

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

12 - 14 January 2018

Report compiled by Dave Nevitt



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Tour participants: Dave Nevitt and 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 a succession of chilly spells in the preceding weeks, good numbers of wildfowl had been forced south so were present in excellent numbers. 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 first evening was quite distant but numbers were good; on the second evening they didn't choose to come any closer, but we still had good murmurations.

Day 1

Friday 12th January

The group assembled in the evening of a 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 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 introducing 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

Saturday 13th 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 several years ago.

This winter has seen a significant influx of Hawfinches into Britain and some had recently been spotted just off our planned route, so we had a short extra stop to look for them. We parked up near the church and kept our eyes peeled for any movement in the Yew and bare Sycamores trees. We could not find any but did a circuit of the graveyard to check everywhere. We were just on our way back to the buses, having given up, when Dave spotted three Hawfinches landing in the bare trees. Scopes were soon set up and, thankfully, they stayed put for all to admire them. Their massive heads and bills were very prominent in silhouette, with their large white wing patch clearly visible too. What a remarkable success with which to start the trip!

We moved on to our next 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. We also saw Buzzards perched 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! Many Fieldfares and Redwings were feeding in the wet meadows and Reed Bunting were coming down to the feeding station. A Great Spotted Woodpecker flew off from the nuts.

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 – Teal and Wigeon 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 scopes, 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 couple of Marsh Harrier was terrorising the Lapwings and ducks, putting them to flight regularly as they searched for their next meal. We also found a beautiful Peregrine sat on a fence post, no doubt digesting a previous meal. Dave managed to pick out the rarity amongst the Teal – a fine male Green-winged Teal – a vagrant from America which obviously found the area to its liking. In the willows we heard a Chiffchaff calling but in the wind it was understandably keeping its head down! A Great Egret strode around majestically, and Cetti's Warblers called from the reeds. Dave returned from the second hide, reporting that there was a Water Rail there, so we crept up and a few minutes later we were delighted as not one, but three birds crept about in the vegetation. What a treat, and another new bird for many as it is normally so secretive.

We moved on to RSPB Dewlands Farm, the centre of the West Sedgmoor reserve. After a loo stop we set off down the muddy track. A scan for Stonechat was unsuccessful but we saw delightful Long-tailed Tits in the hedgerows, a Great Spotted Woodpecker flew over and we heard Green Woodpecker. We scanned unsuccessfully for Cranes, but we had a Chiffchaff in the hedge and Ravens called overhead. Several Redwings and Song Thrush were in one of the meadows.

We got to the converted barn and started to scour the huge array of wildfowl in front of us. Six Pintail were another new species, the males resplendent in their fine plumage. Marsh Harriers were certainly making the most of the plentiful array of food available as up to six birds were cruising back and forth; there seemed to be at least one in view at all times. Several groups of Roe Deer were feeding quietly and a check of the Canada Geese found four White-fronted Geese amongst them – a rare sighting here. We were thrilled by the magnificent sight of not one but two Peregrines terrorising the wildfowl as they twisted and turned in pursuit of them.

Vast flocks of Lapwing adorned the grazing marshes and, in the distance, a mass of Golden Plover was 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. Just before we left, we had one last look for Cranes and we came up trumps, spotting the tiny head of one over the grass. Fortunately, it, and the other two with it, then strode into view and we were all able to admire them through the scopes. How wonderful to finish off a superb morning with Cranes!

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, 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 loos! The Starlings had been leading everyone a merry dance over the past couple of days, so we plumped for Ham Wall Viewing Point 1 to chance our luck. We heard both Cetti's Warbler and Water Rail deep in the reeds on the way and had lovely views of Snipe in the scopes. At VP1 we saw Great Crested Grebe amongst the duck.

Then the Starlings started to arrive. Huge flocks were moving into the area, with some coming overhead, tantalising us that they might come down in front of us. But then off they went again! That seemed to be the pattern for the evening as flock after flock decided that off west was the place to be tonight. Some came down in the distance off to our right, but most went west. The numbers were vast, leaving us struggling to decide just how many we had seen! Great Egrets sauntered past with their incredibly slow flapping flight and several Marsh Harriers patrolled the reedbeds.

