

# THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

TRAVEL | EXPERIENCE | CONSERVE



## Tour Report

### United Kingdom – Somerset Levels in Winter

18 – 21 January 2023

Frozen hogweed



Starlings at Ham Wall



Short-eared owl



Icicles



Compiled by Mike Dilger

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

**Wednesday 18 January 2023**

The group met up at the wonderfully warm and hospitable home of Sarah at the Worth House Hotel just west of the city of Wells at 14:00. This was the final one of three back-to-back winter trips slated for January. Following introductions, a chat about the hotel and a quick discussion of the trip itinerary, Mike Dilger set off in the minibus with all six guests en route to RSPB's Ham Wall Reserve - for an encounter with some starlings.

Driving across Westhay Moor, the weather was cold, calm and sunny, but with the temperature just above freezing the fields had defrosted a touch, allowing redwing and fieldfare easier access to food just below the surface. The first egret we spotted was a 'little', which flew in front of the minibus, enabling all to see the bird's black bill and yellow feet. The second egret species followed quickly, when a quick scan of a nearby field revealed a grand total of 22 cattle egrets in amongst some mute swans. A hunting sparrowhawk also flashed past the minibus here as well.

On arriving at RSPB Ham Wall car park, our first action, after using the facilities, was to check out the feeders behind the visitor centre. Here blue and great tit, chaffinch, goldfinch and a single dunnock were spotted before we headed up onto the main drove. While walking along to the first patch of open water, we could see shoveler conducting their 'yin and yang' courtship for the first time this year, and spotted our first pochard and gadwall of the trip too.

A little further on three snipe flew straight past us, before we picked up our first marsh harrier as a male quartered the reed-bed. This was joined by a female, enabling everyone to see the different plumages in this sexually dimorphic bird of prey. Plenty of lapwing were in evidence here too, with large flocks occasionally passing overhead to reach feeding grounds elsewhere. Closer to Viewing Platform (VP) 1 a few teal were the next species to be enjoyed at close quarters, and while Mike was setting up his scope to see snipe a kingfisher flew straight past us. Unfortunately only those looking in the right direction caught a glimpse as it whizzed past. A little grebe was also observed here between extended periods spent fishing underwater of course.

Looking out over the mere to the north of VP1 we noted a few great crested grebes, in addition to a high count of eight drake pochards. Alongside the diving pochard, we also picked up a few tufted duck in the deeper water. With the light now fading quite quickly, we re-traced our steps just west of VP1 to wait for the first starlings to arrive. With it being so calm and still, the starlings came in relatively late, with most ultimately descending either in front of us or in the reeds close to VP1. A peregrine was briefly seen on the margins of the flock, along with a marsh harrier, and despite the birds staying in the air for only a relatively short period of time, compared to other visits, it was still a memorable murmuration.

With most of the birds now in the roost, the reeds below had become blackened with birds, as the starlings suddenly found their voices. To add to the spectacle, large numbers of birds were constantly lifting off before repositioning themselves elsewhere in the roost, which made the birds look like a black river flowing above the reed tops. With the birds finally appearing more settled and darkness descending, Mike suggested returning to the car park. On the walk back, the evening's fine viewing was capped off with our third species of egret - a great white egret - when one flew past just before we reached the minibus.

## **Day 2: Catcott SWT Complex, Shapwick NNR - New tower hide & Noah's Hide, Sharpham, Huntspill - Stockland Reach**

**Thursday 19 January 2023**

Convening for breakfast the following morning, we could all see a continuation of the fine cold weather as Mike cleared the frost off the minibus' windscreen in preparation for our first full day on the Levels. The plan was to spend the entire day north of the Polden Hills, starting off at Catcott Complex, a reserve managed by the Somerset Wildlife Trust.

On arrival at the car park, we immediately noticed two reed buntings in the scrub close by, but due to the amount of ice on the scrape there was very little bird activity, apart from a few very sorry-looking lapwing and Canada geese. As we moved to the eastern end of Shapwick NNR, the sun was doing its best to raise the temperature above zero. In the wet woodland just beyond the car park we were able to pick up on the calls of long-tailed tits, before eventually clapping eyes on a family party as they moved through the trees.

Walking out into the open, everyone was able to enjoy a great white egret sunbathing at the top of an alder tree, before turning our attention to what initially appeared to be a moorhen walking along the edge of the rhyme parallel to the main path. Upon closer investigation Mike declared it to be a water rail, before the bird hid in a small patch of vegetation. Everyone quickly moved forward to have a good look at this normally shy and retiring species, causing it to promptly disappear completely, before it suddenly and spectacularly exploded out the grass and flew straight towards us! One person had to make a very quick manoeuvre to avoid colliding with bird in what turned out to be a simply unforgettable moment!

