

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

6 - 8 December 2017



Eurasian Teal



Common Firecrest



Great Egret



Common Starling murmuration

Report compiled by Dave Nevitt
Images courtesy of Simon Walkden



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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 a succession of chilly spells in the preceding weeks, good numbers of wildfowl had been forced south so were present in excellent numbers. The forecast extreme weather for the final day fortunately wasn't as bad as predicted. It was very pleasing that we managed excellent views of all the expected Levels wildfowl, as well as a few surprises. The Starlings roost on the second evening was disappointing both in numbers and a lack of aerial displays. As it turned out this was good, as the spectacle of large numbers swirling repeatedly all around us at the dawn rise on the last day, followed by huge flocks descending into the reeds just in front of us on the last evening, meant that we left on a crescendo. Fantastic!

Day 1

Wednesday 6th December

The group assembled in the evening of a chilly 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 Tom 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. It seemed that Starlings were the main thing on people's wish lists, so the pressure was on to find them!

We then adjourned to sample our first of several delicious Swan Hotel meals. After dinner, Dave gave a talk giving an introduction as to how the Levels were formed and the special species that now call it home. Some having spent much of the day travelling, all took a welcome early night.

Day 2

Thursday 7th 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 several years ago.

We arrived at our first destination, Greylake RSPB reserve, where we viewed the marshes across the road. They were absolutely heaving with birds as thousands of Lapwings tumbled across the skies, no doubt trying to evade unseen predators. We soon spotted some Golden Plovers in amongst them on the ground, numbering several hundred. Tom picked out a couple of Dunlin too, and we saw Buzzards sat on fenceposts and Kestrel hovered overhead. Then, in the distance, we saw more great flocks of Golden Plover wheeling across the skies. What a magnificent sight; one of the special features of the Levels in winter!

Walking to the hide, we stopped at several spots with views into the reedbeds to look for Water Rails which were calling all around, but we couldn't spot one. Arriving at the spacious hide, we were soon enjoying views of the various duck species including Teal and Wigeon which were present in huge flocks. They were very jumpy and

kept rising in alarm to unseen threats. Species by species, we had fantastic views of them in the telescopes, marvelling at the intricacies of the patterns on each feather. Then close scrutiny of the reed edges revealed some Snipe that looked amazing in the telescope. Many struggled to even find them, such was their excellent camouflage! We spotted three, in the knowledge that there were undoubtedly many more hiding in the vegetation. A distant Marsh Harrier was terrorising the Lapwings. In the willows we heard a Chiffchaff calling but in the cold wind it was understandably keeping its head down!

Dave returned from the second hide, reporting that there was a Water Rail there, so we crept up and a few minutes later were delighted as it ran across the water in front of us and then swam the next bit before disappearing in the vegetation. What a treat.

We moved on to RSPB Dewlands Farm, the centre of the West Sedgmoor reserve. After a comfort stop, we set off down the muddy track. A scan for Stonechat was unsuccessful, but we saw delightful Long-tailed Tits in the hedgerows and a Grey Wagtail flew over. Another scan soon revealed a lovely flock of 14 Cranes, one of our main quarry species, and there was much frustration as all tried to find them as they flew further and further into the distance. Only a few people had managed to see them, so the mood fell silent for a while, only to be cheered up massively as a flock of seven Cranes flew past and landed in a meadow. They were then followed by two more pairs and a threesome, all trumpeting as they flew in. We were then able to see them feeding in the grassy fields – a wonderful sight! Further along a Goldcrest was successfully “pished” out of the bushes, and another Chiffchaff. Several Redwings and Song Thrush were in one of the meadows.

As we approached the converted barn, a Peregrine flew low over us then headed out across the marsh. Great flocks of ducks lay before us as we had a panoramic view across the wide-open valley. 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 5,000 birds, rose up to give us a spectacular sight as they wheeled across the sky. The birds were also continually harried by several Marsh Harriers that afforded great views as they quartered the reed edges looking for a meal. We also saw several more Cranes in the fields, to finish off a superb morning.

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 with a lovely lunch, we moved on to Kings Sedgmoor Drain. Looking across the marshes we had another profusion of birds including Lapwing, Golden Plover, Redwing, Buzzard and Marsh Harrier.

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 toilets! The Starlings had been leading everyone a merry dance over the past couple of days, but in the cold wind we plumped for Ham Wall Viewing Point 1 (VP1) to chance our luck. We heard both Cetti's Warbler and Water Rail deep in the reeds on the way. At VP1 we saw Great Crested Grebe amongst the ducks, then to our delight a Glossy Ibis flew in and fed on an island in front of us. What great luck!

