

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

14 - 16 January 2016



Common Snipe



Mixed duck flock



Group watching Starlings



Murmuration of Starlings

Report compiled by Dave Nevitt
Images courtesy of Graham Canny



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Tour Participants: Dave Nevitt & David Tattersfield (leaders) with 16 Naturetrek clients

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 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

Thursday 14th January

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 hoped 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 as 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. With some having spent much of the day travelling, we all took a welcome early night.

Day 2

Friday 15th January

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. A Great Spotted Woodpecker also came in to the feeders. On the walk to the hide we stopped to scan the water meadows and came across a beautiful Eurasian Hare squatting down behind a tussock. In the willows by the hide we spotted, then pushed out, a Goldcrest for all to see.

At the hide we were presented with great masses of ducks on the pools before us. Barely had we sat down when they all took flight in unison. The prompt cry of "Peregrine Falcon!" had everyone crouching to look up to try to find the culprit amongst the thousands of duck in the air. What an amazing spectacle! But it very quickly got even better as another Peregrine got in on the act, the two raptors working in tandem to surprise their prey. Then a Marsh Harrier appeared, taking advantage of the chaos to seek a meal of its own. Then another Marsh Harrier; then a third! It was mayhem as the female Peregrine took a duck, and then one of the harriers was seen

to take a Teal. We then managed to calm down a bit and take in the scene in front of us. The Peregrines had landed and one was feeding on the kill.

We were soon enjoying viewing the various duck species – Teal and Wigeon were present in huge flocks. They were still very jumpy and kept rising in alarm. Then close scrutiny of the reed edges revealed some Snipe that looked amazing in the telescope. Several Buzzards were also perched up on posts. There were several Chiffchaffs in the willows between the hides and Water Rails called, unseen in the reeds.

Back at the car park, we scoped the marshes on the other side of the road and found some Golden Plovers in amongst the plentiful Lapwings. After such an amazing start, it was time to move on. With smiles all round in the group, Dave and David struggled to convince everyone that it wasn't always this good!

We moved on to RSPB Dewlands Farm, the centre of the West Sedgmoor reserve where we met Dion, our volunteer guide. After a toilet 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 through the telescopes. Dave was a little behind the group as he had phoned our lunch order in, but we heard him shout "Cranes!" as two of these huge birds flew along the marsh. Unfortunately only a few were able to see them because of trees in the way.

Arriving at the barn hide, we were presented with a view completely different from Greylake. We could see for miles across this unspoilt landscape. Most of the birds were further away than at Greylake but the scale of the place took your breath away. There were many thousands of ducks on the pools and we used the telescopes to go through them. A young Marsh Harrier was quartering the reedy parts, putting up ducks on the way. With the need for a telescope here, we decided to move on to find closer birds. Dion was just explaining some of the local history when a magnificent Barn Owl flew silently over our heads, much to everyone's delight.

Our next stop was at Aller Moor, the centre of the Great Crane Project releases. And our luck was in as we found 43 Cranes quite close by, feeding in a field. What a bit of luck. Also on a flood we had flocks of Golden Plover, a Ruff, Dunlin and a flock of Black-tailed Godwits. We seemed to be finding birds wherever we went today!

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 Kings Sedge Moor where we had Fieldfares and Redwings feeding in the grass. Snowdrops were flowering on the verges. Several jolly Stonechats didn't seem bothered by our presence and entertained us despite the cold wind. Three Great White Egrets and some Meadow Pipits completed our additions here.

It was then time to head for the much-anticipated Starling roost. Many people think that the Starlings always come down to the same roost site every night and that finding them is easy. If only that were the case! There are upwards of a dozen sites which are regularly used and if you are at the wrong site, you will see nothing more than

flocks overflying you to get to their chosen site for the night. We moved on for a respite at the Avalon Marshes Visitor Centre to have a hot drink, use the toilets and a warm up in the shop in preparation for our Starling vigil.

We decided on the area near Canada Farm as the most likely roost site for tonight so we walked from the Visitor Centre, about 600 metres along the rhyne then at a point with a clear view we waited. It wasn't long before Starlings began to appear, in ever larger flocks. They mostly flew over our heads and accumulated over a reedbed ahead of us. What a view we had as huge numbers swirled and waved in front of us. The trees and, later, the reeds were absolutely black with birds! The group was spellbound as there, in front of us, was the sight that they had all come to see. 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 and another delicious dinner. Since we had seen where the Starlings had roosted, and with it being close to the road, the leaders offered the opportunity to leave early the next morning to witness the morning lift-off from the roost. Many were interested so we then retired after a hugely successful day.