After this close encounter a masterclass in wildfowl identification ensued, with coot and great crested grebes also noted, while a couple of marsh harriers floated over the reeds at the back. At the New Tower hide, the elevated viewpoint allowed us to pick out the long-staying drake American wigeon, which as per usual, was spending most of its time asleep. Coming back down to the main path, we enjoyed great views of a couple of great white egrets along the main drain, before turning off the main path towards Noah's Hide.

Once inside the hide, we were able to enjoy fine views of the overwintering flock of pintail, alongside some close great crested grebes, which were now sporting their fine breeding plumage. From our elevated position we could also see marsh harriers showing well. On the walk back, Mike picked out the soft, plaintive call of a bullfinch in the woodland, but the bird unfortunately passed by without being seen. However a goldcrest was much more obliging and showed well to everyone.

During lunch in the car park Mike was given a tip-off by a local birder about a very rare lesser scaup, seen near Sharpham at the eastern end of Ham Wall. We had a good look for it, but had to settle for three little grebes and four species of gull instead. By way of recompense, a single white-fronted goose was located in amongst some overwintering greylags - this goose is a very uncommon on the Levels at any time of year - while a chiffchaff was located in the roadside trees.

While driving back around, Mike and one of the group caught a brief sight of a barn owl flying past a gap in the roadside hedge, and after hastily parking up, quickly relocated it along a footpath, with Mike able to place the bird in the scope - to the delight of all. Buoyed by another terrific sighting, we continued to where the Huntspill River enters Bridgwater Bay at Stockland Reach.

As usual just beyond the sluice we were able to pick up a few redshank and wigeon on the mud, while Canada geese were roosting on the adjacent grass, with shelduck on the water behind. Walking around the scrub, we saw a number of curlews feeding in a field to the east of the access track, then walked up onto the sea wall. Across the water towards Steart Peninsula, we saw huge numbers of dunlin on the wing as they were pushed off the mud by the rising tide. There were a few grey plover just beyond the saltmarsh, while the occasional skylark erupted from out of the grass close to where we were walking. While scanning across to the Steart Peninsula, we heard the unmistakable 'cronk' of a raven, before we picked it up as it flew westward over the water.

Descending to the access road, we quickly walked back up again after a friend of Mike's, who also happened to be birding there, came down to tell us she'd found a spoonbill. Albeit a touch distant, this was quickly scoped up, enabling all to see this delightfully distinct bird with its uniquely-shaped bill. Looking back across to the peninsula, the murmuration of dunlin and golden plover was, by now, astonishing, and in very short measure a peregrine was spotted chasing the flock, before a male hen harrier was picked up to the east of the peninsula - two amazing raptors in the space of as many minutes!

Returning to the minibus, we drove around to Burnham-on-Sea to use the facilities and enjoy a much delayed hot drink, before driving back inland to Worth House. After meeting up with two guests, who had to miss out on the day due to a prior commitment, we retired for a delightful meal at the Pheasant Inn to mark the end of a terrific day's wildlife spotting.

### **Day 3: RSPB Greylake, Bridge at Oath, Road to Langport (opposite Oath Farm), RSPB Swell Wood, WWT Steart Marshes (Steart Gate) & RSPB Ham Wall**

#### **Friday 20 January 2023**

After breakfast, a very cold, frosty and sunny morning greeted us as we drove across Westhay Moor, towards the Polden Hills, for our second full day on the Levels. The frozen ground meant that redwing and fieldfare were again present in large numbers in the fields around North Chine Drove, before we eventually arrived at RSPB Greylake car park.

After Mike put some feed down on the car park bird-table, a robin, great tits, blue tits and starlings all quickly descended to replenish any reserves they'd lost after a night when the temperature dropped to around -5° C, which is considered extraordinarily cold for the Levels in winter. Setting off for the hide, we walked through the reedbeds, where everyone managed to catch a fight between three wrens - doubtless two males viewing for the attentions of a female. Almost immediately afterwards we heard a Cetti's warbler, before this rarely observed bird briefly broke cover to fly across the path.

After watching a moorhen dancing on ice we arrived at the hide, but the icy conditions meant that not a single duck could be seen where normally there would have been thousands. To make up for this lack of wildfowl, which had patently departed for ice-free waters elsewhere, at least six or seven snipe could be seen quietly roosting on the narrow section of ground not covered with ice just in front of the hide. Here we were also able to watch a male reed bunting as it fed on bullrush seed-heads.

