

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

6 – 8 February 2015

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 quite cold weather in recent weeks but no snow to drive them abroad, most of the wildfowl were present in excellent numbers. Fortunately the dry weather ensured that last year's extensive flooding had not been repeated. It was very pleasing that we managed excellent views of all the expected Levels wildfowl as well as many small birds. The Starlings roost display on the first evening was excellent, giving us the full sounds and sights of the spectacle; we returned on the second evening and were again fortunate to have a brilliant display though much more distant. Fantastic!

Day 1

Friday 6th February

The group assembled in the evening of a chilly Somerset winter'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 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 to assist the leaders. Fortunately everyone was at a similar level of experience which assisted with planning.

We adjourned to sample our first of several delicious Swan Hotel meals before moving to the Oak Room where Dave gave a talk giving 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 7th 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 the intervening ridges, the latter giving us spectacular views of the areas that had extensive flooding last year.

We arrived at our first destination, RSPB Swell Wood. Dave put out some seed and peanuts in the car park and we were soon familiarising ourselves with a splendid variety of woodland species. Blue and Great Tits were soon on the list, joined by a surprising number of Coal Tits. We heard a Great Spotted Woodpecker then it dropped down to the tree in front of us for all to see. The other special bird we were hoping for here was the Marsh Tit and it wasn't long before one was tempted down by the nuts, soon to be joined by a second bird. Several Nuthatches were calling but were difficult to see. We heard a Treecreeper nearby but we couldn't pin it down.

We walked to the hide overlooking the heronry and gazed up at the many nests visible in the canopy. There were no Grey Herons in residence as the cold weather had delayed the start of the nesting season of this very early nester. However one did fly in as we were there – perhaps the harbinger of spring? We were lucky to see a Goldcrest near the path as well as a Nuthatch that was good enough to sit stationary on a branch for us all to see. Several Great Spotted Woodpeckers were drumming in the wood but remained elusive.

We carried on down the footpath to the lookout across the valley. On the way, the wood was surprisingly quiet but we did hear a Common Crossbill flying over – a strange record of this pine forest dweller in deciduous woodland.

The view across the wide valley below us was spectacular; thankfully not flooded this year. We were very pleased to see three graceful Common Cranes on the marsh. Dave ran back to fetch his telescope but on his return they had unfortunately flown off - but what a great result so early on! 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. After a comfort stop we set off down the muddy track. We saw Buzzards circling over the hill, delightful Long-tailed Tits in the hedgerows and a party of Redwings showed nicely in the treetops. Mistle Thrushes sang from the treetops then dropped to defend “their” mistletoe berries from intruders.

We walked along the drove to the hide in a converted barn. Great flocks of duck lay before us as we had a panoramic view across the wide open valley. Soon the telescope was set up on our first views of Wigeon, Shoveler and Teal. Every now and then huge swathes of birds went up in the air, presumably to avoid unseen raptors, only to settle once more after their furtive air manoeuvres. There were throngs of Lapwings that kept taking flight, Buzzards patrolled along the rhynes in search of food, and Little Egrets hunted for unwary fish. But the highlight for many was the superb Marsh Harrier that we all saw both perched and flying. We singled out lovely Pintail in the telescope for all to admire, as well as a flock of Black-tailed Godwits that then woke up and flew, showing us why they are so named.

We then moved on to Aller Moor in search of the Cranes from the Great Crane Project. They had been moving about a bit in recent days but our luck was in today as we scanned the fields to find over 40 of them. What majestic birds they are, and much admired by all in the group. We also saw some Roe Deer in the distance.

By now we were cold and needed some sustenance so we headed for lunch at the King Alfred pub. Arriving at the pub, the fire was just as popular as the warming food!

Heartily refreshed, we moved on to Greylake RSPB reserve where we enjoyed a good selection of birds at the feeders including several Reed Buntings in various plumages, Chaffinches and charming Goldfinches. We then walked to the nearby hide. On the way, eagle-eyes spotted a movement in the bases of the willow trees. Our patience was well rewarded as a Water Rail crept out into the open. What a special moment to see one, then two, of these secretive birds extremely well – not surprisingly, a new bird for most in the group. Many in the group were transfixed by these rails and chose to stay and watch them for longer from the boardwalk, eventually clocking up an amazing total of five birds!

At the hide we were soon enjoying close views of the various duck species – Teal, Gadwall and Wigeon. Pintails were very popular too, and we were amazed by the complexity of the plumage markings on individual feathers on the Gadwall. Close scrutiny of the reed edges revealed some Snipe that looked amazing in the telescope. Several Marsh Harriers lived up to their name as they buzzed the flocks of ducks. Little Egrets were also very entertaining as they fed in the rhynes alongside Grey Herons and we all saw at least one of the three Peregrines that sit on posts and in trees, looking for their next meal.

It was then time to head for the much-anticipated Starling roost so we packed up and returned to the buses. We drove to the Visitor Centre for a warming cup of hot chocolate and comfort stop. The Starlings had been leading everyone a merry dance over the past couple of days, choosing different roost locations every night! As we stood in the car park, a couple of flocks went over in the direction of the Roughet at Shapwick Heath so we decided to go there.

