

THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

TRAVEL | EXPERIENCE | CONSERVE



Tour Report

UK - Somerset Levels in Spring

23- 26 May 2021

Avocet



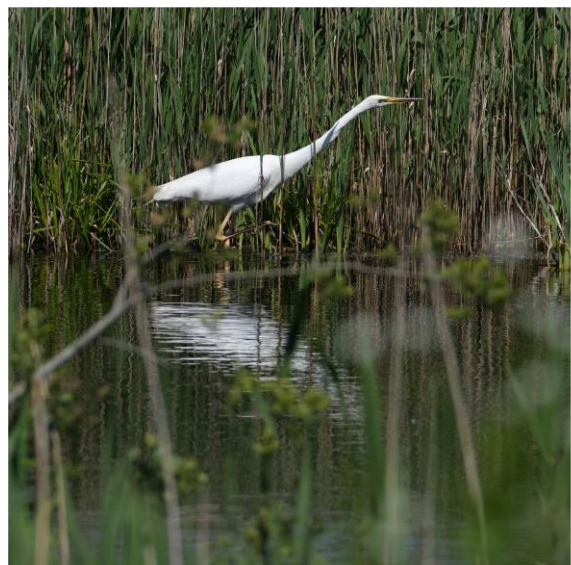
Hairy dragonfly



Bittern



Great white egret



Compiled by Mike Dilger
Images by Peter Ormond

Tour Leader: Mike Dilger with five participants

Day 1: Meet-up at the Worth House Hotel. Catcott SWT Complex and the west end of Shapwick NNR

Sunday 23 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. Situated just west of the village of Wells, this was the second of two successive trips from this new base for - hopefully - all future Levels' tours. The weather was once again unfortunately wet, windy and cold, but this would in no way dampen the spirits of the five guests as Mike Dilger welcomed them all, and after introductions the group set off to brave the unseasonal elements.

With it raining heavily Mike suggested they head for the hide at Catcott - primarily to stay dry. With the weather poor and many of the birds keeping their heads down while feeding young, there were relatively slim pickings, but a pair of gadwall were soon picked up alongside mallards already in eclipse plumage. A pair of lapwing on the island in front of the hide also kept everyone entertained, and with the female incubating a clutch, the male's sole job seemed to be that of keeping a carrion crow at bay, which was obviously keen for a meal of scrambled egg. One of the group also picked up a superb drake shoveler floating in and out of the reeds at the back of the mere, before a distant male marsh harrier was spotted hunting in the rain. Feral geese also bolstered the fledgling trip list with both greylag and Canada geese family parties spotted.

With it still raining hard Mike suggested they at least attempt a short walk and so the group headed off to the Avalon Marshes close by for an amble round the eastern end of Shapwick National Nature Reserve, close to the ancient Sweet Track. Despite the frankly terrible conditions, the group managed to hear blackcap and chiffchaff, before obtaining good views of a willow warbler close by. Mike was also able to show the group royal fern growing along the path to the hide. After reaching the reedbed proper, a quick vote was taken as to whether the brave and sodden explorers should 'stick or twist', with the group unanimously deciding to beat a hasty retreat back to the minibus. Safely back at the warm and dry hotel, a chilli con carne / veggie chilli represented the perfect comfort food as the group familiarised themselves with each other after a very wet first session.

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

Monday 24 May 2021

Waking up to the reality of another wet and windy day, Mike suggested that the wildlife of the southern levels and coast might be prove more robust to the vagaries of the weather than that of the Avalon marshes. And so, after a cooked breakfast the group jumped into the minibus for a spot of crane-hunting.

The first port of call was the Bridge at Oath, whereupon Mike was able to quickly pick out at least seven cranes feeding on Aller Moor, across from the River Parrett, and away to the Northeast. Mike explained that as the cranes are susceptible to disturbance, this sees them spending much of their time on what must surely be one of the remotest parts of the entire Levels. However, despite being a good distance away, the sheer size of the birds meant that views through the scope were still excellent, with this species representing a 'first' for all the guests present.