On our return to the minibus, we drove the short distance to the bridge at Oath, whose elevated position offers unparalleled views over West Sedgemoor and Aller Moor. Here Mike was lagging behind the group during the walk up onto the bridge, putting him in the perfect place as a kingfisher flew straight over his head. A quick shout enabled those closest to him to get a glimpse as the blue bullet shot past.

With both Aller Moor and West Sedgemoor little more than reservoirs, and the shallower sections completely iced over, crane-spotting was decidedly tricky. However just on the other side of the River Parrett we noticed a small number of dunlin as they fed in amongst some lapwings. Further back a couple of great white egrets were also visible from our lofty vantage point. Deciding that the road to Langport might be the best spot to look for cranes, we repositioned there and had fine views of a buzzard, a female marsh harrier and a number of grey herons, before Mike suddenly heard a very familiar call: the bugling of cranes. Looking up, we suddenly saw four birds as they flew from behind a row of trees in front of us in the direction of West Sedgemoor. After they had disappeared out of sight, we heard more cranes where the other birds had emerged, but these had not read the script and steadfastly refused to show themselves. Everyone was thrilled, nevertheless, by such an excellent sighting and we celebrated the cranes' continued success on the Levels with a hot drink and a biscuit.

After a short break in Langport, we went Mike straight up to RSPB Swell Wood to see what was coming down to the feeders. As usual, coal tit was the commonest bird taking advantage of the free handout, ably supported by the more common tit species. By patiently scanning, however, we spotted the rarest tit at Swell Wood - the marsh tit - when it eventually flew in. And this excellent spot was quickly followed by that of nuthatch. Following the theme of woodland birds, a couple of great spotted woodpeckers were also calling noisily in the trees above our heads.



Taking our lunch to the Heronry Hide, we proceeded to enjoy a delightful break while watching redwings in the tops of the trees and squirrels chasing each other through the branches. Bird-food had been placed here too, and at one point three different nuthatches could be seen grabbing beak-fulls of sunflower hearts.

Mike then drove the group across to WWT Start Marshes, where the River Parrett discharges into the Bridgwater Bay. After a quick refreshment stop at the main car park, we carried straight onto Steart Gate to look for the overwintering short-eared owl. As we walked up onto the ridge a large flock of skylarks and linnets revealed themselves in the saltmarsh below, before Mike picked up a distant 'shortie' quartering the ground further to the east. Flying towards us, it must have been about a hundred metres away before it suddenly pitched into the grass - presumably chasing a vole - enabling all to enjoy great views of the perched owl through Mike's scope.

After a brief foray further down the peninsula, we drove straight back to RSPB Ham Wall, in the heart of the Avalon Marshes, for another crack at the murmuration. The highlight here were the marsh harriers cleaving flocks of starling against a salmon-coloured sky. Returning to Worth House for our last dinner, we had just enough time to squeeze in another sighting of barn owl, which we picked up in the headlights while it hunted as we made our way over Westhay Moor - the perfect end to another fine day on the Levels.

#### **Day 4: Westhay Moor NNR (SWT), Cheddar Reservoir (north end)**

##### **Saturday 21 January 2023**

Waking up to our final morning Mike, everyone was pleased to see what looked to be another cold, sunny and clear day as we headed out after breakfast. On arrival at the car park for Westhay Moor, an NNR managed by Somerset Wildlife Trust, we took a stroll down the main drove, and rather than turning off towards the Tower Hide, carried straight on to the new hides at the end of the recently erected boardwalk. This is supposedly a good place to look for otters, but on this occasion we could not see any on the totally iced-over mere! The reed-bed looked beautiful though, with plenty of guests taking the opportunity to snap some frosty scenic shots.

Retracing our steps, we walked slowly around to 30 Acre Lake, with good views of a party of long-tailed tits and a single goldcrest on the way. Astonishingly, the only area that had remained ice-free was a small section at the back of the lake, where all the wildfowl had congregated, but unfortunately the overwintering goosander were not amongst the more usual suspects. We then walked north to North Chine Drove, while Mike ran back to pick up the minibus - hearing a green woodpecker's waffle on the way!

