

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

18 – 20 May 2015

Report compiled by Dave Nevitt



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Summary

This tour, around the Somerset Levels in spring, was a fantastic opportunity to witness the wildlife in one of Britain's prime wetland areas. A home in winter to massive concentrations of waders, wildfowl and the country's largest roost of millions of Starlings, in spring the area comes alive with the many species which come here to breed.

A host of warbler species, the broadest range of breeding heron species in the country, and many specialists of reedbeds and wet grassland habitats combine to make this a unique area. Sought-after species include the largest concentration of breeding Bitterns in the country, the only site in Britain where the Great White Egret breeds, the Cranes which have been re-introduced here, after an absence of over 400 years, and Hobbies which congregate to feed on the plethora of *Odonata* in the rhynes. (A rhyne is a Somerset word for a drainage ditch.) The stage was set for a fantastic feast of wildlife.

Day 1

Monday 18th May

The group assembled in the evening of a cool and showery Somerset evening. In the cosy setting of the Swan Hotel, with Wells Cathedral glowing in floodlight opposite, expectations were high as Dave and Stephen introduced themselves, and whetted the group's appetite with the plan for the days ahead. The group members completed introductions, said what they particularly wanted to see, and shared their level of experience to assist the leaders. All group members were at a similar level of experience.

We adjourned to sample our first of several delicious Swan Hotel meals, before moving to the Exmoor Room where Dave 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, and with an early start scheduled for tomorrow, all took a welcome early night.

Day 2

Tuesday 19th May

A good proportion of the group emerged in the early dawn light at 5am, to be welcomed by Stephen and Dave. Loading up into the bus, we were soon on our way across the marshy fields of the Levels, heading for Ashcott Corner. Arriving in the car park at 5.20, the heavily overcast skies did not bode well and it wasn't long before it started to rain. Despite this, we were greeted by a cacophony of bird song in the car park. Goldfinches tinkled their merry song, our first Cuckoo called in the distance, and a close Whitethroat advertised his territory. We could hear a Song Thrush was giving his characteristic repetitive song, as well as Chaffinch, Great Tit, Wren and Dunnock. Several Blackcaps were singing, and we took the opportunity, while sheltering from the rain under the stand, to learn the differences between his song and that of the Garden Warbler.

Emerging during a lull in the rain, we checked the road bridge for Kingfishers, without any luck, before we spotted a lovely male Greenfinch singing in a nearby tree. We proceeded down the old railway line, taking the path to RSPB Ham Wall reserve, where we heard our first Bittern booming – what a fantastic noise! The birds

came thick and fast. A Goldcrest showed itself to all, then started singing, whilst a Chiffchaff was singing away all the while. Another Blackcap gave us the chance to get to grips with his beautiful song, then we spotted him in the trees, and were all able to see him puffing his throat out as he put all his energy into his song.

At the old railway bridge we heard another Whitethroat, and saw Cormorants flying overhead on their way to their fishing grounds. We all got to grips with the distinctive explosive song of the Cetti's Warbler as he belted it out from the undergrowth. A few Reed Warblers were chuntering their repetitive song from the reeds but, in the cloudy weather, they were staying well hidden in the reedbeds. Another Cuckoo was calling in the distance, and several more Bitterns were booming regularly. With the rain having forced any aerial insects down low, there were hundreds of Swifts whizzing around quite low, making the most of this feeding bonanza. They were also joined by some House Martins and a few Sand Martins.

We were treated to several fly-bys by the rare Great White Egret as they flew between their feeding sites and their nests – this is the only place in the country where this spectacular bird breeds! Some Tufted Ducks were sheltering in the shallows nearby, and a Pochard flew rapidly overhead. A Hobby flew over the path right in front of us – rather unexpected in the rain.

Getting to the viewpoint, the rain still hadn't eased off but we braved it in the open, in the hope of seeing a Bittern flying. We saw two Marsh Harriers – a male and a female – out hunting, and there were many hirundines over the reeds. A couple of the group saw a very brief view of a Bittern in flight that left us all a bit frustrated – will we all see one later? we thought.

