

EXPERIENCE CONSERVE

Tour Report UK – Somerset Levels in Spring 3 - 6 May 2022

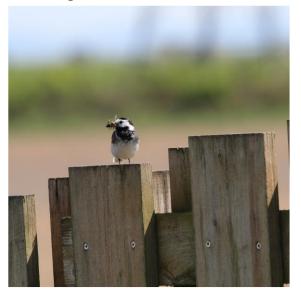
Avocet



Garden warbler



Pied wagtail



Red-crested pochard



Compiled by Mike Dilger Images by Maria Trotman & Gill D'Hooghe



Tour Leader: Mike Dilger with five participants

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

Tuesday 3 May 2022

The group met up at the wonderfully warm and welcoming home of Sarah and Nick at the Worth House Hotel at 14:00 on the first day. Situated just west of the village of Wells, this was the second of two successive Levels' trips, with the first kindly led by Stephen Moss, who had been able to step in for Mike Dilger. The weather was overcast, mild and windless - in other words, perfect birding weather for the seven guests as Mike welcomed them all, and following introductions the group set off for their first afternoon on the Levels.

Travelling across the north of the Levels, the first bird encountered was a local speciality, in the form of cattle egret, as at least 20 were spotted feeding in a field alongside a herd of cattle. Many of the birds were looking splendid in their full breeding regalia, with orange/peachy washes to their crowns and upper breasts as they took advantage of feeding opportunities created by the cattle's disturbance of the ground. A little further on, a small reed-lined rhyne revealed a single little great, enabling the group to see the striking difference in habitat preferred by this closely related species, which also favours a more solitary existence than that of its highly gregarious cousin.

Arriving at Catcott, and after listening to both chiffchaff and willow warbler singing from the trees lining the approach road, the group positioned themselves at the viewpoint. On this occasion, however, the reserve was was fairly quiet, with entertainment coming in the form of a pair of lapwing which could be seen displaying over the marsh. Canada and greylag geese were also in evidence here, with a pair of the latter keen to show off their yellowish goslings while crossing the mere - which was much to the annoyance of the resident American interlopers. A single redshank cut a solitary figure while asleep out on the marsh here too.

Deciding to head off to more productive grounds, Mike then drove across to Tealham Moor on a wagtail hunt. Crossing the North Drain a number of mute swans were seen before a single male yellow wagtail thrilled the group when picked up in a marshy field just to the south of the road. This shy and elusive bird posed beautifully for the group, as singing skylarks applied the backing chorus. Turning our attention to the other side of the road, a female lapwing was then located with four very young chicks, which spent most of their time being brooded. This was then topped off by the group's second wagtail as a pair of pied wags dropped into the field, with a perching buzzard representing the trip's first bird of prey.

Buoyed by the wagtails, the group then headed off to the Peat Moor's Visitor Centre, for a refreshment stop, while enjoying a perched female kestrel on a telegraph pole. On the way. At the Visitor Centre itself, goldfinch and house sparrow were both seen, before a sparrowhawk flashed past overhead, making for the morning's third raptor. Moving down to the western entrance of Shapwick NNR, the group then proceeded to walk east along the central drain. Here chiffchaff and willow warbler once more competed for airspace, while a singing chaffinch was also picked up in a nearby willow. At least two blackcaps were also heard belting out their snappy, jazzy songs during the walk, with at least one male seen well as it alternated singing with feeding. Walking further east a couple of jays were a good spot, being a tricky bird to see on the Levels, shortly before the trip's first bittern started to boom from the reeds close by.

