

THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

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Tour Report

UK - Somerset Levels in Spring

20 - 23 May 2021

Hairy dragonfly



Great-crested grebe



Great white egret



Scarce chaser



Compiled by Mike Dilger

Tour Leader: Mike Dilger with five participants

Day 1: Meet-up at the Worth House Hotel, Shapwick NNR, Catcott SWT Reserve & West Hay Moor Drove

Thursday 20 May 2021

The group met up at the wonderfully warm and welcoming home of Sarah and Nick at the Worth House Hotel at 2pm on the first day. This was a new location for the trip and situated just west of the village of Wells. The weather was unfortunately wet, windy and unseasonably cold, but this couldn't dampen the spirits of the five guests as Mike welcomed them all, and after introductions the group set off to brave the elements.

With the rain finally abating Mike decided to take the group to Shapwick National Nature Reserve, a jewel in the crown of the Avalon Marshes. And upon pulling into the carpark at the eastern end of the reserve the very first bird seen upon alighting from the minibus was a hobby! With the weather having been poor all day, it was obviously hungry and searching for either early dragonflies or unwary hirundines. Aerial insectivores were everywhere and while swallows hawked for insects low over the water, or in the shelter of trees, noisy swifts scythed through the air above our heads. House martins tended to fill the airspace in between the other two species and were easily picked out by their white rumps. The occasional sand martins dotted in amongst the other aerial species were somewhat harder to spot, but eventually most managed to catch sight of the sandy back and dark collar so diagnostic of this migratory visitor from the Sahelian region of Africa.

In addition to the impressive spectacle of the swifts and hirundines, the warblers were patently still in fine voice too and in no time singing willow warbler, Cetti's warbler, blackcap and chiffchaff were all tracked down from the section of woodland flanking the reedbed. Upon emerging from the wood to the first clear and uninterrupted of the reedbeds, a male marsh harrier was picked up almost immediately, before a second was then observed quartering the marsh. Due to no females being observed on the wing, Mike suggested they were either incubating or brooding young clutches in the reeds below. Following quickly on the harriers' heels, the first great white egret of the trip then made its first appearance.

In the open water, gadwall and pochard could also be seen loafing around in the open, the latter with ducklings. Traditionally a bird most commonly seen in winter, it was good to see this duck now breeding successfully on the Levels. Alongside these wildfowl, the ubiquitous mallards and mute swans could be seen, but the highlight was watching a pair of great-crested grebes feed their three mint-humbug like chicks, with the young occasionally riding on their parents' backs. Slowly returning along the same route, the first male whitethroat of the trip showed well, while delivering his scratchy warble and display flight to the group, making for our fifth warbler of the afternoon.

Jumping back into the minibus, Mike suggested they make a quick visit to Somerset Wildlife Trust's Catcott reserve before a return to the hotel. Situated to the west end of the Avalon Marshes, the short journey across entailed driving passing past Godney Peat Works, whereupon one of the guests spotted what he suspected were cattle egrets just to the side of the road. Upon quickly parking up, Mike was able to confirm this excellent spot, with a grand total of 19 being counted as they fed around a herd of cows grazing in a pasture field. The Somerset Levels is still the only place where this species breeds in the UK and it was terrific to see such a good number at close hand, with many looking fine in their full breeding regalia.

Despite there being fewer birds at Catcott than can be observed in winter, when the reserve is frequently full to the gunnels, a small number of breeding birds could still be seen. On the island in front of the hide, Mike was able to point out a lapwing no doubt incubating a clutch, complete with an over-zealous male chasing away anything intent on disrupting his mate's endeavours. The group were also entertained by two drake shelduck constantly chasing each other, a sign of breeding in a species that is traditionally far more abundant in the winter months. While the shoveler were still in full breeding plumage, the gadwall and mallards had entered eclipse, which gave Mike the opportunity to point out the differences between these superficially similar species.

As the group enjoyed the wildfowl, Mike heard a yellow wagtail call over the hide which could not however be relocated, but a pair of greylag geese with four yellowy goslings proved to be recompense - at least in part. Upon leaving the hide, the group were able to bump up their 'trip list' with blue tit, great tit and chaffinch, while another whitethroat made its presence felt from a nearby bramble patch.

With the wind now picking up even more, Mike drove back to Worth House via Westhay Moor Drive to try and catch up with a small flock of whimbrel seen the previous week. Normally this bird would be up in the high Arctic by late May, but it has been a good year for whimbrel staying in Somerset for far longer than would normally be the case. Birdwatching out of the minibus at pools close to the road near Westhay turned up some breeding Canada geese, a pair of little grebes and tufted duck, before a cuckoo then flashed past the windscreen to the delight of all. Finally, four whimbrel were tracked down as they fed in a ploughed field, which proved to be a great way to end the first day before the group retired for bangers and mash at the hotel.