Deciding to shelter from the rain, we checked out the small hides where we saw lovely Great Crested Grebes in their summer finery, Canada Goose and some very showy Pochards. Reed Warblers chuntered away in the reeds and Reed Buntings gave their monotonous song all around. The Great White Egrets gave a superb show, as one bird landed on the edge of the channel in front of us, with several more flying back and forth all around. This rare heron returned to breed here after an absence of 150 years, and is one of the very special birds of the Somerset Levels. A Water Rail squealed from deep within the reeds, while Bitterns continued to boom all around and the Marsh Harrier put in another appearance. What a magical place – despite the weather! It was time to return for breakfast so we headed back towards the bus. On the way, we heard a Garden Warbler getting in on the dawn chorus. It was great to compare its song with the earlier Blackcaps, and we managed to see it in the telescope too.

We were soon back at the Swan enjoying a nice cooked breakfast that we all felt that we had thoroughly earned. After a rest, we headed out again, this time to the Parrett valley in the south of the Levels. First stop was the RSPB Greylake reserve, where we followed the boardwalk into the realm of the Reed Warbler. We were soon surrounded by their songs, some only metres from us. The out-of-tune four-note song of the Reed Bunting gave us a different chorus, and we saw them, smart in their black heads with white collars, on the reeds. As Dave rang the pub to sort out the lunch menu, the rest of the group were treated to a magnificent Bittern fly-past right over them! How brilliant!

Approaching the open grassland, we started to hear the Skylarks singing above us, as the Lapwings flew up to beat up a Crow as it went by. As the rain continued, the Swifts were again whizzing around having a feast. Damp grassland is a habitat that holds a wealth of breeding birds but, by their very nature, most of them keep hidden – it is one of the reasons why they nest here so that their chicks can remain safe in the grass. So we sat it out in the

hide to see what came out. A Cuckoo called in the distance, and we were hearing Yellow Wagtails calling too. Some obliging Gadwalls were right in front of the hide and looked stunning in the telescope. Persistent watching eventually pinned down several Yellow Wagtails as they clung on to the fence in the strong wind. Everyone was able to see them well in the telescopes before they dropped back down into the meadow. Lapwings were plentiful and frequently came up to harry the Carrion Crows that searched for their young. We had good views of several Redshanks as they patrolled the area to protect their chicks which were no doubt hiding in the grass. As Dave rang in our lunch order to the pub, it happened again – another fly-past by a Bittern for the rest of the group! This was proving to be a trend!

It was time to move on, so we headed back towards the bus. One the way, we heard two Sedge Warblers and were able to compare their scratchy and varied song with the many Reed Warblers. We headed off to Oath railway bridge, where we scoped the low-lying, wet fields. Several Curlew were singing their lovely song that echoed evocatively across the huge landscape, and a Lesser Whitethroat gave its characteristic machine-gun-like rattle from a nearby thick hedge. But we were here to look for Common Cranes, and we soon found our quarry. Six birds were feeding in a field and we were all able to see them in the telescopes. They were quite some distance away and we were hoping that we would be able to find some more rather closer, later. We tried at another site – Aller Moor. This is the site where the Cranes have their feeding station in the winter, but sadly they were elsewhere today. We spotted some Roe Deer in the distance, and a Grey Heron.

It was time for lunch, so we journeyed up the road to the King Alfred pub in Burrowbridge, the hub of much of the relief effort during the 2013/14 winter's flooding. As well as the local ciders, we had a lovely lunch, including the famed "Somerset Smokie" for some. After lunch, we made our way up the hill to nearby RSPB Swell Wood. Here we met Dion, one of the RSPB volunteers, who was to be our guide for the next few hours, taking us to parts of the reserve that are not normally open to the public. We went to the hide overlooking the south-west's largest heronry, where we admired the prehistoric-looking young Grey Herons as they squabbled noisily in their treetop nests. They were a fair size, and no doubt not many days from departing their nests. Their neighbouring Little Egrets, nesting somewhat later, were still incubating eggs and sitting tight on their nests. Also on view from the hide was a lovely pair of Spotted Flycatchers, which delighted us with their feeding antics as they sallied forth from their perch to snatch a passing insect. A Goldcrest came down to the pond, and another Cuckoo called in the distance.