A single male gadwall then flew past, while calling, as everyone's first cuckoo of the season was heard further along the path. Following in the direction of the cuckoo's call, the first of three great white egrets were then observed as it flew past on slow, heavy wingbeats, quickly followed by the trip's first marsh harrier, as a tatty male was watched high above the reedbed. With the cuckoo's incessant call getting progressively louder it was eventually spotted by one of the guests in a distant tree, and with Mike putting it in the scope, all were able to enjoy distant, but wonderful views of this rapidly declining species. Walking slowly back towards the minibus, warblers could now be heard singing from everywhere, in addition to the odd burst from Cetti's



warbler, a reasonably obliging garden warbler also made a brief appearance. One of the guests also found a slow worm crossing the path here, enabling all to have a close-up view of this legless lizard. The last bird of note to be seen before arriving back at the car park was a female marsh harrier. Upon arrival back at Worth House, the group then met the final member who had been delayed due to traffic.

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

Wednesday 4 May 2022

With the weather set fair, Mike took the group off after breakfast to the very western edge of the Levels - where the River Parrett disgorges into the Severn Estuary - for an opportunity to see a variety of waders. While stopping at WWT Steart's car park to use the facilities, all were able to enjoy excellent views of a male sedge warbler singing vociferously from the fringing reeds. An unseen reed warbler was also singing close by, which allowed the group to hear the very different song structures of these two reedbed specialists.

Arriving at the Wall Common car park just after high tide meant that many of the birds would be concentrated closer to the shingle ridge, and as the group crossed the short section of salt marsh they were immediately surrounded by singing and displaying skylarks. Climbing the shingle ridge the group were quickly able to pick out a variety of waders at relatively close quarters, as a flock of dunlin in summer plumage were noted, which upon closer inspection revealed a couple of summer plumaged sanderling in their midsts, which had patently still not left for their high-arctic breeding grounds. Good numbers of ringed plover could be seen on the mud here too, along with the occasional oystercatcher. A whimbrel was then picked out by its distinctive ringing call as it flew past, and upon scanning the distant shoreline in the Direction of Hinkley Point it became obvious this scarce visitor far outnumbered curlew. A flock of six waders then flew past, with it instantly obvious that the larger two were curlew, while the other four, were the more diminutive whimbrel. Also on the mud away to the south was an unusual congregation of at least 15 little egret, as a great white egret then subsequently flew past, enabling the huge size difference between these two 'white herons' to be appreciated at first hand. Small groups of shelduck were also located as they fed out in the estuary, with a number additionally past.

Retracing their steps back across the salt marsh the group then drove back to sample the delights of WWT Steart Marshes. The best views are generally to be had looking over Otterhampton Marsh from the Quantocks Hide, and en route there the group were assailed by an incredibly loud Cetti's warbler from a nearby bramble patch, which steadfastly refused to reveal itself. By now the wind had begun to pick up and so the group took cover in the hide as they scanned the brackish scrape. It was obvious that many of the avocet broods had very recently hatched, as chicks could be seen everywhere! A number of avocet pairs even had four chicks present, leading to the conclusion that it must have been a very successful breeding season. Also present were at least three pairs of little ringed plover, with everyone eventually obtaining good views of this specialist summer visitor to scrapes and abandoned gravel pits.

A buzzard then flew over the scrape, leading to it being subsequently mobbed by at least 30 or 40 avocets, which were cleverly working cooperatively to defend their offspring. Also at the back of the marsh, a small flock of black-tailed godwits could be seen, with their cinnamon breeding plumage clearly discernible in the heat haze as the sun finally made its first appearance of the morning.

After a quick sprint back to the shingle ridge to find one of the guest's spectacles, Mike then took the group up to Swell Wood to enjoy a slightly later than arranged packed lunch from the comfort of the heronry hide. While watching the comings and goings of grey herons and egrets, the group were treated to a succession of tits coming down to bathe in the small pool in front of the hide. First, the coal tit came down, before great and blue were subsequently recorded, but the highlight proved to be male goldcrest, which delighted all by showing its fiery orange head crest as he came down to investigate a female close by. Wren, chaffinch and chiffchaff were also seen descending to bathe, while a stock dove was also heard, with a single mistle thrush



seen in the trees. A great spotted woodpecker also made a brief, but close appearance in front of the watching group, with all able to see the diagnostic patch of red on the bird's nape, revealing it to be male.