Re-boarding the minibus the group then carried on up to RSPB Swell Wood. Despite the strong wind, the rain had finally begun to abate and while enjoying a hot drink the group were able to enjoy a spot of car park birding at the feeding station. Here, a variety of woodland birds were picked up in quick succession, such as nuthatch, coal tit and great spotted woodpecker. Repositioning then to the Heronry Hide, a pair of spotted flycatchers high in the trees were enjoyed by all, in between being entertained by a constant stream of avian visitors to the pond, such as blackcap, blackbird and treecreeper. Above our heads the young herons clearly

looked close to fledging up in their tree-top nests, with the decibel level quickly rising whenever one of the parents returned from a fishing trip.

Taking a walk around Swell Wood, Mike then took the group on a short circular route around the wood. Here, a fine selection of ancient woodland indicator plants could be seen, including woodruff, yellow archangel, wood speedwell and pendulous sedge. Calling stock doves were also heard close to the viewpoint across the Levels, before a pair of treecreeper were then spotted while returning to the minibus, along with singing goldcrests, which flatly revealed to show themselves.

Driving then up to Greylake, the group proceeded straight to the hide where they were royally entertained by both displaying (and breeding) lapwing and redshank. A peregrine was then picked up flying low across the moor, no doubt looking for lunch, before a sparrowhawk then flashed past the hide too. A distant buzzard was also observed - making for a trio of raptors in quick succession.

Returning to the minibus, WWT Steart Marshes was our next destination. This reserve is at the very western end of the Levels and marks the point where the River Parrett discharges into the sea. Breeding avocets have recently become a very welcome addition to reserve's portfolio, with an estimated 60 pairs now nesting on the islands in front of the Quantocks Hide. Here, many of the guests were able to enjoy their very first ever views of avocet chicks, with good numbers feeding - or sweeping - away in front of the hide, indicating that 2021 must have been a good breeding season. On the main island, four adult little ringed plovers were also enjoyed by all, as two pairs spent the best part of 20 minutes chasing each other at close range. Such great views of this enchanting species enabled the clients to note the lack of a wing-bar and golden eye-ring, two key features which help differentiate this species from its commoner cousin - the ringed plover. Good numbers of shelduck were also spotted out on the scrape too. Upon returning towards the car park, a dread was then observed as a great black-backed gull was seen being driven away by a large posse of adult avocets, which had patently risen in unison to drive off the clear and present threat to their colony.

Proceeding straight through the car park, the group then crossed the saltmarsh to reach the shingle ridge commanding impressive views across Bridgwater Bay. Here, a large mixed flock of dunlin and ringed plover were observed along the shoreline, along with herring and lesser black-backed gulls. Despite the cold and windy conditions, the breeding skylarks impressed everyone with their towering display flights on the saltmarsh behind.

With the rain now spotting, the group returned to the minibus before heading inland to Jack's Drove on Tealham Moor to listen and look for yellow wagtails. Unfortunately, none could be seen, with a male marsh harrier quartering the moor the only bird of note. Out of sight, whitethroats, reed warblers and the occasional skylark could still be heard, however, but this still wasn't quite enough to prevent the group from making the collective decision of 'quitting while ahead', resulting in a hasty departure back to the hotel to warm up and dry off.

Day 3: RSPB Ham Wall, Tealham Moor, Westhay Moor NNR, Jack's Drove - Tealham Moor, Walton Drove

Tuesday 25 May 2021

Despite the wind still not having dropped, the group were nevertheless delighted to be met with sunshine as they reconvened at the minibus in preparation an early start to one of the Levels' flagship reserves. The plan was to take the group for a walk along the main path at RSPB Ham Wall. And upon leaving the car park the guests were immediately surrounded by bird song filling the air, as blackcap, garden warbler, willow warbler and chiffchaff all competed for airtime. Further along the main bank the group enjoyed their first good views of the whitethroat's parachute display above a patch of brambles, and following the warbler theme, the sedge warbler's frenetic, jazzy song revealed its location in a reedy fringe along the same section of path.

Aerial insectivores were everywhere, with impressive numbers of swifts flying past at almost head-height past the group as they ploughed through swarms of insects sheltering out of the wind and behind the trees.