As we approached, ever larger flocks went overhead, amalgamating into great swathes of birds. From the viewpoint we had the perfect location to watch them as they swirled around before settling in huge numbers, turning the trees black with birds. They started to come down in the reeds in the distance as we were distracted by the flight of a Bittern, then another Bittern, as the Water Rails screeched in the reeds and Cetti's Warblers sang from the bushes. The rest of the people left as they thought the Starling show was over but we hung on, and what a good job we did as the Starlings then decided to move closer to us in a huge black river of birds. They then descended into the reeds, turning them black in front of us. We marvelled at the incredible sound that they made, cupping our ears with our hands to focus the sound. As they settled in for the night, we left for the buses, thrilled at the special display we had witnessed. A fortunate few saw two Woodcock in the twilight on the way back; these amazingly camouflaged birds flying out to the wet meadows to feed after having spent the day hidden on the floor of the woods.

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 despite the cold weather.

Day 3

Sunday 8th February

We left a little later today to have a chance to check out from our rooms. After another hearty breakfast, we returned to Ashcott Corner car park. We heard Bullfinches calling and then stopped at the rhine to watch a lovely Kingfisher sitting in the trees fishing. In the cold wind, we headed east to the RSPB Ham Wall reserve. We stopped to admire the pretty winter-growing Scarlet Elf Cup fungus by the path and Tufted Duck and Pochard on nearby waters. Although it was cold, it was a beautiful still day and there was barely a rustle of the reeds. Distant Cormorants were perched up on dead trees as more Cetti's Warblers called out their strident songs from deep in the undergrowth. At the viewpoint, an elegant Great White Egret was very popular as we brushed up on our duck ID with Wigeon, Shoveler and Great Crested Grebes.

A very close flypast by a Bittern was sadly a few minutes before most of the group had arrived, so we waited and scanned the reeds for a repeat performance. After a while a change of scene was called for so the group headed for the Torr View hide while Dave stayed to ring the lunch order in. As luck would have it, the group were just out of view when two more Bitterns did a circuit before dropping into the reeds. Peter was the lucky one as he managed to hear Dave's shout and returned to see one perched up in the reeds through Dave's telescope. After seeing some Reed Buntings at the Torr View hide, we then returned to the viewpoint to chance our luck again, but sadly it was not to be so we headed back to the buses.

We were soon at our next stop, Catcott Lows Somerset Wildlife Trust Reserve. We enjoyed excellent views of a multitude of ducks which enabled us to consolidate our earlier learnings as well as see our first really close Pintail. Getting the telescope on the intricate plumage of Wigeon, Teal, Shoveler, Gadwall and Pintail only 30 metres away again revealed the stunning patterns on their feathers. We also found a Stonechat and the rare sighting of a Merlin perched on a distant fence post.

Our lunch stop at the Crown was very welcome and we were well looked after before warming up and drying off in front of the log fire.

We then headed to the Somerset Wildlife Trust Westhay Moor reserve for a walk. Gadwall showed well as we walked up Dagg's Lane Drove. Many commented on how they liked this reserve in a quiet corner of the Levels. Some quiet high-pitched calls drew our attention to a couple of Goldcrests in the willows then we stopped at the raised viewpoint to check the reeds. It was pretty quiet until Peter spotted something on the reed heads – it was a Bearded Tit! There then followed a frustrating 15 minutes as we all peered to get a view. We managed to get it in the telescope so that most could see it as it glowed a beautiful warm buff in the winter sunshine. What a great result, and a new bird for most of the group too!

We then had excellent views of an adult male Marsh Harrier quartering the reed bed before it was time to go. We had a quick comfort stop before walking to Shapwick Heath to await the Starlings. We didn't have to wait for long before they started to arrive at the area known as the Roughet. Through the telescope we again saw the trees go black with thousands of birds gathering in pre-roost flocks. Then as the sun went down, so too did the Starlings into their distant roosts. The number of birds was about the same as last night but they were quite a bit further away leaving us marvelling at how nature gives us a completely different experience every time we go out. On the way back to the buses, we again encountered a Woodcock, this time seem by a few more of the group.

We ventured back to Wells to say our goodbyes, and parted after a hugely enjoyable and fulfilling few days.

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Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			7	8
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>	4	4
6	Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	2	1
7	Great Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>	2	3
8	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
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>	15	20
15	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	✓	✓
16	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓
17	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	5	1
18	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1	1
19	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
20	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓
21	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	3	
22	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓
23	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	✓	
24	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	5S +H	H
25	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
26	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
27	Eurasian Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	1	
28	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
29	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	10	4
30	Eurasian Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>	2	1
31	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	60	
32	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
33	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓
34	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
35	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	4	
36	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓
37	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
38	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
39	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	H	H
40	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	3	2
41	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	✓
42	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓
43	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓
44	Northern Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
45	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
46	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	3	✓
47	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			7	8
48	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓
49	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	✓
50	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
51	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
52	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		1
53	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	2	2
54	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		H
55	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		2
56	Bearded Tit	<i>Panarus biarmicus</i>		1+
57	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
58	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	4	
59	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓	
60	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
61	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
62	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	2	
63	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	3H	
64	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	1	
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 Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	1	
70	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
71	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
72	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
73	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	✓	✓
74	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
75	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	2	2
76	Common Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>	1	
77	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