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, if somewhat distant, 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 then another delicious dinner. We retired after a very successful day.

Day 3

Sunday 14th January

We had a leisurely breakfast and left at 8.30 to arrive at Ashcott Corner by 9am.

As we left the car park, eagle eyes spotted yet another Water Rail in the rhyme. This one was very confiding, and we were more able to admire its beautiful plumage than yesterday. Navigating the path of the disused railway, this time we headed west to Shapwick and soon found ever-popular Bullfinches in the scrub there. A Goldcrest called in the trees and we searched the Alders without any luck. Two Jays, a Chiffchaff, Great Spotted Woodpecker, and fly-by Little and Great Egrets were logged on the walk as well as Marsh Harriers. Two Stonechats perched up alongside the drain. By the bridge, yet another Water Rail was showing on the edge of the reeds. Further along on the way to Noah's Hide, we stopped in the Alder carr and tried "pishing". This was very productive, as a flock of Lesser Redpolls and Siskins came down to check us out. Also, an obliging Treecreeper was successfully seen by all. At the hide we were treated to over 100 Pintail, Pochard, Little Grebes and two fine Whooper Swans. But the star of the show was undoubtedly the Kingfisher which showed magnificently just in front of the hide.

It was time to move on, so we returned to the buses and made our way to the Crown. On the way, we stopped at a flooded field where we had 15 Little Egrets feeding and perched in the trees. At the pub, 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 treated to good views of ducks including 10 Pintail, Shoveler, Teal and Wigeon. A Snipe flew in to disappear in the rushes and two Roe Deer were in the distance.

Time was ticking on so returned to Ashcott Corner. As some of the Starlings had roosted further along the path the previous night, we elected for VP2 today. On the way we saw Great Egrets, Pochard and Marsh Harrier. At VP2 it was comforting to see from the crowd that everybody else also thought this was the place to be tonight for the roost. We saw two Stonechats, Great Egret and an Egyptian Goose.

The first Starling flocks started to arrive, but it was soon evident that they were roosting elsewhere tonight. Some significant flocks did, however, come very close and a small number came down in from of us. The noise of their excited calls was amazing, heightened by cupping our hands to our ears to magnify it. Although most of the Starlings were very distant, we had still witnessed huge numbers and seen the famed "corkscrew" formation so it was a great success all round.

We headed back to the buses with smiles all round, venturing back to Wells to say our goodbyes and part after what we hope all in the group 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	
			13	14
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	15
6	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	3	6
7	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
8	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		2
9	White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>	4	
10	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓
11	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓
12	Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiacus</i>		1
13	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓	✓
14	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	✓	✓
15	Green-winged Teal	<i>Anas carolinensis</i>	1	
16	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓
17	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
18	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	6	100
19	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓	✓
20	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	3	15
21	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
22	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	12	8
23	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1	
24	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
25	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓
26	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	3	
27	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	3	
28	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	3 + many H	2 + many H
29	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
30	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
31	Eurasian Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	✓	
32	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
33	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	6	5
34	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	20	
35	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
36	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓
37	Mew (Common) Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓
38	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
39	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓
40	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
41	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
42	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	1	1
43	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	2	5
44	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	H	
45	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓
46	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓
47	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	January	
			13	14
48	Dunnoek	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
49	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	2	6
50	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓
51	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓
52	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	✓
53	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
54	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
55	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	✓
56	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	H	H
57	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	2	2
58	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
59	Coal Tit	<i>Pariparus ater</i>	✓	✓
60	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
61	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
62	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>		1
63	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		2
64	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
65	Western Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓
66	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
67	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
68	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2	
69	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
70	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
71	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
72	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>		8
73	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	✓	
74	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
75	Lesser Redpoll	<i>Carduelis cabaret</i>		10
76	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		8
77	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>	3	
78	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	1