starlings put on two of the best roost displays that the leaders had ever witnessed, with huge numbers of birds in very close proximity. They also included the rare and much sought-after murmuration displays including the exceptionally rare and spectacular “corkscrew” display. Fantastic!!

Day 1

Wednesday 22nd January

The group assembled in the evening of the cosy Swan Hotel with Wells Cathedral glowing in floodlight opposite. Expectations were high as Dave and Tom introduced themselves and whetted 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 to assist Dave and Tom.

We adjourned to sample our first of several delicious Swan Hotel meals before moving to the Oak Room where the leaders gave a short talk by way of an introduction to how the Levels were formed and the special species that now call it home. Some having spent much of the day travelling, all took a welcome early night.

Day 2

Thursday 23rd 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 mounting the intervening ridges, the latter giving us spectacular views of the extensive flooding that has plagued this area in the past few weeks. We had to take a detour to avoid roads that were closed by the floods before we arrived at our first destination, RSPB Swell Wood. Almost as soon as we arrived, Tom found a Goldcrest right above the minibus and all got great views. Dave put out some seed and peanuts in the car park and 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 Nuthatch and a Great Spotted Woodpecker. Some also caught up with a brief Marsh Tit but he didn't stay around for long.

We walked to the hide overlooking the heronry but it was a little too early in the year for them to have started nesting. Dave and Tom were hearing several Treecreepers calling and singing and the group waited with baited breath for one to show itself, but to no avail so we carried on down the footpath to the lookout across the valley. On the way, we again heard Treecreepers and also the call of the Nuthatch. The view of the massive flooding in the valley was indeed impressive and gave us a spectacular appreciation of its scale. We also had excellent views of a pair of Stock Doves in the large Ash trees and a Peregrine flew overhead calling. On the way back, Tom finally pinned down a Treecreeper in the tops of the trees and we all saw it living up to its name as it looked for insects hidden in the tree bark. Returning to the car park, we were pleased to see the Marsh Tits coming down to the nuts so that everyone saw them well.

We moved on to RSPB Dewlands Farm for a comfort stop and a walk down to the edge of the flood as the bitter NW wind got up. A beautiful female Sparrowhawk sailed over the car park and a group of Pintails gave a fly-past to the lucky few. Onwards, we again had a flood detour, via North Curry, to get to Stoke St. Gregory where we scanned the fields for the hoped-for Cranes but without any luck. A Red Fox, a flock of 30 Skylarks, Stock Doves and another Sparrowhawk gave some compensation in the cold wind before a whoop of delight from Dave signalled that the Cranes had been found! We were all able to see birds of different ages in the flock of 54! What a special privilege to see them. We moved on to Aller Moor to witness the river breaching its bank. Lapwings, Fieldfares, a fly-over Raven, Shelducks and Lesser Black-backed Gull were all added to our tally. The cold wind was taking its toll so we adjourned to the King Alfred for some warming lunch and the chance to photograph the river at flood level.

We stopped briefly at the Burrow Mump car park to admire the Mump and scan the floods before moving on to the bridge over the Sowey River to view Kings Sedge Moor. This was a very productive stop with lots of Lapwing assembled on the remaining bits of land. Amongst them we located two Redshanks, up to four Ruff, three Black-tailed Godwits and six Dunlin. Although some were quite distant, everyone enjoyed good views through the telescopes and saw all the salient ID features.

We then moved along to Greylake RSPB Reserve where we were restricted to the car park by the floods. However we still located many Reed Buntings, Snipe sheltering in the bottom of the reeds, Teal, Wigeon, Little Egrets and a Water Rail.

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 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 within a hundred metres from of us. We adjusted our position to get closer and were in awe as the reeds in front of us turned black with up to two million birds. What a spectacular show! We were mesmerised as they slowly moved position like a big black river. The noise of both their wing beats 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. An hour later we were back at 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.