Huge numbers of house martins both resting in the trees and feeding over the water were also admired, alongside a fewer number of swallows, which conveniently allowed for handy comparisons between these two similar species to be made. The calls of at least two different cuckoos were additionally heard, while great white egrets and a couple of male marsh harriers made a guest appearance from Viewing Platform 1. Breeding tufted duck and pochard were also observed out on the open water here too.

Moving along to the Avalon hide, all were then able to enjoy a fine male blackcap and a couple of reed warblers at close quarters as the group skirted along the dividing line between wet woodland and reedbed. Entering the hide, a pair of great-crested grebes were showing well, as a pair were observed feeding their two large chicks. The group additionally took delight in a pair of coot chicks taking their chicks into the water for what looked like the very first time. And then two male marsh harriers drifted past the reedbed, with one in particular giving great views, followed by a female, enabling a comparison to be easily made between the sexes of this distinctively dimorphic species.

Despite no bitterns having been observed it was still deemed a successful morning as the group slowly retreated back to the hotel for a full Somerset breakfast. With the weather now the best of the entire trip, the group then boarded the minibus bound for Westhay Moor, a National Nature Reserve managed by the Somerset Wildlife Trust. Walking along the Coot trail, to the north of the car park, a hobby was briefly observed attempting to catch a swallow - without success - right in front of a number of the guests. "Dragonfly corner" was also hooching with Odonata sheltering out of the northwesterly wind, with thousands of variable, azure and large red damselflies in the vegetation by the path. An impressive number of larger dragonflies were also basking in the sunshine, having obviously only recently emerged, meaning the group were able to enjoy close-up views of four-spotted chaser, female scare chaser and a few distant hairy dragonflies - the latter being a Levels' specialty.

Westhay Moor also possesses the best remaining example of a raised mire in Somerset, enabling Mike to showcase the habitat, through a couple of its classic plants - the carnivorous round-leaved sundew and common cotton-grass. The highlight of this brief foray onto the mire, however, was when Mike lifted a couple of tin sheets, left out for reptiles, with the first one revealing two slow worms and a grass snake, while the second contained a much larger grass snake. MD was able to handle both species in front of the group in order to point out the salient identification features, as well as offering a photographic opportunity for the snappers in the group.

On the way back to the car park, the group were able to enjoy another couple of hobbies, and after lunch in the sunshine Mike suggested the group head back to Tealham Moor to look once more for yellow wagtails. This time, by trying a touch further west, the group eventually had distant, but good, views of them on the road. No doubt feeding on insects hit by vehicles, the highlight was the view of a bright lemon-yellow male, with another observed on the road even further west. By now the wind had picked up even more, making for a cold afternoon, and with the weather continuing to deteriorate Mike suggested a detour towards Walton Drove to listen for quail. Unfortunately, none could be heard here, with meadow pipit, skylark, whitethroat and reed warbler the only species happy to stick their heads above the parapet. A fine view of a male marsh harrier was also had here but given the early start and the worsening weather situation the decision was made to return to the hotel for a fine home-cooked meal.

Day 4: Shapwick NNR

Wednesday 26 May 2021

Due to long homeward journeys, three members had to depart early on the last morning, so Mike took the remaining couple off to Shapwick for a walk along the central drain, this time from the eastern side. The targets here were bitterns and cuckoo, two species which had evaded the group so far, and eventually - after a long wait - a bittern was picked up as it flew across the 70 acre reedbed.

Relieved to have finally bagged this key species, Mike then took the group further west on the hunt for a cuckoo which could be heard clearly calling from a long line of poplars. The bird in question almost seemed to be taunting us, as we patiently waited for it to reveal itself, and eventually it flew, with one of the guests catching its distinctive flight, before it once more retreated out of sight. While not viewed by everyone, with the sun blasting down on such a fine reserve, it was decided this was a fitting place to end such a successful and enjoyable trip given the testing weather conditions.



Checklist

THE TRAVELLING
NATURALIST

	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	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		✓		
20	Marsh harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
21	Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>			✓	✓
22	Water rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>				✓
23	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓	✓	✓
24	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>			✓	✓
25	Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>		✓		
26	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		✓		

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

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

89	Reed bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		✓	✓	✓
	MAMMALS	MAMMILIA				
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>Pyrrosoma 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>			✓	