

THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

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Tour Report

UK - Somerset Levels in Winter

12 – 15 January 2023

Short-eared owl



Starlings with a peregrine falcon



Reeds in winter



Pintail and wigeon



Compiled by Mike Dilger

Day 1: Meet-up at the hotel and visit to RSPB Ham Wall

Thursday 12 January 2023

The group met up at the wonderfully warm and hospitable home of Sarah at the Worth House Hotel just west of Wells village at 14:00, for the first of three winter trips slated for January. Following introductions from Mike and a welcome chat about both the hotel and the planned itinerary, all seven guests set off in the minibus with Mike at the helm en route to RSPB's Ham Wall Reserve, to hopefully catch up with the starling murmuration.

The weather was cold and clear on the first outing, and with Worth House located right at the north-eastern tip of the Levels, we soon dropped down onto the moors, where large tracts of cattle pasture are intersected with ditches known locally as rhynes. The fields looked especially wet along North Chine Drove, with little egrets showing well close to the road. This is normally a great location to look for cattle egrets, which are a speciality of the Levels, but on this occasion, however, none could be located.

'Kingfisher!' shouted Mike as one was briefly spotted flying down the road just in front of the minibus, with a few lucky guests, who happened to be looking in the right direction, spotting the tell-tale blue mantle as it sped away from us. A little further along, we spotted our first great white egret of the trip as it flew past.

A few other birds were logged and added to our fledgling list before finally arriving at the RSPB Ham Wall main car park. Taking a quick peek at the feeders behind the visitor centre, we logged the trip's first blue and great tits, along with a female reed bunting. While we were walking up onto the main drove, a small flock of snipe whizzed past before the first marsh harrier, in this case a male, was seen quartering the reedbed at close quarters. In the open water, just in the foreground, a masterclass on winter ducks then ensued as the group appreciated the key identification features of teal, shoveler and gadwall - all of which were, by now, in superb breeding plumage.

Out of sight, a little grebe's whinnying call was then heard, shortly before the charming call of a water-rail from somewhere deep within the reedbed. Rather more obvious was a singing robin right beside the path, and a chiffchaff then vied for the group's attention when it flew into a bush a little further along the path.

Having by now reached Viewing Platform 1 (VP1), we spotted a couple of drake pochards, along with a few common snipe, while in the deeper water a good number of tufted duck could be seen, in between diving bouts under water. On a small raised area towards the back of the open water a few Canada geese were also resting alongside some wigeon, with all the ducks looking immaculate in their newly acquired plumage.

As we took the short stroll toward the Torr View hide, the mere to the left of the path on Walton's Heath was full of gadwall and coot, which Mike explained, are invariably seen together, along with a few shoveler at the back of the open water. On the walk down to the hide, the group were treated to fine close views of a female marsh harrier, enabling all to see the distinct plumage differences in this sexually polymorphic species. A number of roosting snipe were also tucked in at the bases of some reeds close to the hide.

On the walk back, Mike suggested the best position from which to see the impending starling murmuration might be along the section of main path that overlooks Walton's Heath, almost halfway between VP1 and the car park. Soon enough the first small flock of starlings was spotted and this was quickly followed by ever larger flocks. As starling numbers rose quickly, both buzzard and marsh harrier were seen on the wing, with neither looking even remotely capable of being nimble enough to catch a starling in mid-air. But it was a very different story when a male peregrine suddenly appeared, as it instantly cleaved the starling flock, before swooping at great speed in an attempt to catch a starling from just above the reed-tops. On this occasion, however, it looked to have failed, and with the light dropping the group were lucky enough to be treated to huge numbers of starlings conducting a brief murmuration before quickly dropping down and into the reeds, which would serve as their overnight quarters. As they descended right in front of the group's viewpoint, the reeds and adjacent bushes soon became black with birds, as the river of starlings

continued to pour downwards. Once they had settled, the noise levels instantly picked up as the starlings began to chatter away to one another - which we used as a cue to leave them alone for the night.

Walking back to the car park happy and content, there was just time for another quick view of the male peregrine as it shot over the car park, before we reboarded the minibus for the short return trip to Worth House. As we were still only a few weeks beyond the winter solstice, the early arrival of dusk meant there was still plenty of time for the guests to unpack their belongings before reconvening for a delicious dinner prepared by Sarah and her team.