Day 3

Saturday 16th January

Those who had elected to get up early left at 6.30am and got to the roost site near Burtle before dawn on an icy but still morning. We were significantly closer than we had been last night – the birds were only a few hundred metres in front of us. Soon the Starlings were waking up, and the cacophony of sound was immense. Pulses of birds rose and then fell back into the reeds again, constantly switching positions in readiness for 'the off'. Then finally, over the next 20 minutes, great waves of them rose up, and then swirled around before departing. Just when we thought we had seen them all and they had all gone, absolutely massive additional flocks arose from reeds just behind the woods in front of us. The sky literally went black, there were so many of them! What an amazing spectacle! Several Grey Wagtails and a Tawny Owl were also heard.

We returned to the hotel to join the late risers for another fine cooked breakfast. After checking out we headed off, this time to the Somerset Wildlife Trust Westhay Moor reserve for a walk. The weather was much calmer today – still chilly but nice and sunny with no wind.

We found Gadwall on the first lake, together with a fine Kingfisher that perched up nicely for the telescopes. A couple of Great Crested Grebes were similarly photogenic. Cormorants flew overhead, giving us the clue that deeper water wasn't far off. We headed down the drive 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 screen we met someone who had seen a Bittern which kept our spirits up but sadly it didn't reappear. It really was beautiful in the still sunshine; but very quiet, as reed beds often are in the winter months. There is no reason for most of the residents to make any noise as this simply increases their chances of being eaten – something that we often forget. Three Ravens flew over croaking whilst Goldcrests, Reed Buntings and Cetti's Warblers were the only small birds breaking cover.

We returned to the buses and after a quick toilet stop moved on to Catcott Lows Somerset Wildlife Trust Reserve. With the sun out, the light was excellent and we enjoyed good 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 couple of Stonechats, a Great White Egret, three Roe Deer and some Greylag Geese. Around the car park we saw two Bullfinches, Goldcrest and a couple of Chiffchaffs.

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. The bridge was closed so we took the muddy path diversion to Viewing Point 1 where we scanned the reedbeds for Bitterns and saw Gadwall, Great Crested Grebes and Tufted Ducks on the water. Another obliging Great White Egret was seen in the telescopes. By now the group were beginning to appreciate that reedbeds in winter require a lot of hard work and patience! The hoped-for Bittern flypast wasn't going to happen for us today.

After a quick toilet stop we made our way back to Burtle and the Starling roost. This time we were at the same spot as this morning i.e. much closer than we had been yesterday evening. And what a difference it made as soon the sky was awash with Starlings. They seemed to come from all directions, right above our heads. Steadily they descended into the trees in front of us, turning them black. With there being little wind, they started to murmurate properly, swirling and turning in unison. Then a male Peregrine turned up and zipped right amongst them. Complete mayhem ensued as they panicked and swirled to get out of its way. What a display! Soon the Starlings began to drop into the reeds, great swathes of which were squashed as hundreds of thousands of birds perched up in them for the night. 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 had found 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	January	
			15	16
1	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		4
2	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		5
3	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓
4	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓
5	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	13	3
6	Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	3	2
7	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
8	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		3
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>	12	4
15	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	✓	✓
16	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		15
17	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	8	2
18	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	2	3
19	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
20	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓
21	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrines</i>	3	1
22	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	43	
23	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	2H	3H
24	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
25	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
26	Eurasian Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	500+	
27	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
28	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	20+	25
29	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	14	
30	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpine</i>	10	
31	Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>	1	
32	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
33	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓
34	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓
35	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
36	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓
37	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
38	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
39	Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>	1	
40	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>		H
41	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	H	2
42	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	1	2
43	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>		H
44	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		3
45	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	
46	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓
47	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	2	4

	Common name	Scientific name	January	
			15	16
48	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
49	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
50	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		1
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>	5	3
57	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	2	4
58	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	H	H
59	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	6	1
60	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
61	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
62	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
63	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		1
64	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
65	Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓
66	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
67	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
68	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		3
69	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
70	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
71	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
72	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	✓	✓
73	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		3
74	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
75	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	1	
76	Lesser Redpoll	<i>Carduelis cabaret</i>		1
77	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	1	2
78	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	12	20

Mammals

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