

The Somerset Levels

Naturetrek Tour Report

12 - 14 January 2018

Report compiled by Matt Collis



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Tour participants: Dominic Couzens & Matt Collis (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. Although numbers are still building, we had excellent opportunities to gain close views of all the expected Levels' wildfowl as well as a few surprises adding to the magic. Dampening rain was a feature of all the Starling roosts that we witnessed which were very mobile but still gave quite the spectacle with numbers featuring close to half a million.

Day 1

Wednesday 5th December

Gathered together in the small bar of the Swan Hotel, set within the picturesque English town of Wells, the trip began with some formal introductions. Firstly the leaders Dominic and Matt followed by each client sharing their name and wildlife hopes for the days ahead. It soon became clear that Starlings were the main attraction, so the pressure was on for a brilliant display! It was then time to head into the dining area where a hearty three course meal was ready and waiting for the group – our first of many excellent meals to be had over the next few days.

Straight after dinner, the group moved to the Exmoor Room where a short talk was given by the leaders explaining the history of the Somerset Levels, its uniqueness as a place, and introducing the habitats and species which call it home. With the rough itinerary and vital information shared, everyone drifted their way to bed, full of anticipation for the days to come.

Day 2

Thursday 6th December

With a lovely cooked breakfast in our bellies, we set off across the levels, passing through large areas of low damp fields and over the intervening ridges which break up this otherwise flat and wet landscape. Heading to the most southerly location, we started our day at RSPB Swell Woods; an ancient oak woodland extending 10 miles along the ridge from Langport to the Blackdown Hills.

Arriving in the car park, we soon spotted several woodland specialists gorging on the seeds and nuts left in hanging feeders. 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 Great Spotted Woodpecker arrived, and subsequently hid around the back of a tree, giving us several brief views. It wasn't too long until we had our first Marsh Tit, calling behind us before flying to the top of a small tree only a few metres away and kindly holding this position for almost a minute to give everyone clear views. A clambering Treecreeper proved just as elusive as the woodpecker, opting to stay high in a very mature, ivy covered oak tree, only giving the odd view to a very excited group below.

We opted to leave the feeders and headed through the wood to the picnic view point which overlooks an area known as West Sedgemoor; our first dramatic landscape view revealing the patchwork of damp lowland grassland and peat moorland so iconic of this area. From here the leaders managed to pick our two small groups of Eurasian Crane. The first were quite distant and hiding in the tall rush, but the second were much closer and

in full view exploring a flooded meadow. A joyous start with a much sought-after bird seen within the first hour of our trip. The view also gave us a little taste of what was to come as large numbers of wildfowl and waders could be seen in the meadows below. Only dots from our viewpoint but clearly numbering in the thousands!

After returning to the buses, it was a short journey down the road to RSPB West Sedgemoor where we'd gained special access to their barn hide overlooking a vast area of flooded meadow. Tramping across the sodden grass we bumped into a glorious Buzzard perched up in an oak tree, a couple of Chaffinch and handful of Goldfinch hopping amongst the willows. A pair of flyover Ravens honked as they went past too. After taking a moment to admire a small group of Fieldfare foraging on some rosehips, we took the muddy lane to the hide. It was then that those at the front were treated to the briefest of views of a Weasel as it darted across the path. We attempted to lure it back out with some lip squeaking but no luck today.

Once at the hide the drama really began. The fields in front of us were alive with birds and from this elevated position the group had fantastic panoramic views across a wide expanse of this special reserve. Thousands of ducks lay ahead, mostly Wigeon and Teal, but a few other species including Shoveler and Pintail were also on show. Thousands of very nervy Lapwings were also present, darkening the sky every time one of the numerous Marsh Harriers flew over them as they patrolled the marsh. All of a sudden a wave of five thousand Golden Plover exploded from the ground as a Peregrine searched opportunistically for an easy meal. Then a second bird appeared, seeming to chase off what must have been an intruder on its hunting grounds. The result was a brilliant display as almost every bird on the reserve took to the sky. Both Lapwing and Golden Plover continued to weave through the air for several minutes, showing off their glistening backs and white underbellies. Wow! What a moment!

Beaming from ear to ear, we made our way back to the buses spotting several birds en route including our first Redwings, a group of five Bullfinch flying over us and several Blue Tit, Great Tit and a single Marsh Tit. The final stop before lunch was a brief one at Aller Moor where a quick scan revealed a Glossy Ibis, a national rarity and a bird which delighted the group. Taking great care not to spook it, we viewed from a short distance as it gently waded in the shallowly flooded pools surrounded by Mute Swans.