Day 2: Catcott SWT Complex, Honeygar Lane, Shapwick NNR, Westhay Moor NNR & Cheddar Reservoir.

Friday 13 January 2023

We met for breakfast to hear that a number of the group had spent their waking hours listening to tawny owls hooting away in the back garden! After a fine breakfast, Mike drove the group back across Westhay Moor, with plenty of sightings of starlings, and stopping only briefly for a brief view of a couple of fieldfares resting in a roadside alder tree.

The first visit of the day was to Catcott SWT Complex, a reserve managed by the Somerset Wildlife Trust at the western end of the Avalon Marshes. Here the water level was higher than Mike had ever seen before, resulting in vast numbers of wildfowl right in front of the hide. The main species were wigeon, teal, shoveler and mallard, with lapwing also present on what little dry ground remained, while lapwing flocks also passed overhead. While we watched some coots, a female marsh harrier was spotted right at the back, which subsequently created a commotion when it drifted towards the ducks, causing them to all take to the air.

We also observed black-headed gulls in their less distinct winter plumage while we passed through the reserve, as well as a pair of pochard then spotted - which is considered an unusual bird at Catcott, and a sign as to how much deep the water on the reserve was than normal.

On leaving Catcott, Mike took the group along Honeygar Lane, in attempt to find the resident little owls, which on this occasion didn't appear keen to show themselves. However a little further along at Honeygar Farm, Mike was able to find a few cattle egrets, in among some cows and alongside the more numerous little egrets and a few great white egrets.

After driving round to Shapwick NNR for a hot drink in the car park, we began the slow walk to the New Tower Hide, with a charm of goldfinches joining us briefly on the way. During the walk we also noted the usual suspects of robin, wren, chaffinch, blue and great tit. Upon reaching the open water we were able to view plenty more wigeon, gadwall and teal, but the American wigeon drake, which had been present all winter, sadly could not be located on this occasion.

By then it was very windy so we strolled further along to Noah's Hide, with excellent close-up views of a couple of great white egrets on the way. Despite being very windy on the lake, large numbers of wildfowl were present here too, with an expansive flock of pintail pleasing many in the group. With the hide now creaking in the wind (!) we decided to beat a hasty retreat to the car park, with a single goldcrest the only new species seen on our return.

Moving on to Westhay Moor NNR, we took a very enjoyable lunchbreak in the car park, before heading off into the reserve. On the way to the Tower Hide we caught up with a family of long-tailed tits passing in the trees, but as there were no signs of otters at the hide we quickly moved onto 30 Acre Lake. Here we were lucky to catch up with two pairs of freshly-moulted goosander in the gorgeous afternoon light, with the males looking resplendent. The group then walked the short distance northwards to North Chine Drove, while Mike ran back to collect the minibus, before driving it around to pick them up. He arrived to find everyone enjoying eight cattle egrets feeding in amongst cattle just north of the drove.

With an opportunity to visit one last location before the light was lost, Mike then drove around to the south side of Cheddar Reservoir. But with the wind still strong at this exposed location it was pretty tough to see anything of note, apart from four species of gull, with the pick of the crop being lesser black-back gull, which is not common in Somerset during the winter months. Also on the water were plenty of great crested grebes, a single female goosander, a few pochard, while four pied wagtails were noted flying along the perimeter of the reservoir.

With the light now fading, Mike drove back to Worth House so the group could refresh themselves before concluding the day's activities with a delightful meal at the Pheasant Pub just along the road.

Day 3: RSPB Greylake, Bridge at Oath, Langport Road, RSPB Swell Wood, Bridgwater Bay, WWT Steart Marshes, Burrow Mump and Walton Drove

Saturday 14 January 2023

When we met for breakfast, it looked decidedly wet and windy outside, but the forecast was for conditions to steadily improve as the day continued. The second full day would consist of an exploration of the southern part of the Levels, and by the time we reached our first planned stop at Catcott, it looked like most of the rain had already passed.

