

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

11-13 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 gave us a taste of the sounds and sights of the spectacle, and as we had located the specific roost we were up early the next morning to witness the "Full Monty" of the dawn wake-up. And what a spectacular display it was as first a large gathering of birds rose in front of us, followed by a mass fly-past of a huge number that had roosted on private land further along. Fantastic!!

Day 1

Wednesday 11th 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 Garden 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

Thursday 12th 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 but he avoided our gaze. 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 busy flying to and fro to the peanuts, no doubt stashing them in crevices to eat later. One eagle-eyed group member spotted a Treecreeper nearby and we were fortunate that everyone got to see it. It was then joined by a second bird, enabling even better views. With it being such an inconspicuous bird, this was the first time that many had seen it.

We walked to the hide overlooking the heronry and gazed up at the many nests visible in the canopy. There were at least 10 Grey Herons already in residence – they are a very early nesting species. We were lucky that two Goldcrests came down to the pond in front of the hide and we watched them bathing. Several Great Spotted Woodpecker were drumming in the wood but remained elusive, and we also heard a Green Woodpecker “yaffling”. Just outside the hide we heard a Lesser Redpoll flying overhead, then some Siskin called. After a few minutes of searching the canopy we were able to locate them and we all saw them high up in the oaks, hanging upside down to feed. One was a beautifully coloured male.

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 Stock Dove singing – the first of the year. The view across the wide valley below us was spectacular, thankfully not flooded this year. 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 with our guide Dion down the muddy track. We saw delightful Long-tailed Tits in the hedgerows as Mistle Thrushes sang from the treetops then dropped to defend “their” mistletoe berries from intruders.

We walked along the muddy drove to the hide in a converted barn. Approaching the barn, up went the shout of “Cranes flying!” as a flock of over 20 birds glided across in front of us, alighting on the marsh in front of the hide.

From the hide, we were soon able to spot them and enjoyed good views in the telescopes of both adult and juvenile birds. What a great result so early on!

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. Amongst the throngs of Lapwings, we picked out an enormous flock of thousands of Golden Plover settled in

the distance; when they flew, they alternated white and gold as they banked. Buzzards patrolled along the rhynes in search of food, and Little Egrets hunted for unwary fish. Steve picked out a single Pintail in his telescope, a Curlew fed amongst the Snipe and Lapwings, and a male Stonechat perched on fence posts.

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 and our luck wasn't in today as we scanned the fields without any sightings – what a good job we had seen them earlier! Two Shelducks and a fine Stonechat were our consolation prizes.

By now we were cold and we needed some sustenance so we headed for lunch at the King Alfred pub. On the way, one of the buses was treated to a lovely male Sparrowhawk zooming along the road in front of us. 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. 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 a total of six birds!

At the hide we were soon enjoying close view of the various duck species – Teal, Gadwall and Wigeon. Then 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 far away in the distance. Little Egrets were also very entertaining as they fed in the rhynes alongside Grey Herons, and we all saw a male Peregrine sat on a distant post devouring some food.

It was then time to head for the much-anticipated Starling roost so we packed up and were just leaving the hide when Steve called out that a Marsh Harrier was coming straight towards the hide and putting everything up in the process. From the movements of the duck, it was obvious that there was something else spooking them too, then we saw a large female Peregrine taking advantage of the commotion, then two more Peregrines joined in. We rushed outside to call back the rest of the group but sadly they were out of earshot. One of the Peregrines then settled on a nearby fencepost for the lucky few to admire in the telescope before we had to leave.

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 – the previous night they had murmured very well at Shapwick before heading off very late to Ham Wall. We hoped that they would do the same again so we headed for Shapwick Heath. On arrival, it was soon apparent that they were ignoring Shapwick and going straight for Ham Wall so we quickly relocated there. Most of the birds had already gone down into the reeds for the night and other people were leaving, but we hung on in case the show wasn't over. And what a good job we did as a huge mass of birds started to rise out of the reeds to our left and then proceeded to pour towards us in a thick black river of birds. As they came down in the reeds before 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.

An hour later we were back at the Swan Hotel where we relaxed before another delicious dinner. Since we had seen exactly where the Starlings had roosted, David and Dave offered to the group the unscheduled option of getting up early to return to the roost site to witness the dawn lift-off, returning for breakfast. Many were very enthusiastic so that was the plan for the morning. We then caught up with our checklists for the day before retiring after a very successful day despite the cold weather.