Walking down to the viewpoint, Mike was able to point out some ancient woodland plants along the way, in the form of sweet woodruff, yellow archangel and bluebell. Settling into scan from the viewpoint, two cranes were eventually spotted down on Aller Moor below in addition to a male marsh harrier seen quartering the reedbeds away in the distance. One of the guests then found a couple of marsh tits at close quarters, and after a while of searching all managed to see this unusual woodland bird with the pair re-found while searching for caterpillars in the hazel understory. Walking back to the car, with treecreepers and nuthatches surprisingly notable by their absence, the group then drove down to Langport for a quick refreshment stop, allowing them to pick up the urban trio of starling, house sparrow and collared dove in this small market town. Leaving Langport, the Bridge at Oath was on this occasion unable to reveal any more cranes, which was probably due to the disturbance caused by a farmer cutting hay out on Aller Moor, so the group travelled straight on to RSPB Greylake.

Taking to the reedbeds first, Cetti's and reed warblers were everywhere, as the group then heard another cuckoo calling from some distance. Swallows were moving through here and Mike was additionally able to spot three sand martins as they flew towards the scrape. Reed buntings were briefly seen around the circular reedbed walk as well. Arriving at the hide, the number of birds on the water was fairly sparse, but a couple of great white egrets flew past and breeding lapwing were both seen and heard as they displayed over the scrape. Here too, more breeding success could be seen as a pair of greylag geese were present with an impressive count of seven chicks. A moorhen was then spotted in amongst the fringing reed, while a little grebe in full breeding plumage delighted the group by constantly diving in front of the hide for food. Birds of prey were represented here by buzzards and marsh harriers. Finally walking back through the reeds, the season's first hairy dragonflies, as well as a few peacock butterflies also posed for the photographers in the group.

Due to the late time, Mike then drove the group back to the hotel via Walton Moor, in a vain attempt to listen for quail. But as none could be heard they headed back to Worth House for a quick break before a delightful dinner at the nearby Pheasant Inn.

Day 3: RSPB Ham Wall - VP1, Torr View Hide & VP 2. Westhay Moor NNR, Canada Farm, Honeygar Rd and North Chine Drove

Thursday 5 May 202

The group were delighted to be met with calm conditions as they reconvened at the minibus in preparation for a 5:30 start at one of the Levels' flagship reserves. Here the plan was to take the group for a walk along the main path at RSPB Ham Wall. Upon leaving the car park the guests were immediately surrounded by birdsong filling the air, as blackcap, garden warbler, willow warbler and chiffchaff all competed for airtime. Bitterns could also be heard as the group reached the main path. Having heard a variety of warblers the group then set about actually spotting them, with all delighting in particularly good views of a garden warbler, which was observed singing from high up in a hawthorn. Further along the path the group enjoyed their first good views of the whitethroat above a patch of brambles and following on with the warbler theme, reed warblers were both heard and seen as they held territories along a reedy fringe further along the same section of path.

With cuckoos starting to call, the shout of "bittern!" then went up from Mike as two flew straight over the path and above the group's heads, before then heading into the reeds to the south of the reserve. This represented the first ever sighting of this secret marsh dweller for many in the group, with many cock-a-hoop to have had such a close view. Reaching VP1, gadwall, mallard, tufted duck and pochard were all quickly spotted, in addition to the ubiquitous great white and little egrets, which have in recent years become an ever-present sight across the Avalon Marshes. Both whinnying little grebe and great crested grebe were also



spotted here, while above the reeds at least two marsh harriers were watched while hunting. Also at the back of the open water, a small flock of black-tailed godwits could be seen, which looked resplendent in their cinnamon breeding plumage, while a common sandpiper, several redshank and a number of lapwing bolstered the wader count.

Moving down to the Torr View Hide, a pair of shoveler were in the water to the west of the hide, alongside a variety of diving ducks. The male garganey, which had been showing intermittently for a few days could not be found, however. While looking out, Mike was able to point out to the guests, by way of recompense, both reed bunting and reed warbler and as everyone retraced their steps back to the main path a glossy ibis flew straight past the astonished group!

