

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

13 - 15 January 2017



Wigeon and Teal at West Sedgemoor



Starling murmuration at Ham Wall

Report compiled by Matt Collis
Images courtesy of Val Edlin



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Summary

Touring around the internationally important Somerset Levels, this two day trip was an exciting opportunity to experience two best of British wildlife experiences; the mass concentrations of winter waterfowl and the much-famed murmurations of the country's largest Starling roost. We were privileged to see several huge assemblages of wildfowl and a great variety of smaller birds, including a few absolute birding gems. Blessed with crisp dry winter days, the whole weekend was a fantastic representation of this seasonal spectacular and the perfect way to counter any potential January blues.

Day 1

Friday 13th January

Gathered together at the small bar of the Swan Hotel, set within the picturesque English town of Wells, our adventure began by introducing ourselves, exchanging names and sharing in our wildlife hopes for the weekend ahead. Tour leaders Dave and Matt then more formally welcomed the group and set out the rough itinerary for the next few days, starting with a hearty three-course meal, the first of many food delights during the trip.

Straight after dinner Dave gave an hour-long talk explaining the history of the Somerset Levels, describing the uniqueness of this areas and the habitat it provides for our wintering wildfowl and waders. The group were introduced to some of the species which call these wetlands their home including some of the star species we hoped to come across.

Talk completed, everyone drifted their way to bed, full of anticipation for the days to come.

Day 2

Saturday 14th January

Full from breakfast, we set off towards our first location at RSPB Swells Wood, travelling south across the four main valleys which make up the Somerset Levels. The birding began as soon as we hit the road with large flocks of Rooks and Jackdaws, several Herring Gulls, numerous Lapwings, and a Sparrowhawk which flew over the top of one van and over the road causing a small group of Starlings to panic.

Arriving in the car park of Swell Wood, several woodland specialists were soon spotted, gorging on the seeds and nuts left at the base of the trees. Coal Tits were the most abundant by far, showing off their white nape as they flicked from branch to branch. Blue Tits and Great Tits were in plentiful numbers too but the excitement levels really grew when a rather nervy Nuthatch, which hid around the back of the tree, gave us several brief views as it collected nuts for its winter cache.

Walking to the view point, we enjoyed several chance encounters including a clambering Treecreeper and three Great Spotted Woodpeckers chasing one another up in the canopy. A quick scan from the view point gave us our first dramatic landscape view across the patchwork of damp lowland grassland and peat moorland, with RSPB West Sedgemoor just at our feet. Two distant Ravens were spotted sitting amongst the open fields below.

On the return walk we encountered several Goldcrest which flitted around in the ivy covered trees, hovering effortlessly and gleaning insects from on the underside of leaves. Once back at the car park, with a bit of patience, everyone caught sight of a Marsh Tit which had since come in for its fair share of the nuts.

A short ride down the road took us to RSPB West Sedgemoor where we'd gained special access to their barn hide which overlooked a vast area of flooded meadow. Tramping across the sodden grass, we bumped into a small flock of Stock Dove perched up in an oak tree, a couple of Chiffchaffs hopping amongst the willows, and both a Pied Wagtail and Grey Wagtail hunting for insects amongst a pile of slurry.

Once at the hide the drama really began. The fields in front of us were alive with birds and from this raised elevation point we had fantastic panoramic views across a wide expanse of the reserve. Thousands of ducks lay ahead of us, mostly Wigeon and Teal, but a few other species including Shoveler and Pintail were also on show. A small flock of Black-tailed Godwit rose up from amongst the sea of birds, circling in a tight group before settling back down into the water. A wave of Golden Plover exploded from the back as one of several Marsh Harriers glided opportunistically over, looking for an easy meal. The result was a brilliant display as 3000 Golden Plover wielded across the sky, showing off their glistening backs and white underbellies.

A scan for other predators yielded several more Marsh Harriers and a single Buzzard, no Peregrine. However, we didn't have to wait long as a small male and large pale female came hurtling into view, kicking up the entire assembly of birds in front of us. The male disappeared but the female treated us to at least 10 jaw-dropping minutes of scintillating hunting action, banking left then right and stooping up then down, as she attempted to select her prey. Despite coming close a few times, she failed to catch anything and so perched on a lone wooden post, allowing everyone beautiful stationary views of this top avian predator. Beaming from ear to ear, we made our way back to the minibuses, where we crossed our first Dunnock, two Bullfinch and another Marsh Tit.