At the feeding station in the car park we enjoyed watching a healthy population of house sparrows while large flocks of lapwing passed overhead. A female kestrel was also noted while we observed both blue and great tits also coming down for the free handouts on offer. Taking a walk through the reedbed, we spotted a large flock of lapwing with a number of golden plover clearly present in their midst. As we made our way to the hide we could hear the loud, explosive calls of Cetti's warblers coming from deep within the reedbed, where once more wigeon, teal, shoveler, lapwing and snipe dominated the avian action. With so many waders and wildfowl present it came as little surprise to spot two or three marsh harriers constantly quarrying the marsh, making for some very unsettled birds on the water below.

Mike then noticed two stock doves fly past the hide, with extra interest provided by a couple of great white egrets further out. But with no extra species to add to our list the group departed for the railway bridge at Oath, one of the few sites that offers a view across both Aller Moor and West Sedgemoor. Once up on the bridge no one could quite believe the amount of water present on both moors, which was perhaps hardly surprising given the quantity of rain that had fallen over the previous month, as both locations looked like two enormous reservoirs. Unfortunately the lack of available pasture would make the cranes over on Aller Moor much harder to spot. While scanning in vain for cranes, Mike did hear two ravens calling as they flew past, while two roe deer were also spotted on one of the few dry banks bisecting Aller Moor.

Taking the road to Langport, the group then stopped by the Parrett's riverside bank and to much relief Mike finally managed to spot two cranes feeding out in a field. A third, and closer bird was then spotted, which also gave great views through the telescope. After a quick refreshment stop in the town of Langport, the group headed the short distance up to RSPB Swell Wood situated on the scarp looking down onto West Sedgemoor. Here we enjoyed a hot drink in the woodland car park, while picking out the occasional 'in-out visits' of one or two marsh tits. Amongst the commoner species coming down to the feeders, coal tit was undoubtedly the most numerous.

Great spotted woodpecker and nuthatch were handsome further additions to our list in the woodland, with a pair of woodpeckers making a racket in the trees above. On reboarding the minibus, Mike drove across to the coast, with WWT Steart Marshes our next destination. On the way we were able to stop briefly at an orchard further along the scarp for great views of both redwing and fieldfare feeding on apples that were still on the trees.

At the coast our first stop was at Wall Common car park, which offers the easiest access to Bridgwater Bay. The short walk across the saltmarsh to the shingle ridge was fairly wet, but enhanced immeasurably by the

appearance of a number of skylarks and meadow pipits. And despite the tide being a touch further out than was ideal we quickly managed to identify a sprinkling of grey plover, a few curlew, redshank, a small flock of knot and a huge number of dunlin out in the bay.

On the short drive back to the main Steart car park, Mike spotted a short-eared owl quartering the grassland by the side of the road, and after quickly parking up everyone had fabulous views of this uncommon and charismatic diurnal owl while it hunted for mice and voles. As we walked back to the minibus, the owl reappeared, before diving into the grassland close by. Having apparently caught some prey it promptly took off before a female kestrel bolted out of nowhere to try and steal it! What followed was a brief aerial dog-fight between the owl and the kestrel, which was astonishing and incredibly exciting to witness right in front of us.

Blown away by what they had just seen, the group then took a walk over to the Quantocks Hide on WWT Steart to catch their breath while enjoying a by-now very late lunch. Here, we were able to take in the shelduck and lapwing flocks along with a lesser number of redshank. While we were finishing our lunch, a large flock of golden plover came to land in front of the hide, enabling everyone to appreciate how well named they are as the late afternoon sun caught their plumage. This was instantly interrupted by the sudden presence of a marsh harrier swooping low over the scrape, causing pandemonium in the process.

After the walk back to the minibus, Mike took the guests to Burrow Mump, which was almost completely surrounded by water. Climbing up the western side of the hill, all were able to take in the panoramic views with the surrounding landscape looking more like Water World than the Somerset Levels. Eventually the overwintering whooper swans were located away to the east, in amongst the more numerous and resident mute swans, plus a small flock of around a dozen black-tailed godwits sheltering on a dry section of rhyme edge was a good find here.

Mike then suggested the group try and keep their luck going at one last site before heading back to the hotel. And at Walton Drove, this risk paid dividends when a lone hunting barn owl was observed hunting in the dying light of the day, which represented the perfect end to a simply brilliant day's birding on the Levels.