Mike then suggested that the group walk up to VP2 and they almost immediately found the male garganey on a small stretch of water just to the south of the path, with this representing the third new species for many of the guests in the space of an hour - with the others being glossy ibis and bittern. With little to add to the list from VP2, the group slowly returned back to VP1 and were lucky enough to spot a single ruff, which had possibly been missed during the first scan from here. A barn owl was then briefly seen hunting away to the north, which can be a difficult bird to catch up with on the Levels. By now it was 8:30 and as everyone was becoming increasingly hungry the group retraced their steps back to the car park before returning back for the Full Worth House breakfast treatment.

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 couple of hobbies were spotted high above the reserve. 'Dragonfly corner' was also hooching with damselflies, with hundreds of recently emerged variable and azure damselflies clearly viewable in the grass alongside the path. Larger dragonflies were also present and basking in the sunshine, having recently emerged, with hairy dragonfly (a Levels' speciality) and the year's first four-spotted chaser both seen in quick succession. A couple of large red damselflies were also spotted too.

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 - as the group took a very pleasant stroll around this scarce habitat. A couple of ravens were both seen and heard here before the group eventually headed back to the car park for a spot of lunch.

After everyone had taken their fill Mike drove the group round to the western end of Shapwick NNR, where a pleasant walk ensued through the alder wet woodland en route to Westhay Heath - a reserve managed by the Hawk and Owl Trust. This enabled the group to catch up with a few woodland species, such as great, blue, coal and long-tailed tit and excellent views of a male great spotted woodpecker were obtained on the reserve's feeder. Unfortunately, the southern marsh orchids were not quite out yet in their regular field, but Mike did manage to secure some information as to the precise location of a pair of breeding little owls, which obviously needed to be checked out!

Returning back to the car, the group then drove along to Honeygar Lane, just outside the village of Shapwick, before being thrilled to find a roosting little owl in a line of old, pollarded willows. Slowly driving back to the hotel via North Chine Drove after the most terrific day, Mike then stopped the car for a view of a fine male wheatear. Getting out for a better look, the group were able to count a further three wheatears in the same field, in addition to two song thrush, before a tired but happy group returned back to Worth House for their last dinner.

Day 4: Catcott SWT Complex, Huntspill River - Stockland Reach & Cheddar Reservoir

Friday 6 May 2022



After a leisurely breakfast, the group set off in mild, overcast conditions to where Huntstpill River enters the Severn Estuary. In order to boost the number of bird species seen during the trip, Mike suggested the group first drop into Catcott and this decision was instantly rewarded with a pair of summering teal alongside the more usual gadwall and mallard. Also present in front of the viewing platform were great white and little egrets.

With little time to waste as the tour had to finish by lunchtime the group then drove straight to the Huntspill River, and after a quick look over the bridge at Slow Way Lane moved onto the car park near the sluice. Here greenfinch could be heard singing from the extensive hawthorn scrub, before then being seen as a male revealed itself to the group. A distant red kite was an excellent find above the sluice here and lesser whitethroat sang from deep within the scrub, without revealing its location.

Walking up onto the sea wall, the group cast their eyes across Stockland Reach towards Steart and with the telescope, Mike was able to pick out at least 30 bar-tailed godwit on the far side. Passing whimbrel were also here along the exposed mud on the Huntspill side. Walking further north along the sea wall, a couple of great black-backed gulls were observed on Steart island, along with a high-tide roost of around 150 oystercatchers and a small number of shelduck. Along the salt marsh, a meadow pipit was also observed, before the group then dashed back to the minibus for one last stop before lunch at Worth House.

Cheddar Reservoir tends to be most productive in the winter when it plays host to a large gull roost, but a lack of gulls was more than made up by a splendid male red-crested pochard from just above the Axe Lane car park. The only other birds of note here were a few pairs of coots, great-crested grebes and a pied wagtail. Driving back to Worth House, the group had lunch and totted up their checklists - revealing a very impressive tally of over 100 species of bird - before saying their goodbyes after a superb and fun-filled trip.