With our fill of the Ibis, we moved on to fill our bellies with a delicious lunch at The King Alfred pub at Burrowbridge. We kept our visit short as daylight is never on our side and within an hour we were on our way to RSPB Greylake. Walking to the hide, we stopped at several spots to look into the reedbeds hoping for a sighting of the Water Rails which were calling but we couldn't spot one. Once in the hide, we were soon enjoying views of various duck species which were all crammed together on a central strip of grassland surrounded by water. Teal and Wigeon were the most abundant with numerous Shoveler and Gadwall too. Species by species, we took the time to closely examine each getting fantastic views of them in the scopes, marvelling at the intricacies of the patterns on each feather. It's only by doing this that you truly appreciate these birds.

Close inspection of the field edges also revealed several Snipe including two right in front of the hide; a highlight for many as they looked amazing in the telescope. After several people initially struggled to find them, with a bit of practice and careful direction, everyone was able to spot these masters of camouflage leading to a flurry of sightings. A Peregrine was spotted distantly on the electricity pylons, consuming its latest victim, while a couple of Marsh Harriers continued to put up Lapwings as they terrorised the flock. We made our way back to the car

park, spotting several birds on route including a couple of Reed Bunting and three Great Egrets chasing one another in the fields opposite. Cetti's Warblers continued to call from the reeds.

Our final stop of the day was RSPB Ham Wall for the much-anticipated Starling roost. Despite the weather closing in the mood was positive as we ventured out onto the reserve after a brief stop for loo's and a glance at the sightings board. Cetti's Warblers called from all around us as did Water Rails which still proved to be elusive. Several Great Egrets could be seen fishing alongside their smaller cousin, the Little Egret, while Teal, Gadwall and Tufted Duck were also noted.

With the light beginning to fade, the Starlings started to arrive. Huge flocks moved in from all directions, one after another, filling the skies with some coming in from overhead and their collective wing beats clearly audible. It soon became clear that the roost was split across several areas as birds seemed to be settling in multiple places. We plumped for Viewing Point 1 where most birds seemed to be heading and arrived just in time to see our first proper murmuration before the birds were seemingly sucked into the reed bed in a whirlwind. With the rain constantly threatening, the birds seemed reluctant to perform for long but thousands continued to stream in as the chatter of tens of thousands grew in volume as they sat forming a black slick on the reeds.

More and more decided to settle here, before all of a sudden the flock split again and birds streamed over a small path into a neighbouring reedbed. We decided to take advantage and positioned ourselves right underneath getting us closer than before as birds arched a few metres over our heads. As if that wasn't enough, the experienced was enhanced by the sudden appearance of a small flock of Bearded Tit who lingered for a few minutes right in front of us before flying off – Somerset Levels magic! With the display seemingly over and the light all but gone, we headed back to the buses, thrilled at what we had just witnessed.

Once at the Swan Hotel, everyone took a well deserved rest for a few hours before catching up over our second three course dinner. We returned to the Exmoor Room to recount the day, complete the checklist and enjoyed a brief talk by Dominic covering both the magic of migration and his additional knowledge around Starlings. A lovely end to a thrilling day.

Day 3

Friday 7th December

Despite a rainy forecast, the option was given to return to Ham Wall early morning to see the Starlings take off from their night roost – a much under watched spectacle equal to the evening murmuration. Half the group braved the rain and were thrilled to an excellent take off display. Arriving just before the first light we wandered to the viewing platform, taking shelter in a little hide which was perfectly located in amongst the roost. The birds began to stir and, as if on a timetable, eruption after eruption of birds took to the air, scattering in all directions before leaving the roost or settling back down in anticipation for the next departure. This spectacle continued for 30 minutes or so, the sky all around us awash with black dots every few minutes or so, until all the birds were gone leaving an oddly still and peaceful scene.

Wet clothes replaced with dry, the group reunited back at the hotel for breakfast at 9am before heading off at 10am to Somerset Wildlife Trust's reserve at Westhay Moor. Scanning the ponds just beyond the car park, our day started well with our first Great Crested Grebe of the trip, swimming alongside a small group of Shoveler. Gadwall was also present as were a Great Egret and a fly over male Goosander adding a bit of additional

excitement. Although dry on arrival, it wasn't long before the rain started to come down and we were forced to take shelter in a hide. Not many birds were present but a swimming Snipe was a surprise as it crossed the open water in front of us, showing off that wonderfully long probing bill.