The final stop before our lunch in the King Alfred pub was Aller Moor, in search of the Cranes from the Great Crane Project. Our luck was in, as at least 25 Cranes were spotted out across the fields in front of us including a group of five which took off several times giving us long views of these winged giants gliding through the air. A Kestrel also made an appearance, hunting alongside the bridge in the long grass, hovering effortlessly in the still winter day's sky.

After being suitably overfed with hearty pub food, we set off to RSPB Greylake. Once again the car park proved a prime birding location with superb views of winter thrushes; 60 Redwing and 10 Fieldfare feeding out in the fields. Two Reed Bunting were taking full advantage of the bird feeder stations and Snipe were seen continuously flying high overhead in small groups.

The hide proved incredibly popular, both as shelter from the cold but also for close-up views of several species we'd only previously seen at distance; particularly Lapwing and ducks like Wigeon and Teal. Two Pintail and a pair of Gadwall were present but proved elusive; however, Snipe were abundant and, to our delight, seemed happy walking in the shallows just 10 metres from the hide. With everything so near, we were able to get some breathtaking close up views of their plumage revealing detail which had gone unappreciated until now. Despite our best efforts, no Water Rails were seen but a single 'squeal' was heard.

Our last location of the day was RSPB Ham Wall for the much-anticipated Starling murmuration. Arriving at Ashcott Corner car park, it became obvious we weren't the only ones out for this avian spectacular as cars overflowed from the car park onto the road. The ever-helpful RSPB staff revealed the starlings had been splitting into several groups and roosting in separate locations at the eastern end of the reserve, which meant the exact location of the roost was unknown – we like a challenge!

Taking up a spot near viewing platform one (VP1), we started scanning the skies for birds and soon added Great Egret, Tufted Duck and Pochard to our list for the day. As dusk drew in the first of the starlings began to appear; small flocks of 50 or so birds to start with, but these soon ballooned into groups of several hundred followed by several thousand. The sky appeared full of birds as cloud upon cloud of Starlings flew in from all directions around us. Instinct told us we should move further east towards viewing platform two (VP2), as the birds seemed to be mostly heading in that direction. A brilliant decision as swathes of Starlings began to drop into the space directly in front of us creating a black blanket across the reed bed. Although acrobatic murmurations were limited, the spectacle itself didn't disappoint as we enjoyed both a visual and audible experience of one million birds gathering together to roost right in front of us.

As darkness fell, and the birds began to settle, we took our leave and returned to our minibuses to reflect on the fantastic display we'd just witnessed. Once back at the hotel, the joyful conversations at dinner made it clear that we'd all had a fantastic day's birding. Personal accounts of the day shared and bird checklists completed, we retired to our rooms for a restful night's sleep, pending the second day of excitement to come.

Day 3

Sunday 15th January

Rising well before the sun, almost the entire group had gathered ready to return to RSPB Ham Wall for a dawn Starling spectacular. Arriving at the car park, we layered up and headed to the spot we'd left the Starlings the previous night, ready to watch as they departed from the roost to spend the day feeding at various locations across the county.

The reeds were seemingly bare, showing no sign of any of the blackness which had cloaked the reeds the previous night. The only sign of life was a light chattering which slowly began to break the silence. We waited patiently. As the light slowly increased so did the volume, as more birds seemed to stir in the reeds. Just as the first light began to break, several small plumes of Starlings shifted low across the reeds as birds moved between different roosting areas. The golden-yellow of the reeds soon blackened once again as each bird made its way to the top of the reed stems. Before long there wasn't an area of reedbed which wasn't covered in Starlings and larger and larger groups seemed to be shuffling around moving from patch to patch.

At sunrise the birds started erupting with huge groups bursting up into the sky right above our heads. Starlings littered the sky, gaining height incredibly fast before dispersing in every direction. The seemingly endless supply of birds left everyone gobsmacked. To add to the experience, we were also treated to a large flock of at least 15 Great Egrets which were also rising from their night roost. When the final group of Starlings departed, we made our way back to the minibuses triumphantly, ready for a well-earned breakfast and with nobody wishing they'd stayed in bed.

The first location following breakfast was Shapwick Heath, just the other side of Ashcott Road and RSPB Ham Wall. We took a short stroll down the discovery walkway which wound its way through a willow coppice woodland. Several people enjoyed close encounters with Goldcrest, which were numerous and very confiding, coming to within just a few metres of us. However, it was the magnificent Firecrest which showed very well and for a long time which brought the most delight: a winter rarity nobody anticipated seeing.