Then the Starlings started to arrive. They whooshed around in front of us, threatening to come down in the reeds, then off they went again, continuing east. After several flocks had done this, we decided to go after them to Loxton's marsh, just a few minutes away. Arriving there, we had good views of them swirling around before they went back west to where we had just been! An about turn soon had us back at VP1 watching them seething in the reeds. It later transpired that we had actually done the right thing as those at VP1 had had very poor views as the Starlings kept low in the wind and sneaked into the reeds with no display at all. More continued to arrive and then, as it got dark, we cupped our ears to hear the assembled throng chattering to themselves before slumber. What a brilliant spectacle as we had watched 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 retired after a successful day, despite the cold and windy weather.

Day 3

Friday 8th December

We were up early and left at 6.30am to arrive at Ashcott Corner prior to 7am, hoping to see the rise of the Starling roost. Navigating the path of the disused railway we were soon at VP1, where we could hear the Starlings beginning to stir in the reeds. We elected for Torr View Hide as our viewing point as it afforded a little shelter as well as appearing to be in the throng of the birds. How right we were, as the cacophony of sound increased. Then, as faint light appeared, we saw the reedbeds black with the multitude of birds on them! There had obviously been a significant influx of birds into the area after dark as they were everywhere, all around us. They started to get agitated, moving in large flocks backwards and forwards between reed clumps. Then, suddenly, they were off, as the sky went black with them all overhead. Soon all was quiet again as we were left with empty reeds in front of us. But the show wasn't over yet as more great flocks came up from a way off and rose over the woods to disappear off to the south. What an amazing spectacle and we were so lucky to be right in the throng of it!

We returned to the car park and were all boarding the buses when Dave called us out again. There was much consternation amongst hungry people ready for their breakfasts, until we discovered that it was to see two magnificent Firecrests which Dave had "pished" out of the bushes. They performed marvellously, posing for pictures and one even tried to land on Dave's leg! What an amazing morning we were having! On we went back to Wells where we had the treat of another fine cooked breakfast back at the hotel!

After a little time to recover, we headed off again, back to Ashcott Corner car park. This time we headed west to Shapwick and soon found Bullfinches in the scrub there. A Goldcrest called in the trees and we found a Lesser Redpoll in the Alders. A flock of 14 Stock Doves flew past, as did four Ravens. Over the reeds, several Marsh Harriers patrolled as we looked in vain for Bitterns. Two Stonechats perched up alongside the drain. Further along, just before we turned off to Noah's Hide, Tom and Dave saw a Bittern flying across in front of us but sadly the rest of the group were further back and missed it! At Noah's Lake we had a plethora of ducks before us: many Wigeon, Teal and Tufted Duck and some Pintail in amongst them too. Two Marsh Harriers lived up to their name and kept chasing the ducks, and several people saw a Bittern briefly flying at the rear of the lake. A Kingfisher thrilled as it flew by.

It was time to move on, so we returned to the buses and made our way to the Crown, where we were well looked after for lunch before warming up in front of the roaring log fire.

We then moved on to Catcott Lows Somerset Wildlife Trust Reserve. With the sun out, the light was excellent and we were looking forward to good views of ducks, but it was not to be as, for some unknown reason, the reserve was completely devoid of ducks.

Time was ticking on so drove to Ashcott Corner. We found a Siskin in the Alders at the car park then headed off to VP1. On the way we saw several Great Egrets, Pochard and Marsh Harrier. At VP1 we saw some Black-tailed Godwits and heard Water Rails. The first Starling flocks started to come down quite near us and over the next half an hour, untold streams of them descended in front of us. What an amazing spectacle to finish the trip on – we were lucky indeed! The noise of their excited calls was amazing, heightened by cupping our hands to our ears to magnify it. We also saw three Cattle Egrets flying to roost at the back of the reedbed – a recent colonist adding to the amazing collection of birds in this magnificent area.

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 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	December	
			7	8
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	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		3
6	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	4	✓
7	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	5	7
8	Great Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>		2
9	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	1	
10	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
11	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	
12	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓
13	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓	✓
14	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	✓	✓
15	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓
16	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
17	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	2	12
18	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓	✓
19	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		✓
20	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
21	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	7	6
22	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	3	
23	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
24	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	7	✓
25	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	1	
26	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	1	
27	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	16+	
28	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	1 +many H	H
29	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
30	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
31	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	8000	
32	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
33	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	10	
34	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	15	✓
35	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	3	
36	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	1	
37	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓
38	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
39	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓
40	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓
41	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
42	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓
43	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>		14
44	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
45	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
46	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	2	1
47	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	1	

	Common name	Scientific name	December	
			7	8
48	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓
49	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓
50	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	1	
51	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
52	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
53	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	2	4
54	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	3	✓
55	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓
56	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	15	3
57	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	20	
58	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
59	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
60	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	✓
61	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>		2
62	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	1 + H	H
63	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	6	4
64	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
65	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	1	
66	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓	✓
67	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
68	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
69	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	H	
70	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	1	
71	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
72	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓
73	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
74	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
75	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		4
76	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
77	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
78	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
79	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>	1	1
80	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
81	Lesser Redpoll	<i>Carduelis cabaret</i>	4	10
82	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	3	2
83	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	2	1