

# The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

7 - 9 December 2016

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Report and images by David Tattersfield

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Tour participants: David Tattersfield and Andrew Bray (leaders) with 15 Naturetrek clients

## Summary

We spent two full days exploring the Somerset Levels and observing the variety of birdlife that the area has to offer in mid-winter. As well as the resident birds of the region, we saw huge numbers of overwintering migrants, far from their breeding-grounds, taking advantage of the rich feeding, provided by extensive areas of farmland and wetlands. We had opportunities to witness the largest roost of starlings in the country, attracted by the safety of the reedbeds. We were not disappointed! Mild and settled weather was an unexpected bonus and excellent food added greatly to a trip that will remain long in our memories.

### Day 1

**Wednesday 7th December**

We assembled at the Swan Hotel and, after a brief introduction, enjoyed a delicious dinner. Afterwards, we enjoyed a talk on the history and development of the Levels, its present management and its importance as a haven for wildlife, especially during the winter months. The proposed itinerary for the coming days was outlined and we retired to bed, with high expectations.

### Day 2

**Thursday 8th December**

After a hearty breakfast, we left at 8.30am and headed towards the southern part of the Levels. Our first destination was the RSPB reserve at Greylake. Reed Bunting showed well around the feeders in the car park, Goldcrest and Chiffchaff were seen briefly, and a Great Spotted Woodpecker was seen high in the trees. The sky was full of large flocks of Lapwing and, as we made our way through the reedbeds, we heard the loud explosive call of Cetti's Warbler and the distinctive squeal of a distant Water Rail. The well-constructed hide provided excellent views of the reedbeds and flooded fields and welcome shelter from the rain showers. Right in front of us, we had excellent views of Shoveler, Teal, Wigeon and a few Gadwall and everyone had an opportunity to compare their distinguishing features through the telescopes. Much less obvious were a small number of Snipe, their incredible camouflage blending almost perfectly with the background. Near the hide, after a patient search of the flooded willows, most of us had wonderful views of a Water Rail.

We had time for only a brief visit to the very different habitat of RSPB's Swell Wood. Conveniently placed bird feeders ensured that all we had to do was to get out of the minibuses and watch. Among the usual medley of Chaffinch, Great Tit, Blue Tit and Coal Tit, we were treated to superb views of the much less common Marsh Tit, soon joined by a pair of Nuthatch. Then it was on to RSPB's headquarters at Dewlands Farm for a loo stop and a short walk to the Barn Hide. This gives commanding views across the vast expanse of the West Sedgemoor Reserve, which provides a safe winter feeding-ground to huge numbers of duck and waders. Unlike Greylake, the birds here were quite distant and the telescopes were needed to fully appreciate the scene. We were able to pick out the distinctive profile of Pintail from the huge rafts of other species and to spot a couple of Marsh Harriers perched in their midst. The raptors were, at least for the time being, well fed and with no inclination to go after their next meal.

However, by now, we were all ready for some sustenance, so we headed off for lunch at the King Alfred in Burrowbridge. Before that there was one further treat in store for us at Aller Moor, where we located a flock of

Common Cranes, feeding in the fields. This was the site where the birds had been released during the early stages of the Great Crane Project and it was interesting to see a young bird within the flock. It was very mild and the sun came out briefly. After a substantial lunch, we were ready for the rest of the afternoon. We stopped briefly on Kings Sedge Moor and then drove north to Ham Wall, where we had high hopes of witnessing the famous Starling roost. Arriving early at the new car park, we had time for a coffee, before making our way along the course of the old railway to the view point.

