

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

5 - 7 February 2016

Report compiled by Dave Nevitt



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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 and wet weather in recent weeks and no snow to drive them abroad, most of the wildfowl were present in excellent numbers. Whilst it had certainly not been dry, the lack of recent heavy rain 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. After continuous rain all day, the Starling roost display on the first evening was an unexpected delight with superb close views all around us; one of the best murmurations that the leaders have ever seen. Some of the party returned to witness the dawn rise the next day too, which was equally spectacular. Fantastic!

Day 1

Friday 5th February

The group assembled in the evening of a rainy but 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. It seemed that it was Starlings that everyone was here for, so no pressure on the leaders to deliver them! 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

Saturday 6th February

A day that will stick in the memory of all in the group for two reasons: the weather and the superb birds we saw.....read on! After a hearty cooked breakfast we set off across the low damp fields towards Glastonbury with the Tor on the skyline. It was raining from the moment we boarded the buses, and it was to transpire that that it wouldn't stop in the slightest all day. 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 donned our full waterproofs against the miserable weather. In the car park we saw several Reed Buntings that showed well, as well as Chaffinches and Dunnocks. Across the road we picked out some Golden Plovers flying in the distance too. With the heavy rain, we walked briskly to the nearby hide. We stopped at a viewpoint across the grazing marshes to view a flock of Black-tailed Godwits that had just dropped in, before pressing on for the shelter of the hide.

We 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 a raptor. There was an excellent selection of ducks and we went

through each, getting them in the telescope for everyone to learn the key identification features for themselves. Teal and Wigeon were present in huge flocks, as well as smart Shovelers, Gadwall and a couple of beautiful Pintail. Then close scrutiny of the reed edges revealed some Snipe that looked amazing in the telescope. It was almost as if you could touch them! They were certainly very popular with everyone in the group. We spotted several, in the knowledge that there were undoubtedly many more hiding in the vegetation. A Fieldfare did a fly-past in front of the hide. A distant Buzzard was perched up on a post but there was no sign of any other raptors – in the increasing wind, now approaching gale force, we surmised that they were probably taking shelter out of sight.

We moved on to RSPB Dewlands Farm, the centre of the West Sedgemoor reserve, where we met with Dion, our volunteer guide. After a toilet stop we moved to Swell Wood where we sheltered under the back doors of the bus whilst watching Coal Tits, Great Tits and a single Marsh Tit coming down to the nuts.

The walk down to the viewpoint was rather wet as the path had become a river and the view when we got there was rather disappointing because of the heavy rain. Our hoped-for Cranes were no doubt there, but not for us to see today. However a jolly female Goldcrest brought a ray of sunshine and on the return we heard Treecreeper calling plus another Goldcrest and a Marsh Tit. Long-tailed Tits entertained us with their antics. The respite of the heronry hide was enjoyed by all as we admired the goings on of the herons on their nests; it was amazing that they weren't blown off their nests!

We returned to West Sedgemoor and because of the weather, we drove down to the barn hide instead of walking. From the barn hide great flocks of ducks lay before us as we had a panoramic view across the wide open valley. With the wind whistling round the barn, we set to scanning the landscape in front of us. There were huge numbers of ducks, mainly Wigeon, Shoveler and Teal but with some Gadwall, Pintail, Mallard and Tufted Duck. It was an impressive sight by anyone's standards. We searched for raptors but they were again out of view. They were obviously about though as a huge flock of perhaps 5,000 Golden Plovers took to the air in the distance. Seeing Golden Plover from a distance is often the best way to appreciate their huge flocks, and as they wheel around the sky, the colour of the flock changes from the golden on their upperparts to the white of their underparts. Wonderful. There were some Shelducks feeding on the marsh and a Buzzard and a Sparrowhawk zipped around in the wind hoping to catch a meal unawares.

By now some were getting a little cold in the wind and we needed some sustenance. We drove back to the road and stopped further along to look again for Cranes but there was no sign of them so we headed for lunch at the King Alfred pub. The log fire was very popular as we tried to dry out a bit. Fortunately our lunch was lovely and warmed us up from the inside!

Heartily refreshed, we moved on to Burrow Mump car park, from where we scoped the flooded marshes. We were treated to five Whooper Swans, a scarce visitor this far south in the UK. A Little Egret was also accompanying them as well as a good selection of ducks.

With the rain still tumbling down, we then moved on for a respite at the Avalon Marshes Visitor Centre to have a hot drink, use the toilets and warm up in the shop in preparation for our next walk. And a very popular decision it was too with the group soaked and cold!

We then went in search of the Starling roost. Many people think that they 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. With the weather so awful today, our hopes of a spectacular roost were slim as in the wind and rain they usually dive straight in the reeds.