We then descended the hill, with a wonderful view across the huge expanse of the great West Sedge Moor reserve. We scanned the marsh, and soon located a fabulous Crane strutting along. We were able to approach closer and had superb views of it, and we were lucky enough to see a couple more of these impressive birds in flight.

Swallows were whizzing back and forth in the strong wind, hovering up the insects. We walked the track that got increasingly muddy, seeing a freshly emerged family of Long-tailed Tits on the way. Arriving at the wild flower meadow, we soon found our first orchid – a Pyramidal Orchid. We followed Dion, and were soon delighted he had found a perched Hairy Dragonfly. In the chilly wind, it was staying put so we were able to admire it in our binoculars. We added two more orchid species, Green-winged and Early Purple, before it was time to go so we returned up the hill to the bus. Thanking Dion, we then made our way back to the luxury of the Swan at Wells.

After some time to relax and spruce ourselves up, we enjoyed another delicious dinner. We then caught up with our checklists, which revealed a very respectable total of 78 species for the day despite the inclement weather, before retiring after a very successful day.

Day 3

Wednesday 20th May

After another satisfying breakfast, we left Wells to explore the more northerly valleys of the Levels.

We returned to Ashcott Corner car park where we had been at dawn yesterday. On arrival, we paused to listen and, despite there still being many birds singing, we commented how much quieter it was than at dawn the previous day. It certainly had been worth getting up early yesterday!

We headed west this time, to the Natural England Shapwick Heath reserve. A Chiffchaff was singing away merrily and a Reed Warbler soon joined in. A pair of Coots were looking after their cute youngsters, but then our attention was grabbed by a Bittern that flew over the path and into the reeds. At the lagoon, which had been drained, we saw a good sized flock of Black-tailed Godwits, some resplendent in their summer finery, and a Redshank with ludicrously orange legs! Red-eyed Damselflies were an intriguing new species for most, as we watched them sitting on the lily pads on the rhyme.

We had a couple of distant Hobbies, and there were several Buzzards enjoying a free ride on the strong wind. A fine full adult male Marsh Harrier was patrolling the reeds but then joined the Buzzards to see them off, with much talon-waving! We presumed that he had a female on a nest nearby and, further on, a female duly appeared. Another male Marsh Harrier was quartering the reeds on the other side of the path and Swifts whizzed around feeding.

Some threateningly dark clouds were looming so we headed for the hides, splitting the group between the two hides. The Meare Heath hide produced several Willow Warblers singing in the woods, as well as Blackcap and a brief Treecreeper. The male Marsh Harrier was seen again and a Bittern flew briefly. At Noah's hide there were four Common Terns, and Cormorants lounging in the dead trees, including a very close immature bird. Great Crested Grebes were dotted amongst the Coots, and some of the group were lucky to encounter a group of four Hobbies overhead.

Time was pressing on so we headed back to the bus, striking it lucky with another Bittern fly-over, followed by two more that were foot-tugging in mid-air!

It was time for lunch, so we headed to the Crown at Catcott, where we all enjoyed a lovely meal, before moving on to the Somerset Wildlife Trust Westhay Moor reserve, where we had the now familiar song of the Cetti's Warbler from the car park. Walking past a lake, we saw a Great Crested Grebe sitting on its nest. Reed Warblers were singing from the reeds, despite the strong wind, and Swifts were zooming past our heads. A pair of Gadwall gave us the chance to study their superbly vermiculated plumage.

Our attention was then grabbed by a couple of Hobbies that delighted us as they flew close to us, repeatedly doing a fast zoom, stretching out their legs to pluck an insect from mid-air, then eating it. With the excellent

light, we were able to see their reddish undertail coverts and the intense streaking on their undersides. We were transfixed, watching these masters of the air for quite some time.

