

# The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

2 - 4 February 2018

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Report compiled by Dave Nevitt



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Tour participants: Dave Nevitt & Andrew Bray (leaders) with 16 Naturetrek clients

## Introduction

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 2nd February

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 Andrew 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. Then, with some having spent much of the day travelling, all took a welcome early night.

## Day 2

## Saturday 3rd February

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 had 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 near the church and kept our eyes peeled for any movement in the Yew and bare Sycamore trees. We could not find any initially, but it wasn't long before we spotted a couple of Hawfinches briefly in nearby trees before they flew off, leaving everyone very frustrated! Greenfinches and Goldfinches provided consolations. Fortunately, we then found some more Hawfinches, typically perched atop bare trees. After seeing them through the telescopes, we walked round the church to get a better look and were obliged to find them still there. Their massive heads and bills were very prominent in silhouette, but up closer we saw the beautiful hues of pinks and blue. What a remarkable success to start the trip with!

We moved on to our next destination, Greylake RSPB reserve, where we firstly 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. We also saw Buzzards sat on fenceposts and Kestrel hovered overhead. A male Sparrowhawk, sat on a distant post, caused some head scratching before being identified! Many Fieldfares and a few Redwings were feeding in the wet meadows and were duly admired by all. On the feeders, Reed Buntings were coming down to the seed. A Great Spotted Woodpecker flew off from the peanuts.

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 telescopes, marvelling at the intricacies of the patterns on each feather. Then, 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! A Marsh Harrier was terrorising the Lapwings and ducks, putting them to flight regularly as it searched for its next meal. A Great Egret was fishing the reed edges – our first encounter with this Levels speciality. We also found a beautiful male Peregrine sat on a fence post, no doubt digesting a previous meal.

From the second hide, we crept up to see if we could strike it lucky with our quarry, Water Rail. After a while we eventually spotted one and, after ten minutes we had spotted up to five of these very secretive birds as they crept about in the reed fringes. What a treat, and another new bird for many as it is normally so secretive. We retraced our steps back to the car park, encountering Cetti's Warbler on the way.

We then went to the railway bridge at Aller, where we hit the jackpot with three Cranes in a field. They were quite a way off, as always with the nervous Cranes, but we all admired them in the telescopes. Then we found another two, a bit closer this time. Several Shelducks were on the flash too. On the other side of the road we found another three Cranes and we were then treated to two more flying past – what a sight!

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 RSPB Dewlands Farm, the centre of the West Sedgemoor reserve. We set off down the muddy track, soon seeing a very bright Goldcrest and a Chiffchaff. A scan for Stonechat was unsuccessful, but we saw delightful Long-tailed Tits in the hedgerows, and a Great Spotted Woodpecker flew over.

We got to the converted barn and started to scour the huge array of wildfowl in front of us. Some 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 five 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 very pale Buzzard had people guessing as to its identity for a while. A Stonechat perched up in front of the hide and a Great Egret strode around majestically. But it was the sheer numbers of wildfowl on view which made the panoramic view from the hide so spectacular, with Wigeon and Teal dominating. Additionally, in the distance, great flocks of Golden Plover were feeding in the fields and every now and then they were put up by raptors, making the sky shimmer with their gold and silver plumage. Stunning!

Time was ticking on, so we headed back to the buses. On the way, we found two obliging Stock Doves, a wintering Blackcap, Long-tailed Tits and Goldcrest. We then headed for the much-anticipated Starling roost, but the question was where to go? They had been leading everyone a merry dance for the past few weeks, not settling in any one place for long. We chose Meare Heath and parked up at Ashcott Corner, then headed west. We were soon admiring Marsh Harriers as they lived up to their name, cruising back and forth over the reedbeds. In our wait for the Starlings we saw Pochard, Little Grebe, Gadwall and Tufted Duck on the water, and another five Great Egrets too. A roost of Pied Wagtails was forming in front of us, eventually over 100 coming down in the reeds.

Then the first Starlings started to arrive, initially in small wispy flocks, then ever greater numbers, settling in the trees to turn them black. They were a good way off at the back of the marsh, but our positioning enabled us to have a panoramic view of the whole event. They swirled back and forth, looking like they were coming down into the reeds, then whooshing back up again. Quite spectacular! And then finally they all settled down to roost. Even though they were quite distant, when we cupped our ears we could hear the incredible cacophony of their excited calls. 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 and then another delicious dinner. We retired after a very successful day.