We decided on Ham Wall as the most likely roost site for tonight so we parked at the Ashcott Corner car park and headed east along the very muddy path to Ham Wall RSPB reserve. As we arrived, the first Starling flocks started to come in but they continued past us and descended into the trees further along. We then had a difficult decision – do we follow them, or stay put? We opted to stay put, and what a fortuitous decision that was. From the viewpoint we saw Tufted Ducks and an obliging Great White Egret, three Great Crested Grebes and Cetti's Warblers were singing from the undergrowth. We went for the shelter of the three small viewing screens and we were elated when, from the first one, we saw the rare Glossy Ibis which had been frequenting the area for some weeks but had been leading people a merry dance. A good omen, possibly, as we squinted to admire it through the rain-lashed telescope. With greater and greater Starling flocks coming in, they now started to drop into the trees and reeds in front of us. We therefore moved to the Tor View Hide that is right in the middle of the reeds to get a better view. With the wind howling through the hide and the rain still lashing down, we were treated to one of those spectacles that will stay with you forever as hundreds of thousands of Starlings poured in to the reeds only a few hundred metres from us. Just when you thought that was it, another huge flock would appear and join them. Then they all decided to move and upped and relocated, this time even closer! The reeds were just black with Starlings. Some Starlings even tried to come in to the hide! It was truly breath-taking. The sound of all those birds was quite something.

We stayed there until the light faded, when we decided that the muddy return path was best negotiated before it got too dark. As we walked back, most of the Starlings decided for some reason to relocate and huge swirls of them passed right over our heads – as if our previous spectacle wasn't enough! They then decided to go back to the original site, so they came over us again! To the sound of Water Rails screaming in the reeds, we squished our way through the mud back to the buses, with huge smiles all round.

We were soon back at the hotel and all tried to dry out before dinner. Our three course meal went down very well, and then we did our checklists for the day. Since we had seen where the Starlings had roosted, and with it being close to the path, the leaders offered the opportunity to leave early in the morning to witness the morning lift-off from the roost. Many were interested so we then retired after a successful day despite the gloomy, wet and windy weather.

Day 3

Sunday 7th February

Those who had elected to get up early left at 6.45am and got to the roost site at Ham Wall before dawn. Soon the Starlings were waking up, and the cacophony of sound was all around. Pulses of birds rose and then fell back into the reeds again before finally moving off. Over the next 20 minutes, they all departed in all directions – an amazing spectacle! Two Great White Egrets also added to the event.

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 kinder today – nice and sunny with no wind and certainly not gloomy like yesterday.

Great Crested Grebes, in almost full breeding plumage, were very popular sightings; one, which was swimming away, even prompted the call of “Otter!” before it turned to reveal its true identity. We heard Teal at the back of the pool, showing that the group had learned the calls from yesterday. Further on, an immature Marsh Harrier showed briefly behind some trees and we were also hearing the squeals of Water Rails all around, hidden in the reeds. Cetti’s Warblers were singing away and we heard two Chiffchaffs in the distance. Some Snipe were flying around and two Great White Egrets flew several times.

We progressed along the path to the screen and tried to find the elusive Bearded Tit. Conditions were good, but we heard none of their calls. We hung around for a while but sadly they weren’t to show today.

We returned to the buses and moved on to another Somerset Wildlife Trust reserve – Catcott Lows. We drove up to the hide as access here is very easy and we were soon scoping the open grazing marshes. A Great White Egret was fishing the shallows and a Greylag Goose defied identification for a while because of its hiding position. An immature Marsh Harrier was joined by a nice adult male. Both were quite distant but this helped us to go through the jizz of these birds which enables identification even at range. But the really close views of the dabbling ducks were undoubtedly the highlight, with backlit sunshine showing off the wonderfully intricate plumage of this enticing family of birds. Up to four Stonechats also delighted us as they perched atop reed stems.

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 were about to take a small detour to look for a rare Cattle Egret when we spotted a group of egrets feeding in a field by the road. Telescopes were soon up, only for us to find the Cattle Egret feeding amongst 19 Little Egrets! Whilst Dave was leaping about with joy, everyone got good views of it in the telescopes.

Arriving at Ashcott Corner, we walked west this time to Shapwick Heath. There were no finches in the alders but we found a Goldcrest as compensation. Over the open reeds, we found a male and a female Marsh Harrier quartering the reed beds, and possibly a third bird too. At the pools we added some Pochards, and a Cetti’s Warbler sang behind us.

Returning to the buses once more, we took a vote on whether to see the Starling roost again or to return to the hotel. Surprisingly everyone voted to finish there as we had all had such superb experiences of the Starlings both yesterday evening and this morning that could not be bettered. What a great position to end on! So, we had seen the famed murmurations, complete with stunning aerial displays followed by a descent close by into the reeds and everyone was happy. What a fantastic result!

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.

Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			6	7
1	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		✓
2	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	3	5
3	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓
4	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓
5	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	1	
6	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		1
7	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	1	23
8	Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	1	6
9	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
10	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	5	
11	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		1
12	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓
13	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	15	
14	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	✓	✓
15	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	✓	✓
16	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓
17	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
18	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	25	10
19	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	✓	✓
20	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		✓
21	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	10	✓
22	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		4
23	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1	1
24	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
25	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓
26	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓
27	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	H	H
28	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
29	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
30	Eurasian Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	5000	
31	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
32	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	30+	✓
33	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	20	
34	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
35	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓
36	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓
37	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
38	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓
39	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
40	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
41	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	20	
42	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	1	
43	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓
44	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
45	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
46	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		4
47	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			6	7
48	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	1	
49	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
50	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
51	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	2	
52	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	2H	H
53	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		H
54	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
55	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	1	
56	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>	12	
57	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
58	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
59	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	2H	
60	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
61	Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓
62	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
63	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
64	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
65	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓
66	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
67	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
68	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	6	✓

Mammals

1	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓	
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