

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

14 - 16 February 2014

Report compiled by Dave Nevitt



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Summary

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. The Starlings put on two excellent roost displays, with huge numbers of birds. Our choice to change the viewing location on the second night was a spectacular success with the birds in very close proximity. They also performed the much sought-after murmuration displays including the exceptionally rare and spectacular “corkscrew” display. Fantastic!!

Day 1

Friday 14th February

The group assembled in the evening of a mild Somerset winter’s day – also Valentine’s Day! In the cosy setting of the Swan Hotel with Wells Cathedral glowing in floodlight opposite, expectations were high as Dave and David introduced themselves, and whetted the group’s appetite with the plan for the days ahead. The group members said what they particularly wanted to see and shared their level of experience to assist the leaders. It turned out that everyone was here for the Starlings, so no pressure on the leaders to deliver there! 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

Saturday 15th February

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.

As we dropped down to cross the valley of Kings Sedge Moor, the floodwaters were lapping at the side of the road but it was quite passable. A quick stop at Nythe Bridge produced our first views of large numbers of Lapwings and in the far distance we saw swirling flocks of Golden Plover. We travelled onwards for an unscheduled stop to witness at first hand the floods at Muchelney. We walked along the wibbly-wobbly floating pontoon walkway then we were at the banks of the River Yeo that were overflowing onto the surrounding moors as far as the eye could see. As we arrived, the emergency boat service that we had all seen on the TV was just departing to bring supplies and a communication link to the “island community” of Muchelney. We saw Fieldfares and Redwing in the few bushes that were not under water and also two Hares on far fields. Returning to the buses past houses that were suffering half a metre of floodwater, all in the group were very quiet as witnessing the effect of the floods at first hand was quite different to seeing it on the television screen.

Soon we were at RSPB Swell Wood, where we put out some seed and peanuts to entice the birds in. After a summary of how to identify the likely candidates from Dave, we were soon enjoying good views of Coal, Blue and Great Tits as well as the star of the show, Marsh Tits. Nuthatches called above us as we made our way to the hide. The wood has one of the largest heronries in the southwest and several of the birds had already returned to tidy up their nests for the breeding season. Dave was hearing Treecreepers as we walked along but they refused to show any interest in the taped calls. However a Goldcrest was more obliging and to our delight showed very well to all the group. We looked across the valley at the devastation of the flooding that had created a huge lake many miles long. On the way back, we were very lucky as a Treecreeper finally gave itself up and everyone was able to enjoy its antics as it inched jerkily along the branches looking for food. Returning to the car park, we again saw the Marsh Tits coming down to the nuts so we departed sated.

Onwards, we were now on the search for the Common Cranes. After a quick comfort stop in Langport, we had to take a flood detour, via North Curry, to get to Stoke St .Gregory where we scanned the fields for the hoped-for Cranes. Initial scans drew a blank but then we were in luck as three birds came into view from behind a hedge. The scopes were soon on them and we all had good views. In nearby trees we saw up to 20 Stock Doves and a flock of Skylarks flew up from nearby stubble. As the rain showers started to give way to tentative sunshine, we stopped to listen to a faint sound on the wind. It was more Cranes – trumpeting away to each other! What a delightful sound, that kept getting more persistent as the wind dropped. We soon found the culprits – four more birds, displaying to each other in the next field. We left to this evocative sound, lucky to have witnessed part of the Crane’s comeback to Britain.

It was time for lunch, so we retraced our steps, having to detour via Langport and Othery to get to our destination of Burrowbridge. As we approached the village, it soon became obvious that there was a lot going on! Normally on a crossroads, Burrowbridge was effectively now a dead-end as three of the roads were a metre under water. Someone directing traffic pointed us to a nearby yard where we parked up.