Day 3

Friday 24th January

After another satisfying breakfast, we left Wells to explore the more northerly valleys of the Levels. We arrived at Ashcott Corner to a milder day than yesterday however the forecast had been full of wall-to-wall rain and amber flood warnings so we prepared for the worst. We first explored the Alder trees near the car park and were soon rewarded with a mixed flock of Lesser Redpoll and lovely Siskins. The latter delighted the group as they hung upside-down feeding on the catkins. A little further on and some of the group were lucky to see a Great White Egret over the marsh, then two Marsh Harriers showed themselves to all. A Cetti's Warbler shouted his loud song from nearby vegetation and a Song Thrush started to spark up too. We then retraced our steps to the bridge and were soon enjoying Bullfinches in the telescopes as well as Redwings with their bold eye-stripe. At the railway bridge we stopped to watch a Roe Deer resting in the grass and dead trees full of Cormorants in the distance. We enjoyed a Stonechat on some fence posts whilst we scoured the reedbed for the elusive Bittern. Further along we came across Lapwings hunkered down from the wind and rain and amongst them we found Teal and highly camouflaged Snipe that put on a good performance.

Reaching the viewpoint, we soon had another Marsh Harrier in our sights before identifying all the species of duck that were on show. One by one we studied Shoveler, Gadwall, Wigeon and Tufted Duck. Another Marsh Harrier, this time a much closer full adult male, gave us great views as it quartered the reeds. Tom then took the group round the four hides, clocking up a Water Rail as well as a Mink that had the otter-spotters going for a minute! There is still quite a threat to much of the wildlife here from these vicious killers. Fortunately the light rain had now stopped and our return to the buses was quite a pleasant walk.

After a quick loo stop, we 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. Our lunch stop at the Crown was very welcome and we were well looked after before warming up in front of the log fire.

Our next stop was Somerset Wildlife Trust's Westhay Moor Reserve, where we donned our wellies in preparation for the known floods. The first hide gave us good views of another Water Rail on the reed edge then in flight and we heard the calls of the Cetti's Warbler but characteristically it kept hidden! After wading through some puddles, the wellied members of the party headed for the Tower hide and found yet another Treecreeper in the willows. Our path to the hide was unfortunately too flooded to go any further so we retraced our steps. On the way back we came across a good flock of Lesser Redpolls in Silver Birch and we had amazing views in the telescope, a very welcome find as those we had encountered earlier at Shapwick had eluded most of the group. The non-wellied members of the group took the dry path up the drove and on their return they also caught up with the Lesser Redpolls.

The weather was closing in so, anticipating an earlier Starling roost than yesterday, we made our way back to Shapwick and retraced our steps of yesterday to the Roughet area. We were right that they were earlier than yesterday and huge flocks of Starlings came in right in front of us. Perhaps because of the drizzly weather, unlike yesterday they gave spectacular swirling displays just before they came down in the reeds only a couple of hundred metres in front of us. They even treated us to the much sought-after and very rare "corkscrew" display on several occasions.

Local birders who come to the roost regularly confirmed just how lucky we were to have such spectacular murmurations, not once but on consecutive days! It was a fantastic end to the trip. A Peregrine powered past us and as a Tawny Owl called in the distance, we decided to head back. But it wasn't over yet, as on the walk back to the bus the final "magic moment" was provided by a superb Woodcock which flew over a lucky few in the group.

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

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Species List

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

	Common name	Scientific name	January	
			23	24
1	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		✓
2	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		10
3	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓
4	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓
5	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	7	10
6	Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		3
7	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
8	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		2
9	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>		3
10	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	20	
11	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	✓	✓
12	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>		✓
13	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓
14	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
15	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	20	✓
16	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	✓	✓
17	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓
18	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	3	4
19	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	3	2
20	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
21	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	1	
22	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	1	1
23	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓
24	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	54	
25	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	1S +H	2S +H
26	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
27	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓
28	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
29	Eurasian Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rustica</i>		1
30	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	10	5
31	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	3	
32	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	2	
33	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	6	
34	Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>	4	
35	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓
36	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
37	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓
38	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓

39	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓
40	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	9	
41	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
42	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
43	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>		H
44	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		1
45	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	2	4
46	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	30	
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>	✓	
51	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓
52	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓
53	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	✓
54	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
55	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
56	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		1
57	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	✓
58	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	H	H
59	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	H	H
60	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
61	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	6	
62	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>	✓	
63	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
64	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
65	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	✓	
66	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	✓	✓
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>	✓	✓
73	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
74	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
75	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	✓	✓
76	Lesser Redpoll	<i>Carduelis cabaret</i>	H	25
77	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>		10
78	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
79	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		4
80	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓

MAMMALS

1	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	✓	✓
2	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓	
3	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	✓	
4	Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>	✓	
5	Mink	<i>Neovison vison</i>		✓



Swollen River Parrett by Tony Maynard-Smith