

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

2 – 4 December 2015



Bearded Tit



Freshwater Oyster shell with Otter teeth marks



Goldcrest

Report compiled by Dave Nevitt
Images courtesy of Alan Crockard



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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 very mild weather in recent weeks and no snow to drive them abroad, most of the wildfowl were present in excellent numbers. Fortunately the recent dry weather ensured that previous years' 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 on the second evening we were treated to huge flocks descending into the reeds just in front of us. Fantastic!!

Day 1

Wednesday 2nd December

The group assembled in the evening of an unseasonably mild 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.

Dave gave a talk giving an introduction to how the Levels were formed and the special species that now call it home.

We then adjourned to sample our first of several delicious Swan Hotel meals. Some having spent much of the day travelling, all took a welcome early night.

Day 2

Thursday 3rd December

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 two years ago.

We arrived at our first destination, Greylake RSPB reserve where we enjoyed a good selection of birds in the car park, including several Reed Buntings that showed well. Redwings flew over calling and a couple of Great Spotted Woodpeckers showed to all. We then walked to the nearby hide. On the way, we kept our eyes peeled over the reedbeds for any activity.

We stopped at a viewpoint across the grazing marshes and were soon enjoying large flocks of Lapwings, some just in front of us and some in the distance that kept rising up, no doubt having been disturbed by one of the many Buzzards in the area. Keen eyes spotted a lone Dunlin in with the Lapwing flock too.

At the hide we were soon enjoying view of the various duck species – Teal and Wigeon were present in huge flocks. They were very jumpy and kept rising in alarm to unseen threats. Then close scrutiny of the reed edges revealed some Snipe that looked amazing in the telescope. We spotted four, in the knowledge that there were undoubtedly many more hiding in the vegetation. A distant Marsh Harrier was perched up on a post, as were several more Buzzards.

A high-pitched call alerted us to a jolly little Goldcrest that showed itself in the hedge by the hide, followed by at least two Chiffchaffs in the willows.

David returned from the second hide, reporting that there were several Water Rails on show. The hide soon emptied as everyone went for a look at these weird, usually skulking, reedbed dwellers.

We moved on to RSPB Dewlands Farm, the centre of the West Sedgmoor reserve. After a loo stop we set off down the muddy track.

A check for a Stonechat was unsuccessful but we saw delightful Long-tailed Tits in the hedgerows and Fieldfares were soon being admired in the orchard through the telescopes.

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. Almost as soon as we sat down, a large female Peregrine buzzed a flock of Wigeon in front of us then sat on a gate post. We were all able to have superb views of this top predator through the telescope. Later on, a smaller male Peregrine joined the female, even sitting on the same gate at one point. The huge flocks of duck, mainly Wigeon and Teal with a few Pintail, in a setting with such a panoramic view across the Levels, certainly gave us a great taster of the Levels landscape and its huge appeal to waterfowl. Vast flocks of Lapwing adorned the grazing marshes and, in the distance, a mass of Golden Plover were resting in the fields. At one point this huge flock, of about 10,000 birds, rose up to give us a spectacular sight as they wheeled across the sky. The birds were also continually harried by a young Marsh Harrier that afforded great views as it quartered the reed edges looking for a meal.

By now some were getting a little cold in the wind 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 Aller Moor in search of the Cranes from the Great Crane Project. They had been moving about a bit in recent days but we had heard that some had been seen here only an hour ago. Sadly, we arrived to be told that they had just been flushed by a dog walker and had flown off towards West Sedgmoor. What bad luck, but you can't win them all!! We had a nice consolation prize in the form of a Chiffchaff in the hedge by the buses.

It was then time to head for the much-anticipated Starling roost so we packed up and were soon at Ashcott Corner car park, complete with its new loos!

The Starlings had been leading everyone a merry dance over the past couple of days – having been at the east end of Ham Wall for over a month, they were starting to fragment and roost in several different places, usually a

sign that the whole flock will soon move – but to where, nobody knows! We made our decision to head for Viewing Point 2 at Ham Wall and headed off east along the disused railway track.

The weather was pretty gloomy, as it had been all day, so dusk was somewhat earlier than normal. As we walked, Cetti's Warblers serenaded us with their loud songs as they had done throughout the day at various sites. Some Tufted Ducks provided a new species, followed by Gadwalls. Several Buzzards circled around, no doubt looking forward to a Starling meal!

As we arrived at Viewing Point 2, the Starlings soon started to arrive. Great clouds of them were gathering at the back of the reedbed beneath the water tower and we marvelled at them through our binoculars. Flocks flew over our heads, twisting and turning in amazing swirls in the strong wind. Then an immense flock arrived from the south, seeming to cover half the sky, again performing fantastic patterns as they dropped into the reeds on the south side of the path.

What a brilliant spectacle, as we had watched hundreds of thousands of birds coming in to this wonderful roost site. As darkness fell, we retraced our steps back to the buses, thrilled at the special display we had witnessed.

An hour later we were back at the Swan Hotel where we relaxed for a while before catching up with our checklists before another delicious dinner. We then retired after a successful day, despite the gloomy and windy weather.