Walking back to the King Alfred pub, we saw police, coastguards, ambulances and over 100 volunteers in hi-viz jackets all running around to sort out the effects of the flooding that was all around us. However we went to our table upstairs in the pub and were soon being served drinks and our delicious lunch. Afterwards we took the obligatory photos of the gorged River Parrett just metres from the pub, the river only being stopped from breaching here by the fact that it had breached further upstream, so relieving the water levels. As we marvelled at the good work being done by so many people, it was time to move on.

We boarded the buses and were soon at the RSPB Greylake reserve. Restricted to the car park by the floodwaters, we recorded good views of Reed Buntings coming down to the feeders, beautiful Teal, Wigeon and Gadwall on the water and many Dunlin on the water's edge. A good number of Snipe were hunkered down at the base of the reeds and we were amazed at how effective their camouflage was! As each peered through the telescope in turn, Dave waited for the "Eureka" moment when the observer realised they were looking at many Snipe and not a patch of dead reeds!

Time was ticking on, so we headed back north to the Avalon Marches Visitor Centre for a comfort stop and a welcome cup of hot chocolate! We then went to the Ashcott Corner car park and walked towards the RSPB Ham Wall reserve in search of the famous Starlings. On the way we stopped at a bridge and saw what we first thought to be two Otters but sadly on closer inspection they were Mink. Seeing a Marsh Harrier over the reedbeds, we pressed on to the second viewing ramp to take our position for the hoped-for Starling Spectacular. Whilst we were waiting, with the help of another birder we managed distant view of the rare and elusive Green-winged Teal from North America that had been present for a few weeks. Then the Starlings started to arrive. First in small flocks, then in increasingly large gatherings which took over the skies as they came in over our heads! The "ooh"s and "aah"s from the enthusiastic crowd added to the atmosphere as the great flocks amassed over the reedbeds in the distance, swirling around and settling in trees that made them look like they were groaning under the weight of the birds.

Several Marsh Harriers were quartering the reeds but didn't seem that interested in the plentiful food available for them nearby. Several group members spotted a Peregrine chasing the Starlings, after which the amassed millions settled down in the reeds for the night. What an amazing display we had witnessed, even though they eventually came down to roost some distance away. As we were about to leave, a ghostly white shape above the reeds revealed itself as a hunting Barn Owl, no doubt with Starling on its menu for tonight. With smiles all round, we walked back to the buses with the evening chorus of Water Rails squealing in the reeds all around us. On the way back David lucked out with a brief view of a Bittern but sadly nobody else saw it. However a Woodcock which flew over the path on the way back was seen by several group members, providing an exciting end to a very successful day. We returned to Wells and were soon enjoying our excellent supper, followed by completing our checklists in the Oak Room before bed.

Day 3

Sunday 16th February

After another satisfying breakfast, we left Wells to explore the more northerly valleys of the Levels. We arrived at Ashcott Corner to a beautiful sunny day with no wind, somewhat better than yesterday. We first explored the Alder trees near the car park but they were very quiet with no Lesser Redpoll or Siskins. However we were lucky enough to see beautiful Bullfinches in the tree-tops.

We proceeded a little further on to views over the reeds and saw two Marsh Harriers quartering the reeds. A Cetti's Warbler shouted his loud song from nearby vegetation, Water Rails squealed and a Song Thrush started to spark up too. Dave stopped in his tracks as he heard the call of the very rare Penduline Tit, but sadly it did not repeat the call and the willow trees alongside the track prevented us from getting views across the reeds behind. This bird was heard in the same area a week later but nobody succeeded in seeing it!

We retraced our steps back to the car park and headed out to RSPB Ham Wall. Reaching the bridge, we were treated to views in the scope of a Kingfisher, then on the opposite side a fine pair of Stonechats were on view with many Cormorants perched up on dead trees in the distance. We searched in the undergrowth and successfully found the Scarlet Elf Cup *Sarcosypha austriaca* on some ash twigs. Further along we heard some Siskins and soon found them in the Alder trees above us. We were entertained by their antics as these lovely green, yellow and black finches hung upside down to feed on the catkins. As the reeds came into view, we were treated to spectacular views of at least one adult male Marsh Harrier as it performed repeated passes in front of us in the glorious sunshine.