We continued our explorations, walking along the main pathway up to Meare Lake to check for Bittern and Water Rail. Neither showed, but close views of several pairs of Gadwall were a good consolation. A quick scan of the Alder trees lining the path gave us a nice flock of Goldfinch and a brief view of two Redpolls feeding on the hanging catkins. From the hide at Noah's lake we were once again treated to huge numbers of wintering ducks, similar in composition to RSPB West Sedgemoor the day before, but with the addition of a distant Great Crested Grebe and many Black-headed Gulls. A few of the group managed to spot the Kingfisher which whizzed past in front of the hide, keeping itself low to the water weaving through the vegetation. Another Water Rail was heard but not seen as we walk back to the minibuses.

On our way to our next location we stopped for our final meal of the trip at The Crown pub. A roaring fire and welcoming atmosphere made for a pleasant meal and, with bellies full of carvery and soups, we travelled on to Catcott Nature Reserve. Alongside the now-familiar selection of ducks, which everyone could now pick out on their own, we spotted several Little Egrets, a passing Marsh Harrier and a lone Great Egret which fed right at the water's edge in full view. A female Stonechat was also seen, flicking regularly between the ground and its favoured reed top perch in front of the hide.

As the light began to fade, we returned to RSPB Ham Wall for a second attempt at viewing the evening murmuration. It was at this point we said farewell to half the group who needed to head back to the hotel and get on the road early. The remaining half ventured back to our favoured viewing spot, half way between VP1 and VP2, this time opting to stand on the banks of the reed bed for a closer encounter.

What an experience we had. Starling reeled across the sky in an almost continuous stream with several groups treating us to beautiful twisting murmurations before finally settling into the reedbeds in front of us. A few of us fell casualty to the odd well-aimed dropping but nobody minded, wearing the white smear as a badge of honour as we soaked up every moment of this close encounter.

As the last of the light faded from the sky, we made our way back to the minibus before returning to Wells to say our goodbyes. By the smiles on faces it appeared everybody had had a wonderful couple of days birding and was going home feeling inspired by some of the incredible things we'd seen during the weekend. A successful trip all round!

Naturetrek Facebook

We are delighted to launch the Naturetrek Facebook page so that participants of Naturetrek tours can remain in touch after the holiday and share photos, comments and future travel plans.

Setting up a personal profile at www.facebook.com is quick, free and easy. The [Naturetrek Facebook page](#) is now live; do please pay us a visit!

Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	Trip	January	
				14	15
1	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	✓		1
2	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓		2
3	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓		
4	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓		
5	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	8	10
6	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓	2	17
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>	✓	2000+	3000+
11	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	✓	6	23
12	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	1500+	2500+
13	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓		
14	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	✓	3	14
15	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	✓		
16	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	✓	3	5
17	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓		
18	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓	9	6
19	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	✓	3	1
20	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓		
21	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	1	
22	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	✓	3	
23	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓		
24	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	✓	25	
25	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	✓	H	H
26	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓		
27	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓		
28	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	✓	3500	
29	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓		
30	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	20	12
31	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	✓	80	
32	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	✓	6	
33	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓		
34	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓		
35	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓		
36	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓		
37	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia domestica</i>	✓		
38	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	✓	6	
39	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓		
40	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓		
41	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	✓	H	H
42	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	✓		
43	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	5	3
44	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	2	
45	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	40+	11
46	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	✓	1	
47	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓		

	Common name	Scientific name	Trip	January	
				14	15
48	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓		
49	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	1	1
50	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	4	3
51	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓		
52	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	10	3
53	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	60	100+
54	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓		
55	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	✓	H	H
56	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	2	
57	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓		
58	Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	✓		1
59	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓		
60	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	✓	2	
61	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓		
62	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓		
63	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓		
64	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	✓	1	
65	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	✓	4	2
66	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓		
67	Western Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓		
68	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓		
69	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓		
70	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	7	2
71	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓		
72	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓		
73	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓		
74	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓		2
75	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓		
76	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	✓	2	
77	Lesser Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea cabaret</i>	✓		2
78	Common Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	✓	2	H
79	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	2	

Other Taxa

Red Fox, *Vulpes vulpes*

Badger, *Meles meles*

Winter Moth, *Operophtera brumata*

Roe Deer, *Capreolus capreolus*

Short-tailed (Field) Vole, *Microtus agrestis*

Chicken of the Woods, *Laetiporus*

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