Day 3

Friday 4th December

After another fine cooked breakfast, we headed off, this time to the Somerset Wildlife Trust Westhay Moor reserve for a walk. The weather was much kinder today – still warm but nice and sunny with no wind and certainly not gloomy like yesterday. We were treated to a Chiffchaff in some willows that gave us the opportunity to discuss field craft and how to point out the location of a bird to other people.

We continued to the Viridor hide where we scrutinised the reed edges for Bitterns. Moorhens were doing otter impersonations and some Snipe were showing us how well their cryptic camouflage enables them to hide in the cut reeds. Cormorants flew overhead, giving us the clue that deeper water wasn't far off. We headed for the Tower Hide and stopped several times to try to entice Bearded Tits to show in the reeds but, despite the seemingly perfect conditions, there was no response. We heard some Siskins calling as they flew over. At the hide, we enjoyed a great view over the reedbeds and waited for the hoped-for Bittern to appear! It wasn't to be but we had nice views of Gadwalls and Snipe flying by.

We then made for the screen on the other side of the reserve, again stopping to try to see Bearded Tits. At the screen we had a lovely fly-past of over 40 Snipe in the sunshine. Alan carried on the path a little way whilst we were at the screen, returning to say that he had heard Bearded Tits calling so we all walked 50 metres on to the location and tried the tape again. Finally, this time we had success as first a female then a splendid adult male showed to us all very close in the reeds. They then went on to move 10 metres further down and to show even better, right out on the reed heads by the path. How fantastic!

With smiles all round, we returned to the buses and, after a quick loo stop, moved on to Catcott Lows Somerset Wildlife Trust Reserve. With the sun out, the light was excellent and we enjoyed excellent views of a multitude of ducks which enabled us to consolidate our earlier learnings as well as adding great views of the beautiful Pintail to our repertoire. We also found a distant Stonechat, a Marsh Harrier perched on the ground, a male Peregrine sitting on a mound of reeds as well as a fly-past by a large female Peregrine.

It was then time for our welcome lunch stop at the Crown where we were well looked after, before warming up in front of the roaring log fire.

Time was ticking on so we drove to Ashcott Corner. We checked out the rhyne here and were very pleased to find a splendid male Kingfisher that sat there being admired in the telescope by the whole group – what a wonderful bird they are.

Pressing along, we heard several Goldcrests calling in the ivy – despite our best efforts, they singularly refused to show themselves further though. We saw some Goldfinches feeding in the alder trees that were accompanied by a nice male Bullfinch and more Cetti's Warblers were singing away in the reeds. At Viewing Point 1 we scanned the reedbeds for Bitterns and saw Gadwall and Tufted Ducks on the water. We then had the decision to make of where to go for the Starlings. The previous night some had come down north of VP2, some south of VP2, some near VP1 and some at Meare Heath, over a mile to the west! It was anyone's guess where they would choose, but we decided to stay at VP1 and hope for the best.

The first flocks started to come down near VP2, so we were tempted to rush down there but then some of the Starlings doubled back to VP1, so we stayed where we were. As it happened, it was a great decision as we were able to see some coming down at VP2 and Meare Heath in the distance performing magnificent swirls and twists as they cruised in! However the vast majority descended into the reeds by VP1, albeit very distantly. Then our luck held as the distant flocks rose up again, flying towards us and going down much closer. How fortunate were we, as streams of birds flowed towards us and turned the reeds black with birds. The noise of their excited calls was amazing, heightened by cupping our hands to our ears to magnify it.

So, we had seen the famed murmurations, complete with stunning aerial displays followed by a descent close by into the reeds. What a fantastic result! Thrilled at having witnessed two completely different experiences of the roost on different nights, we headed back to the buses with smiles all round.

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

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Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	December	
			3	4
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	2
6	Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	2	2
7	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
8	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	40	20
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>	10	20
15	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	✓	✓
16	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		4
17	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
18	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	3	3
19	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1	
20	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
21	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓
22	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	2	2
23	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		✓
24	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	3S + H	H
25	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
26	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
27	Eurasian Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	10100	
28	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
29	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	7	45
30	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	1	
31	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
32	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓
33	Common (Mew) Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓
34	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
35	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓
36	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
37	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
38	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	H	1
39	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	3	1
40	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	December	
			3	4
41	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	250+	✓
42	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	1	
43	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
44	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
45	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	3	
46	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓
47	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓
48	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	✓
49	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
50	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
51	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	2	3
52	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	2	7
53	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	1	
54	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	H	H
55	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	5	4
56	Bearded Reedling (Tit)	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>		2
56	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
57	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓	
58	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
59	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
60	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		1
61	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
62	Western Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓
63	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
64	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
65	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	12	
66	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
67	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
68	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
69	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>	H	H
70	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
71	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	✓	10
72	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		1
73	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓

Mammals

1	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓	
2	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	✓	

Others

1	Common Toad	<i>Bufo bufo</i>	✓	
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Long-tailed Tit