## Day 3

## Sunday 4th February

We had another lovely breakfast and set off for Ashcott Corner. This time we headed east, to RSPB Ham Wall. In the car park we saw a Chiffchaff in the brambles, then eagle eyes spotted yet another Water Rail in the rhyne, which enabled all to get splendid views again, and we saw several Bullfinches in the trees. A soaring raptor had us all looking skywards – a male Sparrowhawk displaying – spring must be on the way, despite the chilly weather!

Overlooking the marsh, we soon found some Little Grebes and listened to their excited trilling calls. Andrew then found three Bearded Reedlings (Tits) on the far side of the water but sadly they didn't stay around to be admired. Great Egrets flew by and a Marsh Harrier quartered the marsh. The open water held flocks of Tufted Ducks. There had been a Ring-necked Duck amongst them on occasions recently, so we looked out for him. Our initial searches drew a blank, but then we found him, constantly diving with the Tufted Ducks. It stayed around to be admired by all; very smart in adult plumage.

Further on we checked the reed edges and spotted several Snipe, superbly camouflaged such that people could only see them in the telescopes! At the viewpoint we added a Stonechat perched up on twigs, and there were many Gadwall in the open areas.

With a stiff wind blowing, we elected to find somewhere more sheltered, so we retraced our steps back to Ashcott Corner and tried the Discovery Trail. Here we tried a bit of "pishing" to tempt birds out but it was hard work in the cold and the wind. At the far end of the trail we came across a mixed flock of Siskins and Lesser Redpolls. There were some nice bright males of both species, but sadly before most could get their binoculars on them, they were off! Aside from hearing a Raven, we had very little else on the trail.

It was time to move on, and all were cold and hungry, so we returned to the buses and made our way to the Crown for our lunch. On the way we stopped at a flooded field where we saw some Little Egrets feeding, but no sign of the hoped-for Cattle Egrets which had been here recently. At the pub, we were well looked after for lunch before warming up in front of the roaring log fire.

Time was ticking on so returned to Ashcott Corner. We walked westwards this time, seeing Marsh Harriers and Greylag Geese on the way. Pochards were sleeping despite the cold wind. We pressed on to the shelter belt and searched the tree tops for finches. Eventually we found some, and we were soon admiring both Siskins and Lesser Redpolls feeding in the Alders.

At the hide we saw a beautiful Grey Wagtail in some overhanging trees, but the star of the show was the Kingfisher right in front of the hide. There were more throngs of ducks on the water, mostly several thousand Wigeon with a few Pintails amongst them. A Great Egret flew by. On the return, we saw a Goldcrest and finally managed to call out a Treecreeper for all to see.

It was now Starling time, so we returned to our lookout point to await them. The first Starling flocks started to arrive, and it was soon evident that they were going to do a re-run of yesterday, with enormous numbers coming in over the next half an hour, all coming down at the back of the marsh. We were mesmerised by them as they sallied back and forth, no doubt trying to avoid unseen predators. Several Marsh Harriers were obviously trying to catch their supper but, try as we might, we couldn't see them make a kill. With the Starlings all settled down for the night, we headed off, overawed by the spectacle that we had witnessed.

We headed back to the buses with smiles all round, and then ventured 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	February	
			3	4
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>	8	5
7	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
8	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓
9	Canada Goose	<i>Branta Canadensis</i>	✓	✓
10	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	6	
11	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓	✓
12	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	✓	✓
13	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓
14	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
15	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	20	10
16	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓	✓
17	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya farina</i>	12	✓
18	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
19	Ring-necked Duck	<i>Aythya collaris</i>		1
20	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	12	5
21	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1	1
22	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
23	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓
24	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrines</i>	1	
25	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓
26	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	12	
27	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	5 +manyH	manyH
28	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
29	Eurasian 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>	20	15
33	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
34	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓
35	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓
36	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
37	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓
38	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	2	
39	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
40	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
41	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		1
42	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	2	3
43	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	100+	100+
44	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		1
45	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
46	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
47	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	2	1

	Common name	Scientific name	February	
			3	4
48	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓
49	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓
50	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	✓
51	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓
52	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
53	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		
54	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		
55	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	H	H
56	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		
57	Bearded Reedling	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>		3
58	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
59	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>		✓
60	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
61	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
62	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>		
63	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	2	5
64	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
65	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓
66	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
67	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
68	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		H
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>Spinus spinus</i>		10
73	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	6	
74	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
75	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	15	
76	Lesser Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>		25
77	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		4
78	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>	14	
79	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