The rain eased and we ventured out to explore several of the pathways around the reserve. Cetti's Warbler and Water Rail were present once again, but still only heard, and we stumbled across a large mixed tit flock which contained another Treecreeper and a Goldcrest, giving better views than our previous day. The highlight though was a stunning adult male Marsh Harrier which flew up from a reedbed perch and glided across the site showing off its mosaic feathering of warm browns, silvers and jet blacks. The rain continued to threaten so we headed back to the car park to check the nearby fields, picking out a flock of Lapwing, several Mute Swans and a Buzzard catching worms in the open field. Several Pied Wagtails flew overhead too.

We left the reserve and headed southwest towards Catcott Meadows, stopping to inspect a field which was full of white egrets which turned out to be a large flock of 35 Cattle Egret mixed in with Black Headed Gulls, Herring Gull, Lapwing and a few Mallard. We watched this unexpected assemblage for 15 minutes before most of the egrets departed, flushed by a Buzzard which kept hovering close by. Although reports of Cattle Egret have been increasing, this was certainly the largest flock anyone in our group had seen in the UK and for most it was a new bird altogether.

Arriving at Catcott, the hide was very busy, partly due to a number of photographers being present (likely due to the Lesser Yellowlegs which had been around) but also some maintenance work being undertaken on the hide. No bother, and the group split with some viewing from inside whilst others looked through the open gaps in the fence adjacent. The reserve was dominated by ducks, mostly Wigeon and Shoveler with the odd Teal in between. Lapwing stole the show, sat on islands very close to the hide giving binocular filling views which was an absolute treat for many. A single Marsh Harrier patrolled the waters at the back, flying in its usual lackadaisical manner, which was completely ignored by the other birds present.

With the cold penetrating our clothes, we retreated to the nearby Crown Inn for lunch which included a special treat of homemade chocolate brownies, made by a leader, in celebration of one client's birthday. The energy boost was perfectly timed and gave us the fuel we needed for our penultimate site of the day; Shapwick Heath. Parking in the same car park as for Ham Wall, Shapwick Heath is conveniently situated just on the other side of Ashcott Road. Before we could leave the car park, both Siskin and Lesser Redpoll were heard and seen in the trees behind the toilets, mixed in with a flock of Goldfinch patrolling the Alders.

Once on the Shapwick side, we headed up the main path keeping our eyes and ears open. Chiffchaff was picked up in the hedges around us as were Greenfinch and a couple of Chaffinch. We eventually arrived at the tower hide looking over Meare Heath where we decided to stop and scan for a while. Birds were fairly sparse but we did get a spectacular view of the golden red reeds, backlit by the setting sun. We were also treated to a Shoveler diving underwater to find food just like a Tufted Duck. Not the typical behaviour of a dabbling surface feeding duck and certainly a new behaviour never seen by either leader - just goes to show you always have something new to see even with commonly seen birds!

With time and light going fast, we crossed back over to Ham Wall for our second night with the Starlings. Despite the rain dampening proceedings somewhat, the Starlings performance was just as epic as before and the

sight of a Peregrine hunting the flock added to the spectacle as it ripped its way through the ever shuffling pack of birds. Once again, the Starlings seemed divided as to where to finally roost but eventually settled around the small hide as they had the previous evening.

With the sky succumbing to the night, our day was done and we returned to the hotel in Wells to say our goodbyes and thanks for what was a special trip. Another Naturetrek adventure complete and we feel certain everyone went away with wonderful nature-filled memories to share with friends.

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Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	January	
			6	7
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.	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		35
8.	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
9.	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	
10.	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	
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>	✓	
16.	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓	✓
17.	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓
18.	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓	✓
19.	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	✓	
20.	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓
21.	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	
22.	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	✓	✓
23.	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	5	
24.	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	✓	
25.	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓
26.	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	H	H
27.	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
28.	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
29.	Eurasian Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	✓	
30.	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
31.	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	✓
32.	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	✓	
33.	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	✓	
34.	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	
35.	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
36.	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓
37.	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
38.	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
39.	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	✓
40.	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓
41.	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓
42.	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
43.	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
44.	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓
45.	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓
46.	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	✓
47.	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	January	
			6	7
48.	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
49.	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	✓
50.	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	H	✓
51.	Bearded Tit	<i>Panarus biarmicus</i>	4	
52.	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓
53.	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
54.	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	✓	
55.	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>	✓	✓
56.	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
57.	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
58.	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	✓	✓
59.	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		✓
60.	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
61.	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓
62.	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
63.	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
64.	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2	
65.	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
66.	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
67.	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
68.	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		✓
69.	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓
70.	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
71.	Lesser Redpoll	<i>Acanthis cabaret</i>		✓
72.	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	✓	
73.	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	