Day 2: RSPB Greylake, Bridge at Oath, RSPB Swell Wood, WWT Steart Marshes, Bridgwater Bay, Tealham Moor

Friday 21 May 2021

With the group bracing for another wet and windy day, Mike made the decision to delay an early start at RSPB Ham Wall in favour of the more southerly and westerly stretches of the Levels. RSPB Greylake was particularly quiet en route, with the highlights being noisy reed and sedge warblers, interspersed with the monotone calls of reed buntings, before Mike then took the group down to Aller Moor for a crane hunt.

Sure enough on the Bridge at Oath, seven cranes were picked up on the remotest section of the Moor away to the northeast. The sheer size of the cranes meant they were clearly visible even from a considerable distance, and all were able to enjoy excellent 'scope views' of these stately birds seemingly totally at home in their surroundings. The cranes spent most of their time feeding, but the group were also able to catch a snippet of dancing as one bird repeatedly jumped around in order to impress its peers!

Carrying on up the hill, the group dipped into RSPB Swell Wood, with the rain by now steadily coming down, for a spot of birding at the car park feeders. Cheered up by a hot drink, the group quickly turned up sightings of nuthatch and coal tit, in addition to the commoner species. The distance to the heronry is a short one, so the group then moved across to the hide to both take cover and appreciate the herons and egrets nesting in the canopy of oak trees. The pond in front of the hide also had a steady trail of birds coming down to drink and bathe, with a male blackcap, nuthatch and treecreeper all seen at close quarters. The undoubted stars however were a pair of spotted flycatchers observed hawking insects in the canopy, with all the group ultimately catching them as they sallied back and forth. Despite the pair being well above the group's heads a few pictures were bagged by those with a long enough lens.

As the rain finally began to lessen Mike took the group on a short circular walk around the wood. Here, a fine selection of ancient woodland indicator plants were present, with Mike able to point out woodruff, yellow archangel and wood speedwell along the way. The soft, deep cooing of stock doves was also clearly heard during the walk, while the high-pitched song of goldcrests was unfortunately only audible to the younger members of the group! Finally a pair of treecreepers put on a fine show as we re-boarded the minibus bound for Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust Steart Marshes. Spotting a roadside orchard along the way, Mike briefly stopped the minibus for a quick scan and all were able to enjoy good views of great spotted woodpeckers. With a yodelling green woodpecker being also picked up, this enabled the group to complete the duo of common woodpeckers. Having earlier heard stock doves at Swell Wood, a pair was then also observed in one of the orchard trees, making it a very profitable pitstop.

WWT Steart is close to the town of Bridgwater and comprises both fresh and brackish scrapes as well as plenty of grazing marsh. This is a relatively new addition to the portfolio of Levels' reserves and marks the point where the River Parrett emerges after winding its way across the northern part of the Levels. Upon

arrival at the car park the group headed straight for the Quantocks Hide to uncover the delights on the brackish scrape. With the hide also giving some respite from the relentless wind the group were thrilled to see a fine number of avocet chicks feeding themselves under the watchful eyes of their anxious parents nearby. This colony has built up in the last few years to an estimated 60 pairs and it was obvious that the success of the colony is down to a 'safety in numbers strategy', which was visibly demonstrated when all the adults were observed to fly up to collectively drive off a greater black-backed gull and thereby preventing it from swooping down to snatch one of the defenceless chicks. The other star bird on the scrape at Steart is little ringed plover and with at least two pairs breeding on the shingle island just in front of the hide it didn't take long to pick them out. The adult plovers proved great entertainment as they constantly chased each other around the island, which in turn allowed the group to observe the lack of wing bar and a golden eyeing, which are the two key features for separating this species from its commoner cousin, the ringed plover. Large numbers of shelduck were also recorded on the scrape with a small number of lapwing.

The group then returned to the car park, before crossing the saltmarsh for a view out across the Severn Estuary, and towards Wales. As we came our muddy way to the shingle ridge we were rewarded with a number of skylarks rising up on all sides as they conducted their amazing aerial displays. The visit had been timed with a rising tide in mind, meaning the group were able to achieve relatively close views of a large flock of dunlin in full summer plumage - which may well have been non-breeding birds. These were then joined by a smaller flock of ringed plover. The addition of the latter species enabled the group to see the difference in a short space of time between the breeding 'littles' on the scrape and non-breeding 'ringeds' on the shoreline.