After Mike picked up the group by the roadside, everyone was able to enjoy a group of three cattle egret in amongst some cattle before Mike drove to Cheddar Reservoir, plumping for the northern end. There we quickly picked up both pied wagtail and a single fly-past of grey wagtail - which is a decidedly difficult species to see on the Levels in winter. When someone asked 'What's that?', Mike was thrilled that he'd finally managed to catch up with the long-staying drake red-crested pochard, which was very close to the side of the reservoir along with a few mallards. Obviously all red-crested pochards in the UK are the progeny of escaped birds, but this individual was nevertheless a most welcome addition to our checklist. Further out on the water there were large numbers of coots, gulls, great crested grebes and cormorants, but with lunchtime approaching we headed back to Worth House.

There we compiled the final checklist

before tucking into a most delightful 'Worth House' lunch before everyone bade each other farewell at the culmination of another fabulous 'Levels in Winter' trip.

# Checklist

THE TRAVELLING  
**NATURALIST**

|    | Common Name         | Scientific Name               | Day 1 | Day 2 | Day 3 | Day 4 |
|----|---------------------|-------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
|    | <b>BIRDS</b>        | <b>AVES</b>                   |       |       |       |       |
| 1  | Canada goose        | <i>Branta canadensis</i>      | ✓     | ✓     |       | ✓     |
| 2  | Greylag goose       | <i>Anser anser</i>            | ✓     | ✓     |       | ✓     |
| 3  | White-fronted goose | <i>Anser albifrons</i>        |       | ✓     |       |       |
| 4  | Mute swan           | <i>Cygnus olor</i>            | ✓     | ✓     | ✓     | ✓     |
| 5  | Egyptian goose      | <i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>   |       | ✓     |       |       |
| 6  | Shelduck            | <i>Tadorna tadorna</i>        |       | ✓     | ✓     |       |
| 7  | Shoveler            | <i>Spatula clypeata</i>       | ✓     | ✓     |       | ✓     |
| 8  | Gadwall             | <i>Mareca strepera</i>        | ✓     | ✓     | H     | ✓     |
| 9  | Wigeon              | <i>Mareca penelope</i>        | ✓     | ✓     | H     |       |
| 10 | Mallard             | <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>     | ✓     | ✓     | ✓     | ✓     |
| 11 | Pintail             | <i>Anas acuta</i>             |       | ✓     |       |       |
| 12 | Teal                | <i>Anas crecca</i>            | ✓     | ✓     | H     |       |
| 13 | Red-crested pochard | <i>Netta rufina</i>           |       |       |       | ✓     |
| 14 | Pochard             | <i>Aythya ferina</i>          | ✓     | ✓     |       |       |
| 15 | Tufted duck         | <i>Aythya fuligula</i>        | ✓     | ✓     |       | ✓     |
| 16 | Pheasant            | <i>Phasianus colchicus</i>    |       | ✓     | ✓     | ✓     |
| 17 | Little grebe        | <i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i> | ✓     | ✓     |       |       |
| 18 | Great crested grebe | <i>Podiceps cristatus</i>     | ✓     | ✓     |       | ✓     |
| 19 | Cattle egret        | <i>Bubulcis ibis</i>          | ✓     | ✓     |       | ✓     |
| 20 | Grey heron          | <i>Ardea cinerea</i>          | ✓     | ✓     | ✓     | ✓     |
| 21 | Great white egret   | <i>Ardea alba</i>             | ✓     | ✓     | ✓     | ✓     |
| 22 | Little egret        | <i>Egretta garzetta</i>       | ✓     | ✓     | ✓     | ✓     |
| 23 | Cormorant           | <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>    | ✓     | ✓     | ✓     | ✓     |
| 24 | Sparrowhawk         | <i>Accipiter nisus</i>        | ✓     |       |       |       |