Checklist



Scientific Day Day Day Day **Common Name** 2 3 1 4 Name AVES BIRDS Branta bernicla 1 Brent goose \checkmark \checkmark 2 Canada goose Branta canadensis ✓ \checkmark 3 Greylag goose Anser anser √ ✓ ✓ 4 Mute swan Cygnus olor √ ~ ⁄ ✓ 5 Shelduck Tadorna tadorna ~ ~ ✓ Spatula querquedula 6 Garganey ./ Spatula clypeata 7 Shoveler **√** Gadwall 8 Mareca strepera \checkmark \checkmark \checkmark Mallard 9 Anas platyrhynchos ✓ 1 \checkmark \checkmark 10 Teal Anas crecca \checkmark 11 **Red-crested pochard** Netta rufina \checkmark 12 Pochard Aythya ferina \checkmark 13 Tufted duck Aythya fuligula \checkmark 14 Pheasant Phasianus colchicus ✓ ✓ \checkmark ✓ 15 Little grebe Tachybaptus ruficollis ✓ \checkmark 16 Great crested grebe Podiceps cristatus \checkmark ✓ 17 Glossy ibis Plegadis falcinellus \checkmark 18 Bittern Botaurus stellaris ✓ ✓ ✓ 19 Cattle egret Bubulcus ibis \checkmark \checkmark 20 Grey heron Ardea cinerea ✓ ✓ \checkmark ✓ 21 Great white egret Ardea alba ✓ \checkmark \checkmark \checkmark 22 Little egret Egretta garzetta ✓ √ ✓ ✓ 23 Cormorant Phalacrocorax carbo √ ✓ ✓ \checkmark 24 Sparrowhawk Accipiter nisus \checkmark 25 Marsh harrier Circus aeruginosus ✓ ✓ 1



26	Red kite	Milvus milvus				✓
27	Buzzard	Buteo buteo	~	~	✓	✓
28	Water rail	Rallus aquaticus			Н	
29	Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus		~	✓	
30	Coot	Fulica atra	~		✓	✓
31	Crane	Grus grus		~		
32	Oystercatcher	Haematopus ostralegus		~		~
33	Avocet	Recurvirostra avosetta		~		
34	Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus	~	~	✓	~
35	Ringed plover	Charadrius hiaticula		~		
36	Little ringed plover	Charadrius dubius		~		
37	Whimbrel	Numenius phaeopus		~	✓	✓
38	Curlew	Numenius arquata		~		
39	Bar-tailed godwit	Limosa lapponica				✓
40	Black-tailed godwit	Limosa limosa		~	✓	
41	Ruff	Calidris pugnax			✓	
42	Sanderling	Calidris alba		~		
43	Dunlin	Calidris alpina		~		
44	Common sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucos			✓	
45	Redshank	Tringa totanus	~		✓	
46	Great black-backed gull	Larus marinus				✓
47	Herring gull	Larus argentatus	~	~	✓	✓
48	Lesser black-backed gull	Larus fuscus	~	~	✓	✓
49	Rock dove / feral pigeon	Columba livia				✓
50	Stock dove	Columba oenas		н	✓	
51	Woodpigeon	Columba palumbus	~	~	✓	✓
52	Collared dove	Streptopelia decaocto	~	~	✓	
53	Cuckoo	Cuculus canorus	~		Н	Н
54	Barn owl	Tyto alba			✓	
55	Little owl	Athene noctua			✓	
56	Kingfisher	Alcedo atthis			✓	