By now the weather was even colder and windier than before, and with hats and gloves a necessity the group decided to head back inland to try and spot yellow wagtails over on Tealham Moor. The only bird of note over the moor, however, was that of a male marsh harrier quartering the marsh, before the group then unanimously voted to 'quit, while they were ahead' and return to the warmth and comfort of the hotel, before driving up the Mendips for a pub dinner.

Day 3: RSPB Ham Wall, Tealham Moor, Westhay Moor NNR, Catcott reedbed, Walton Drove

Saturday 22 May 2021

Meeting early for a 6am start, the group were delighted to discover that despite the odd spot of rain the wind had mercifully died down overnight, making conditions excellent for enjoying a dawn chorus. Upon arrival at RSPB Ham Wall car park, it became immediately obvious that delaying the visit to this key reserve to the second full day had been the right decision, as both cuckoo and bittern were simultaneously heard while the group donned binoculars and cameras in preparation for a morning on the reserve. Walking down the main path, hirundines and swifts were observed making up for the lack of feeding opportunities during the previous day's poor weather, with hundreds catching insects all around the group.

Swifts delighted all as they screamed past just above head height, while large numbers of swallows were seen feeding closer to the water. However, the most impressive spectacle came from thousands of house martins roosting in trees close to the main path. These large flocks would erupt in 'dreads', as they then dispersed to feed in any airspace left vacant by the swallows and swifts, with Mike declaring he'd never seen so many gathered in one place before.

Mike then quickly picked up two single bitterns flying past in quick succession, enabling all of the group to get good views of this secretive superstar of the reedbeds before the birds disappeared out of sight. Mike explained that the bittern population is currently so healthy in Somerset, that there are now thought to be more pairs on the Avalon marshes alone (around 50) than are present in the whole of East Anglia.

The smaller passerines were not to be upstaged by rare herons, however, as the still morning proved perfect for enjoying the collective chorus of blackcap, willow warbler and chiffchaff, with all of the guests eventually picking out a clear garden warbler too. This avian orchestra would then be occasionally and rudely

interrupted by the explosive song of Cetti's warbler, another species which has enjoyed an exponential increase across southern wetlands in recent years. A number of the group were additionally thrilled to enjoy good sightings of one particularly confiding individual of what can be a very shy and retiring species.

Arriving at Viewing Platform 1 it became clear again that the ducks had had a good breeding season at Ham Wall too, with pochard ducklings a first for most of the group. Great crested grebes had also successfully managed to raise young and these were then joined by a couple of great white egrets emerging from the reedbeds before landing close to the hide. Avalon Marshes is still one of the very few places where great white egrets have successfully bred, having colonised from the continent, and are in part responsible for the Levels being dubbed the 'heron capital of the UK'.

Crossing over to the Avalon Hide, the group then enjoyed very close and confiding views of a sedge warbler, which up to that point had been decidedly thin on the ground, and certainly far less common than whitethroats which anecdotally seemed to be having a super year. Water rail was then heard 'sharming' from the reeds before all the group had terrific, if brief, views of a perched cuckoo before it was chased off by a blackbird. Once ensconced in the hide the group were able to see plenty more evidence of a successful breeding season with an array of ducklings and goslings present on the water. But all the attention was stolen by a family of coots with very young coot chicks that had nested very close to the hide, until another two bitterns flew straight past the hide that was! This fly-by of two bitterns was ably supported by great views of marsh harriers too, making for a terrific morning's birdwatching.

After a late breakfast at the hotel, and with the sun finally emerging for the first time all trip, the group left for Westhay Moor, a large reserve managed by the Somerset Wildlife Trust. Walking along the main drove which bisects the reserve a hobby was quickly picked up scything through the sky before the group then picked up another at far close quarters in the process of trying to catch a swallow - a brief but thrilling spectacle for those who happened to be looking in the right direction!

With the sun now out, a sheltered spot out of the wind, and situated along one of the flanking droves proved to be an exceptional place to watch dragon and damselflies. With many having only just emerged and so needing to rest in order to dry their wings, this meant that close-ups could be far more easily achieved than would have been the case in normal circumstances. There were hundreds of large red damselflies and almost all of the blue damsels upon closer inspection proved to be of the decidedly uncommon variable damselfly. Dragonflies were also present with four-spotted chasers alongside a couple of very confiding hairy dragonflies, another specialist dragonfly of the Somerset Levels and usually the first hawk to be seen on the wing. The undoubted star, however, were a couple of female scarce chasers, a species Mike did not even know was present on the Levels - until then that was! Everyone enjoyed taking photos of these fair-weather invertebrates, with many of the best pictures taken with nothing more than phone cameras and all agreed it was great to relegate birds to supporting artists, if only for a couple of hours!