|    |                          |                                   |   |   |   |   |
|----|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|---|---|---|
| 25 | Marsh harrier            | <i>Circus aeruginosus</i>         | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 26 | Hen harrier              | <i>Circus cyaneus</i>             |   | ✓ |   |   |
| 27 | Buzzard                  | <i>Buteo buteo</i>                |   | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 28 | Water rail               | <i>Rallus aquaticus</i>           |   | ✓ | H | H |
| 29 | Moorhen                  | <i>Gallinula chloropus</i>        |   | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 30 | Coot                     | <i>Fulica atra</i>                | ✓ | ✓ |   | ✓ |
| 31 | Crane                    | <i>Grus grus</i>                  |   |   | ✓ |   |
| 32 | Oystercatcher            | <i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>      |   | ✓ |   |   |
| 33 | Avocet                   | <i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>     |   | ✓ | ✓ |   |
| 34 | Lapwing                  | <i>Vanellus vanellus</i>          | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 35 | Golden plover            | <i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>        |   | ✓ |   |   |
| 36 | Grey plover              | <i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>       |   | ✓ |   |   |
| 37 | Curlew                   | <i>Numenius arquata</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 | Common gull              | <i>Larus canus</i>                |   | ✓ |   | ✓ |
| 43 | Herring gull             | <i>Larus argentatus</i>           | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 44 | Lesser black-backed gull | <i>Larus fuscus</i>               |   | ✓ |   |   |
| 45 | Rock dove / feral pigeon | <i>Columba livia</i>              |   | ✓ |   |   |
| 46 | Stock dove               | <i>Columba oenas</i>              |   |   | ✓ |   |
| 47 | Woodpigeon               | <i>Columba palumbus</i>           | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 48 | Collared dove            | <i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>      | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 49 | Barn owl                 | <i>Tyto alba</i>                  |   | ✓ | ✓ |   |
| 50 | Short-eared owl          | <i>Asio flammeus</i>              |   |   | ✓ |   |
| 51 | Kingfisher               | <i>Alcedo atthis</i>              | ✓ |   | ✓ |   |
| 52 | Great spotted woodpecker | <i>Dendrocopos major</i>          |   | ✓ | ✓ | H |
| 53 | Green woodpecker         | <i>Picus viridis</i>              |   |   |   | ✓ |

|    |                 |                                |   |   |   |   |
|----|-----------------|--------------------------------|---|---|---|---|
| 54 | Kestrel         | <i>Falco tinnunculus</i>       |   |   | ✓ | ✓ |
| 55 | Peregrine       | <i>Falco peregrinus</i>        |   | ✓ |   | ✓ |
| 56 | Jay             | <i>Garrulus glandarius</i>     |   | H |   |   |
| 57 | Magpie          | <i>Pica pica</i>               | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 58 | Jackdaw         | <i>Coloeus monedula</i>        | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 59 | Rook            | <i>Corvus frugilegus</i>       | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 60 | Carrion crow    | <i>Corvus corone</i>           | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 61 | Raven           | <i>Corvus corax</i>            | ✓ | ✓ |   |   |
| 62 | Coal tit        | <i>Pariparus ater</i>          |   | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 63 | Marsh tit       | <i>Poecile palustris</i>       |   |   | ✓ |   |
| 64 | Blue tit        | <i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>     | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 65 | Great tit       | <i>Parus major</i>             | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 66 | Skylark         | <i>Alauda arvensis</i>         |   | ✓ | ✓ |   |
| 67 | Cetti's warbler | <i>Cettia cetti</i>            |   | H | ✓ | H |
| 68 | Long-tailed tit | <i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>     |   | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 69 | Chiffchaff      | <i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>  | ✓ | ✓ |   |   |
| 70 | Goldcrest       | <i>Regulus regulus</i>         |   | ✓ |   | ✓ |
| 71 | Wren            | <i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i> |   |   | ✓ | ✓ |
| 72 | Nuthatch        | <i>Sitta europaea</i>          |   |   | ✓ |   |
| 73 | Starling        | <i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>        | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 74 | Blackbird       | <i>Turdus merula</i>           | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 75 | Fieldfare       | <i>Turdus pilaris</i>          | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 76 | Redwing         | <i>Turdus iliacus</i>          | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 77 | Song thrush     | <i>Turdus philomelos</i>       |   | ✓ |   | ✓ |
| 78 | Robin           | <i>Erithacus rubecula</i>      | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 79 | Stonechat       | <i>Saxicola rubicola</i>       |   | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 80 | House sparrow   | <i>Passer domesticus</i>       |   |   | ✓ |   |
| 81 | Dunnock         | <i>Prunella modularis</i>      | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |   |
| 82 | Grey wagtail    | <i>Motacilla cinerea</i>       |   |   |   | ✓ |



|    |                 |                              |   |   |   |   |
|----|-----------------|------------------------------|---|---|---|---|
| 83 | Pied wagtail    | <i>Motacilla alba</i>        |   |   |   | ✓ |
| 84 | Chaffinch       | <i>Fringilla coelebs</i>     | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 85 | Bullfinch       | <i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>     |   | H |   |   |
| 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>  |   | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 90 | American wigeon | <i>Mareca americana</i>      |   | ✓ |   |   |
| 91 | Spoonbill       | <i>Platalea leucorodia</i>   |   | ✓ |   |   |
|    | <b>MAMMALS</b>  | <b>MAMMALIA</b>              |   |   |   |   |
| 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>   |   | ✓ | ✓ |   |