Day 3

Friday 13th February

We met at 6am by the minibuses and 10 of us were soon on our way. By 6.20am we were at Ashcott Corner car park and strolling in the dark towards Ham Wall Viewing Platform 1. On the way we were delighted to experience rain and snow showers!

Arriving at the viewing point, there was no activity. As it started to get light a Bittern rose out of the reeds and flew over to the next reed bed. Water Rails squealed all around and Cetti's Warblers sang from the bushes. A Great White Egret flew into the reeds in front of us too. Then the Starlings began to wake up. The ever increasing noise was then joined by the birds starting to rise from the reeds, then drop down again. Then another Bittern came up, followed some minutes later by another, the latter giving a good protracted flypast which meant that all the group got to see it. In the rain it seemed as though the Starlings were reluctant to leave. Finally they came up in several large groups and flew off. We were left amazed. Some in the group were starting to get a bit cold and made to go but we stayed on – and what a good job we did as the main flock that had roosted further over to our left then rose up and the sky was black with birds as flock after huge flock came right over us – hundreds of thousands of birds. What a spectacle, one that everyone will remember for our lifetimes!

It was time to move on, so we returned to Wells where we enjoyed our breakfasts having felt that we had earned them!

We left by 9.15am and returned to Ashcott Corner. Sadly the forecast rain had set in so we made swift progress towards the hides, stopping briefly to watch some Tufted Ducks and Pochards.

At Noah's Lake hide we had another feast of ducks in front of us and managed to see Pochard and Great Crested Grebes in the telescope. Greylag Geese were also new for the trip. Some were lucky to see a Water Rail in the vegetation below the hide and all saw the ever-popular Kingfisher that buzzed past and perched up for some.

At Meare Heath hide, the reedbed dwellers were keeping low in the rain but we picked out a Goldcrest and a couple of Chiffchaffs in the adjacent bushes, hiding from the weather.

We returned to the buses and after a quick comfort stop, we were soon at Catcott Somerset Wildlife Trust Reserve. By now the sun had come out and we enjoyed excellent views of a multitude of ducks which enabled us to consolidate our earlier learnings as well as adding the beautiful Pintail to our list. Getting the telescope on the intricate plumage of Wigeon, Teal, Shoveler, Gadwall and Pintail only 30 metres away revealed the stunning patterns on each feather. We also found Barnacle Geese, a Stonechat, two Ravens at their nest, and the rare sighting of a Merlin perched above a Buzzard in a distant tree. 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 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 headed towards the Tower hide. Many commented on how they liked this reserve in a quiet corner of the Levels. Several Chiffchaffs were spotted in the willows and a showy Water Rail managed to avoid the gaze of some! We sheltered from the rain in the hide, waiting for it to stop in the hope that something might show when it cleared. And so it transpired – in the lovely winter sunshine we had excellent views of an adult male Marsh Harrier quartering the reed bed. Then Steve spotted a strange shape flying towards us – as it neared, he identified it as a Bittern. It then performed a magnificent flypast, backlit by the golden sunshine. What a brilliant finale from this stunning reserve!

We quit while we were ahead and returned to the buses, seeing a flock of Golden Plover on the way. We then had a comfort stop before moving on to Ashcott Corner. We returned to the Ham Wall Viewing Platform to await the Starlings, stopping on the way to admire the winter growing fungus Scarlet Elf Cup. We didn't have to wait for long before the Starlings started to arrive – the great flocks passing over towards Meare and Street Heath. Through the telescope we 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. No repeat of the spectacular displays of last night and this morning, but different again, leaving us marvelling at how nature gives us a completely different experience every time we go out.

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	
			12	13
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>	20	15
6	Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		4
7	Great Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>		4
8	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
9	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		2
10	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓
11	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	2	
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>	1	35
17	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	✓	✓
18	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		20
19	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓
20	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	1	5
21	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1	2
22	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
23	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		1
24	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓
25	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	3	
26	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	
27	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	20	
28	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	6S +H	2S+H
29	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
30	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
31	Eurasian Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	5000	30
32	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
33	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	20	4
34	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	1	
35	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
36	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓
37	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓
38	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
39	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	H	
40	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓
41	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
42	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
43	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	H	H
44	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		2
45	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	H	
46	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	H	
47	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			12	13
48	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓
49	Northern Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
50	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
51	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	3	
52	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓
53	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		✓
54	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>		✓
55	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
56	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
57	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	2	3
58	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	3	3
59	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	H	H
60	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		4
61	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
62	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	2	
63	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>	✓	
64	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
65	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</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>	1	
77	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>	4	
78	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
79	Common Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>		10
80	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		2
81	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓

Mammals

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