Upon taking a walk around some of the rides, there were so many damselflies at a few locations that some of the guests were worried about accidentally inhaling them as they brushed past the vegetation! Brimstone and small white butterfly were also observed on the walk around the droves. Taking a very agreeable lunch back at the carpark in blazing sunshine, this weather unfortunately was not predicted to last, and with an already freshening breeze Mike suggested they head back to Catcott to look for yellow wagtails.

Highlights at this reserve were displaying buzzards and lapwings, but with no yellow wagtails again to be seen, Mike suggested they drop in to Walton Drove - often the best site on the Levels for quail. The usual suspects of whitethroat, reed warbler, willow warbler and reed bunting were all present on this one-track road, but unfortunately no quail were picked up in what was now a strong wind. With the elements again against us, and given the early start, the group opted for a premature return to the hotel to enjoy a delicious meal cooked by Sarah and Nick.

Day 4: Cheddar Reservoir

Sunday 23 May 2021

Two guests had to depart early after breakfast so were unable to join their group for the final morning. After brief show of good weather the previous day, the weather was once more very cold and so Mike took the group to Cheddar reservoir. On the walk up to the reservoir's rim a dunnock was both seen and heard for the first time that trip and on the water itself great-crested grebes and the usual ducks in eclipse plumage were all present. A pair of common sandpipers were then picked up flitting around the edge of the reservoir, alongside a single male pied wagtail. But with the weather so bitterly cold for May, the group decided instead for a hot drink back at the hotel as we reminisced over a terrific week, exchanged contact details and made our farewells.



Checklist

	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4
	BIRDS	AVES				
1	Canada goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Greylag goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	
3	Mute swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		✓		
5	Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓			
6	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	✓		✓	✓
9	Tufted duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓		✓	✓
10	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	
11	Little grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	✓	✓		
12	Great crested grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓		✓	✓
13	Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>			✓	
14	Cattle egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓	
15	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	
16	Great white egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	
17	Little egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓	✓	
18	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓	
19	Marsh harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓	✓	✓	
20	Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	
21	Water rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>			✓	
22	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			✓	
23	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
24	Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>		✓		
25	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		✓		
26	Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		✓		

27	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	
28	Ringed plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>			✓	
29	Little ringed plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>			✓	
30	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	✓			
31	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓		✓	
32	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓		
33	Common sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>				✓
34	Black-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓			✓
35	Great black-backed gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓		
36	Herring gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓	✓	✓
37	Lesser black-backed gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
38	Rock dove / feral pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	
39	Stock dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>		✓		
40	Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
41	Collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
42	Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	✓		✓	
43	Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
44	Great spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		✓	✓	
45	Green woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>		✓		
46	Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓		✓
47	Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>	✓		✓	
48	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>			✓	
49	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
50	Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
51	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>		✓	✓	
52	Carrion crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
53	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓		
54	Coal tit	<i>Parus ater</i>		✓		
55	Blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓	
56	Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	
57	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓	✓		✓

58	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
59	House martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
60	Cetti's warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		✓	✓	
61	Long-tailed tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓		
62	Willow warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
63	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓	✓	✓
64	Sedge warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>	✓	✓		
65	Reed warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>	✓	✓	✓	
66	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
67	Garden warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>			✓	
68	Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
69	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		✓	✓	
70	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
71	Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	✓	✓	✓	
72	Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>		✓		
73	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
74	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
75	Song thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓	✓	✓
76	Mistle thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>				✓
77	Spotted flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>		✓		
78	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
79	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
80	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>				✓
81	Yellow wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>	✓			
82	Pied wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
83	Meadow pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	
84	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
85	Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>			✓	
86	Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓	✓	
87	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
88	Reed bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓

	MAMMALS	MAMMALIA				
1	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓	✓		
2	Grey squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>		✓	✓	
3	Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	✓			
4	Roe deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>		✓	✓	
	BUTTERFLIES	PAPILIONES				
1	Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>			✓	
2	Small white	<i>Pieris rapae</i>			✓	
	DRAGONFLIES	LIBELLULA				
1	Large red damselfly	<i>Pyrrhosoma nymphula</i>	✓			
2	Azure damselfly	<i>Coenagrion puella</i>			✓	
3	Variable damselfly	<i>Coenagrion pulchellum</i>			✓	
4	Blue-tailed damselfly	<i>Ischnura elegans</i>	✓		✓	
5	Hairy dragonfly	<i>Brachytron pratense</i>	✓		✓	
6	Four-spotted chaser	<i>Libellula quadrimaculata</i>			✓	
7	Scarce chaser	<i>Libellula fulva</i>			✓	