Day 4: Huntspill River

Sunday 15 January 2023

The 'four seasons in one trip' theme continued on the final morning, as Mike took the group back to the coast for a short walk along where the River Huntspill joins the much larger River Parrett. Stopping briefly at the road bridge over the Huntspill, we logged the first birds of the day: great crested grebe and mute swan before continuing a touch further on to the Huntspill's sluice.

In the grassland close to the sluice a song thrush was observed feeding, before we peered over the wall to check out the state of the tide, which by this time was rising rapidly. On the small area of remaining mud, curlew, wigeon and shelduck were all quickly identified - with the star species being a few avocets both across the water and on the eastern side of the Steart Peninsula.

Passing around the scrub, the group walked up on to the raised bank which is separated from the estuary by a stretch of saltmarsh. Here we spotted a couple of meadow pipits, and heard the contact calls of skylarks as they passed overhead. Across the water the numbers of dunlin pushed off the mud by the rising tide was incredible, with the murmuration easily rivalling anything the starlings had been able to muster on the first evening. With the help of the scope, Mike was able to point out a large high-tide roost of both Canada geese and avocets, while noisy redshanks flew further into the estuary as their muddy feeding grounds were covered by the incoming tide.

Out on the water a small flock of pintail could be clearly seen, before a small flock of calling linnet flew over the by-now slightly frozen group up on the exposed sea bank. Before dropping back down to the road and out of the wind, Mike was able to point out some greater black-backed gulls toward Steart Island. Once back at the minibus, we made a quick drop-in to Burnham-on-Sea to use the facilities, before warming up with a hot drink. On the drive down to the southern edge of the seafront, there was just time to look at the high tide roost of oystercatcher on Steart Island before we drove back to Worth House Hotel.

After a delightful lunch in the hotel lounge and the last roll call of the checklist, Mike bade farewell to the group at the culmination of a most enjoyable and wildlife-filled trip.

Checklist

THE TRAVELLING
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	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	Whooper swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>			✓	
5	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>			✓	✓
6	Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	✓	✓	✓	
8	Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>		✓		✓
11	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	✓	✓		
13	Tufted duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓	✓	
14	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		✓		
15	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		✓	✓	
16	Little grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	H			
17	Great crested grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓	✓		✓
18	Cattle egret	<i>Bubulcis ibis</i>		✓		
19	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
20	Great white egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	
21	Little egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
22	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
23	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		✓		
24	Marsh harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓	✓	✓	
25	Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
26	Water rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	H	H	H	

27	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓	✓	
28	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓	✓	
29	Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>			✓	
30	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>				✓
31	Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>				✓
32	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
33	Golden plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>			✓	
34	Grey plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>			✓	✓
35	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>			✓	✓
36	Black-tailed godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>			✓	
37	Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>			✓	
38	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>			✓	✓
39	Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			✓	
40	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			✓	✓
41	Black-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓	✓	✓
42	Little gull	<i>Hydrocoloeus minutus</i>				
43	Common gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓		✓
44	Great black-backed gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>				✓
45	Herring gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
46	Lesser black-backed gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓		✓
47	Rock dove / feral pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>				✓
48	Stock dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>			✓	
49	Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
50	Collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
51	Barn owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>			✓	
52	Tawny owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>		H		H
53	Short-eared owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>			✓	
54	Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	✓	✓	✓	
55	Great spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		✓	✓	
56	Green woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>			✓	
57	Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>			✓	

58	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	✓			
59	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
60	Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
61	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
62	Carrion crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
63	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			✓	
64	Coal tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>			✓	
65	Marsh tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>			✓	
66	Blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
67	Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
68	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>			✓	H
69	Cetti's warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	H	H	H	
70	Long-tailed tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓	✓	H
71	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓			
72	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		✓		
73	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓	✓	
74	Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>			✓	
75	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
76	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
77	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>		✓	✓	
78	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>			✓	
79	Song thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>				✓
80	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
81	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>			✓	✓
82	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓	✓	
83	Pied wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓		
84	Meadow pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>			✓	✓
85	Rock pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>				✓
86	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓
87	Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>			✓	
88	Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>				✓
89	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓

90	Reed bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓			
	MAMMALS	MAMMALIA				
1	Grey squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>			✓	
2	Roe deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	✓		✓	✓