Reaching the viewpoint, we scoped the various ducks present and admired the Great Crested Grebes coming into their fine breeding plumage. Little Grebes were trilling away in the distance and Long-tailed Tits danced between the bushes. Sadly the Bitterns didn't reveal themselves so we tried the four small hides nearby. Here we again heard the strident song of the Cetti's Warbler but he remained hidden in the reeds. Several beautiful Snipe were hiding in the edges of the reeds and Grey Herons were starting to build their nests in the reedbeds – a very rare phenomenon as they usually nest in trees. On our return to the buses we again had good views of the Marsh Harriers.

After a quick comfort 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. In turn we had great views of Shoveler, Wigeon and Teal as well as adding the beautiful Pintail to our repertoire. We also found a Little Egret, 13 Greylag Geese and up to 20 Buzzards were thermalling in the winter sunshine. We also saw another pair of Stonechats in the adjacent field, where a Meadow Pipit also flew over calling. 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 parked up and walked Dagg's Drove. At the first hide Water Rails were calling away and a wintering Chiffchaff was in the willow trees. At the reed blind there were Teal and Gadwall at the water's edge and a Marsh Harrier flew by. A fleeting glimpse of a large white bird flying in the distance sparked discussion of Great White Egret but were unconfirmed. Some of the group stayed here while the rest continued to the end of the drove. Those who stayed reaped the greatest benefit as a fine Great White Egret eventually gave itself up as it took another sortie. It was otherwise pretty quiet so we adjourned to Amy's hot chocolate bar to fuel up.

After last night's spectacular Starling display had dropped down some way off at the back of the reedbed, tonight we decided to see if we could get more up close and personal with them and went to a different location. We parked up the buses and walked a footpath as the sun started to slowly go down. Across a field and we were right on the edge of the reeds! As we waited, we found three Marsh Harriers and two Sparrowhawks including one which was perched up on a post. Six Roe Deer were also seen.

Then the Starlings started to arrive. And boy, did we have a display as tens of thousands, then hundreds of thousands amassed around us, swirling and even giving the very rare “corkscrew” display!! The trees around us turned black as they alighted around us. As they started to descend into the reeds just a few hundred metres ahead of us, a Barn Owl appeared and pounced on one for its supper. The reeds went black with the throngs of birds, but the most amazing sense was the sound as they all chattered to each other. Then, as something alarmed them, they all took off with an amazing “whoosh” of their panicking wingbeats. As the light faded, they settled down for the night and we were left in awe at the spectacle which we had witnessed.

It was a fantastic end to the trip, and as a Tawny Owl called in the distance, we decided to head back. 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.

Any trip is only as good as the participants make it and Dave and David would like to thank all the clients on the trip for their enthusiasm and companionship

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Species List

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			15	16
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>	1	1
6	Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		1
7	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
8	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		13
9	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓
10	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	6	
11	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	✓	✓
12	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	✓	
13	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓
14	Green-winged Teal	<i>Anas carolinensis</i>	1	
15	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
16	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	24	✓
17	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	✓	✓
18	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
19	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	3+	6
20	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	2	2
21	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	4	30
22	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	1	1
23	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	1	
24	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓
25	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	7	
26	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	H	H
27	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
28	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
29	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
30	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	10,000	
31	Eurasian Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rustica</i>	1	
32	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	8	10
33	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	6	
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>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
38	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓
39	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	12	
40	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			15	16
41	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
42	Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>	1	1
43	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	H	H
44	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		1
45	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	2	2
46	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	20	
47	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		1
48	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓
49	Northern Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
50	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</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>		4
57	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	✓
58	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	H	H
59	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		1
60	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓
61	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	4	
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 Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
72	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
73	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
74	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓	✓
75	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>		6
76	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
77	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		3
78	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓

Mammals

1	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	6	✓
2	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓	
3	Brown Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	2	

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			15	16
4	Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>	✓	
5	Mink	<i>Neovison vison</i>	2	