By the first hide, we walked through the long grass and disturbed hundreds of damselflies. We saw Blue-tailed, Common Blue, Variable and Large Red Damselflies. In a sunny glade we found several dragonflies – Hairy Dragonflies, including a pair mating, as well as Four-spotted Chaser.

We moved on, and were soon in the depths of this ancient unspoilt marshland, one of the first reserves on the Levels, with reedbeds on one side and thick alder carr on the other. We stopped to try to entice Bearded Tits out of the reeds, but without any luck. However, a Cuckoo was calling in the distance. At the Tower Hide, made famous by John Craven as he was filmed here on Countryfile watching the huge winter Starling roost, we had an elevated panoramic view of the reserve. A Bittern boomed, and we looked from the hide to watch another Marsh Harrier over the reeds. But it was rather chilly in the wind at the hide, so we moved to watch from nearby shelter, in the sunshine. We marvelled at three more (or were they the same?) Hobbies, performing marvellously, even closer above us this time. Hobby was one of the target species for many in the group so there were big smiles all round!

We returned to the Drove and walked to the screen, trying to find Bearded Tits on the way. With the strong wind, they were staying well down in the reeds, but we chanced upon a Cuckoo on the way back, that sat in a tree so that we could all enjoy the view of this wonderful bird in the telescopes. What a superb end to our trip!

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

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Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; H = heard only; S = seen; M=male; F=Female)

	Common name	Scientific name	May	
			19	20
1	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	✓	✓
2	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	6	✓
3	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓
4	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓
5	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	8	2
6	Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	6	
7	Great Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>	3S , 5H	7S , 3H
8	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
9	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	13	
10	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓
11	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		2
12	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	✓	✓
13	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
14	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	6	✓
15	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
16	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	5	4+
17	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1	1
18	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
19	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓
20	Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>	2	9+
21	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓
22	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	12	
23	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	H	H
24	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
25	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
26	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
27	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	1	
28	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		40
29	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	2	1
30	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	3	
31	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
32	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓
33	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
34	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>		4
35	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	2	
36	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
37	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
38	Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	1S , 4H	1S , 4H
39	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	✓	✓
40	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	2	1
41	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓	✓
42	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓
43	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	✓	✓
44	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	6	2
45	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	2	
46	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓
47	Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>	2M, 1F	

	Common name	Scientific name	May	
			19	20
48	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
49	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
50	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓
51	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
52	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
53	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	✓
54	Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>	✓	
55	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	✓	✓
56	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓
57	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>		3
58	Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>	✓	✓
59	Lesser Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia curruca</i>	1	
60	Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>	✓	✓
61	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>	✓	✓
62	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	✓
63	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	2	
64	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
65	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓	
66	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
67	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
68	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	1H	
69	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	1	1
70	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	✓	✓
71	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
72	Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓
73	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
74	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
75	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
76	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
77	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
78	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓	✓
79	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
80	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	✓	✓
81	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓

Mammals

Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓	✓
Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	✓	✓
Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>	✓	

Invertebrates

✓

Small Tortoiseshell	<i>Aglais urticae</i>		✓
Peacock	<i>Inachis io</i>		✓
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>		✓
Green-veined White	<i>Pieris napi</i>	✓	
Orange-tip	<i>Anthocharis cardamines</i>	✓	
Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>		✓
Common Carpet	<i>Epirrhoe alternata</i>		✓
Blue-tailed Damselfly	<i>Ischnura elegans</i>	✓	✓
Common Blue Damselfly	<i>Enallagma cyathigerum</i>		✓

	Common name	Scientific name	May	
			19	20
	Red-eyed Damselfly	<i>Erythromma najas</i>		✓
	Variable Damselfly	<i>Coenagrion pulchellum</i>		✓
	Large Red Damselfly	<i>Pyrrhosoma nymphula</i>		✓
	Four-spotted Chaser	<i>Libellula quadrimaculata</i>		✓
	Hairy Dragonfly	<i>Brachytron pratense</i>	✓	✓