57	Great spotted woodpecker	Dendrocopos major	Н	✓	\checkmark	
58	Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus	\checkmark		✓	✓
59	Hobby	Falco subbuteo	✓	✓	✓	
60	Jay	Garrulus glandarius	✓			
61	Magpie	Pica pica	✓	✓	✓	✓
62	Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula	✓	✓	✓	✓
63	Rook	Corvus frugilegus		~	✓	
64	Carrion crow	Corvus corone	\checkmark	✓	✓	\checkmark
65	Raven	Corvus corax			\checkmark	
66	Coal tit	Periparus ater		✓	✓	
67	Marsh tit	Poecile palustris		~		
68	Blue tit	Cyanistes caeruleus	\checkmark	✓	✓	
69	Great tit	Parus major	\checkmark	~	\checkmark	
70	Skylark	Alauda arvensis	\checkmark	✓	✓	~
71	Sand martin	Riparia riparia		✓		
72	Swallow	Hirundo rustica	\checkmark	✓	\checkmark	\checkmark
73	House martin	Delichon urbicum		✓		
74	Cetti's warbler	Cettia cetti	Н	н	✓	
75	Long-tailed tit	Aegithalos caudatus	\checkmark		✓	
76	Willow warbler	Phylloscopus trochilus	\checkmark	✓	✓	~
77	Chiffchaff	Phylloscopus collybita	\checkmark	✓	✓	\checkmark
78	Sedge warbler	Acrocephalus schoenobaenus		~	~	~
79	Reed warbler	Acrocephalus scirpaceus	Н	н	✓	✓
80	Blackcap	Sylvia atricapilla	~	~	~	✓
81	Garden warbler	Sylvia borin	~		~	
82	Lesser whitethroat	Sylvia curruca				Н
83	Whitethroat	Sylvia communis	\checkmark	н	Н	✓
84	Goldcrest	Regulus regulus		✓		
85	Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes	\checkmark	✓	\checkmark	~
86	Starling	Sturnus vulgaris		~		✓
87	Blackbird	Turdus merula	\checkmark	~	✓	\checkmark



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88	Song thrush	Turdus philomelos		Н	\checkmark	Н
89	Mistle thrush	Turdus viscivorus	✓	~		
90	Robin	Erithacus rubecula	~	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark
91	Wheatear	Oenanthe oenanthe			✓	✓
92	House sparrow	Passer domesticus	✓	✓	✓	~
93	Dunnock	Prunella modularis	н	✓	✓	
94	Yellow wagtail	Motacilla flava	✓			
95	Pied wagtail	Motacilla alba	✓	✓	✓	~
96	Meadow pipit	Anthus pratensis				~
97	Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs	✓	✓	✓	~
98	Greenfinch	Chloris chloris				~
99	Linnet	Linaria cannabina		✓	✓	✓
100	Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis	✓	✓	✓	✓
101	Reed bunting	Emberiza schoeniclus		✓	✓	
	MAMMALS	MAMMILIA				
1	Rabbit	Oryctolagus cuniculus		✓	✓	~
2	Brown hare	Lepus europaeus		✓		
3	Grey squirrel	Sciurus carolinensis		✓		
4	Wood mouse	Apodemus sylvaticus		✓		
5	Roe deer	Capreolus capreolus	✓	✓	✓	
	REPTILES AND	REPTILIA AND				
	AMPHIBIANS	AMPHIBIA				
1	Slow worm	Anguis fragilis	✓			
	BUTTERFLIES	BUTTERFLIES				
1	Brimstone	Gonepteryx rhamni			~	
2	Large white	Pieris brassicae			✓	
3	Small white	Pieris rapae			~	
4	Orange-tip	Anthocaris cardamines	✓	✓	~	
5	Red admiral	Vanessa atalanta			\checkmark	
6	Peacock	Aglais io		✓	✓	
	Speckled wood	Pararge aegeria	+	i	i	



	DRAGONFLIES	DRAGONFLIES				
1	Large red damselfly	Pyrrhosoma nymphula			~	
2	Azure damselfly	Coenagrion puella	✓		~	
3	Variable damselfly	Coenagrion pulchellum			~	
4	Blue-tailed damselfly	Ischnura elegans			~	
5	Hairy dragonfly	Brachytron pratense		✓	~	
6	Four-spotted chaser	Libellula quadrimaculata			~	