All was quiet, at this stage – not a Starling in sight, as we waited patiently. And then it happened. At first, small flocks appeared, high in the sky, towards Glastonbury Tor. These were followed by more and more from every direction. Some were in tight formation, corkscrewing downwards behind the reeds and as their numbers built up so did the noise of their chatter. Nearer to ground level, a black heaving mass of birds could be observed through binoculars, gradually moving into the reed beds closer to us. Most of us, at this point, moved down to the Tor View Hide, where we found ourselves right in the middle of the main flock. The reeds were weighed down under a black mass of noisy Starlings. A Great White Egret occasionally took to the air among them, adding to the amazing spectacle. It is hard to speculate on the number of birds, but 1 million was considered to be a reasonable estimate. We stayed, enthralled by the display, until it was almost too dark to see and then headed back to the minibuses.

After dinner, during our checklist, we offered an opportunity to set off early the following morning to witness the rise of the Starlings.

## Day 3

## Friday 9th December

We left the hotel at 6.30am and made our way back to the hide. Dawn was just breaking when we arrived and the noise of the Starlings was gradually increasing. A lovely pink glow spread across the sky, and the birds were moving around in the reeds for quite some time, becoming more and more active. Small flocks lifted with a whirl of wings and then settled again and then around 7.30am the whole flock took to the sky. What a sight! Suddenly, the whole sky was full of birds and moments later they were gone. Silence returned and we went back to Wells for a late breakfast, well satisfied by our experience.

Having packed and vacated our rooms, we left for a day in the northern part of the Levels. We went first to Westhay Moor, the oldest of the reserves, dominated by mature reedbeds. Many Mute Swans and Lapwings were feeding in the adjoining fields and Gadwall were present on the open water, but elsewhere was very quiet and the hoped-for Bearded Tits did not put in an appearance. We stopped for coffee at Sweets Cafe before making our way to Catcott Lows Reserve, like Westhay, managed by the Somerset Wildlife Trust. The shallow open water in front of the hide gave a perfect opportunity for splendid views of the good numbers of duck, especially Pintail, which previously we had only observed from a distance. The light was good and the settled mild weather continued. A well-fed Peregrine was perched in the distance and a couple of Marsh Harriers put a lot of ducks and Snipe into the air, as they flew over.

Another excellent lunch was enjoyed by the log fire in the Crown, just up the road. There were lots of Starlings here, feeding in the fields and on the fallen apples in the orchard. We headed back to Ashcott car park and this time set off westwards along the rhyne onto Natural England's Shapwick Heath Reserve. Greylag Goose and Great Crested Grebe were added to our list at Noah's Hide, where more Marsh Harriers were seen in the distant

trees. The wet Alder carr between the reedbeds, represents the climax vegetation, which would have dominated the area in past times, and the large golden hummocks of Royal Fern were visible, among the trees.

Smaller birds were less evident, but we did see Bullfinch and Kingfisher on our way back. By the time we reached the car park there were already strings of Starlings heading towards their roost, so we wasted no time in returning to the Tor View Hide. Today's experience was equally as amazing as yesterday's with the birds landing all around us and we were compelled to stay until the daylight faded.

Sadly, all good things come to an end and we returned to Wells to say our goodbyes. The mild weather had been an unexpected bonus and we departed with lasting memories of some of the unforgettable experiences we had shared over our two days on the Somerset Levels.

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## Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Latin name	December	
			8	9
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>	✓	
6	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓	✓
7	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
8	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓
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>	✓	✓
15	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	✓	✓
16	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
17	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓	✓
18	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
19	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓
20	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		✓
21	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	✓	✓
22	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	✓	H
23	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
24	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
25	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
26	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	✓
27	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		✓
28	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓
29	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
30	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
31	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia domestica</i>	✓	✓
32	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
33	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
34	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		✓
35	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	✓
36	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	H	
37	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓
38	European Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
39	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓
40	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓
41	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓
42	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
43	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	
44	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		✓
45	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
46	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	H	H

	Common name	Latin name	December	
			8	9
47	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓
48	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	✓
49	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
50	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	✓	
51	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>	✓	
52	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
53	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
54	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	✓	
55	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	✓	
56	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	✓	
57	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
58	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓
59	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
60	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
61	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
62	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
63	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
64	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
65	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	✓	✓
66	Common Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		✓
67	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