WILDLIFE WORLDWIDE
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Tour Report

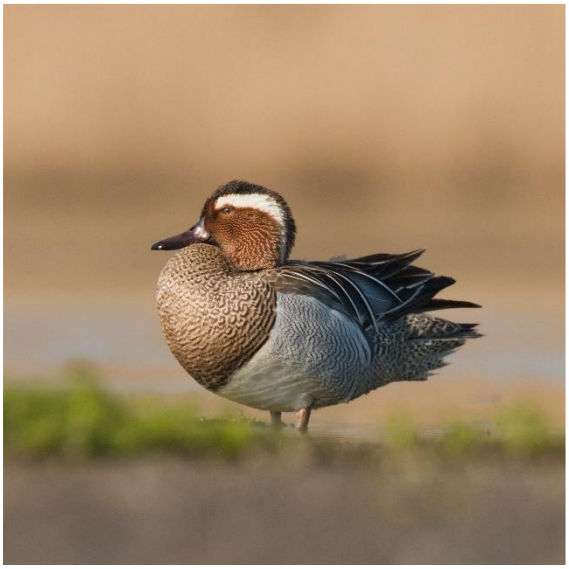
UK – Somerset Levels in Spring

30 April – 3 May 2022

Marsh harrier

Great white egret

Garganey



Snipe

Compiled by Stephen Moss

Day 1: Meet at Worth House Hotel; RSPB Ham Wall; Tealham Moor

Saturday 30 April 2022

We met just after lunch at the Worth House Hotel, where we were warmly welcomed by our host Sarah, and enjoyed seeing the local swallows and four buzzards soaring high overhead. We then set out to our first location – the RSPB reserve at Ham Wall – on a lovely sunny and warm spring afternoon. Ham Wall is rapidly becoming one of the very best places to watch birds, not just on the Somerset Levels, but in the whole of south-west England; and this time of year is the peak time for a range of resident species, newly arrived summer visitors, and passage migrants, stopping off to feed on their long journey from Africa to northern Europe. The warm weather had also encouraged several classic spring butterflies, including orange-tip, brimstone and a delicate holly blue, to emerge.

We had hardly left the car park when our ears were assailed by a cacophony of songs – from no fewer than seven different species of warbler. Chiffchaffs, which overwinter in Iberia and North Africa, calling out their name in that rather monotonous way, along with another early arrival, the blackcap – one of which showed himself well, while singing his delicate and tuneful song. A willow warbler – just arrived from South Africa – posed at the top of a tall tree, as did a common whitethroat (on a bramble bush), while several garden warblers and a reed warbler (both from West Africa) were rather less obliging, staying hidden from view. Not to be outdone by these newcomers, our only resident warbler here on the levels, Cetti's, sang its explosive song from deep inside the dense foliage. Seven warblers in the bag, and we had only walked about 50 metres!

We then set off east along the disused railway track, where we saw the first of several marsh harriers – a smart male – and had brief views of a flyover hobby hunting for insects in the bright blue sky above. At the first viewing platform we could see so many birds we hardly knew where to look: several stately and elegant great white egrets were fishing in the open water, along with a couple of smaller – but equally elegant – little egrets. An array of ducks included three pintails (including a very smart male), shoveler, gadwall, mallard, teal, a pair of wigeon (unusual as they have usually headed back north by now), tufted duck, pochard and best of all a pair of garganey – the male at first asleep, then preening and finally swimming, showing off his smart head plumage with that lovely white eyestripe. Other waterfowl included three Egyptian geese – a scarce but increasingly frequent bird here in Somerset – and a lone Canada goose.

Amongst all these wildfowl there were waders, too: a flock of five whimbrels, stopping off on their way north to Iceland, black-tailed godwits (heading the same way), a redshank, several lapwings, a common snipe, two splendid male ruffs (one with a black headdress, the other chestnut), and a local scarcity – a smart wood sandpiper, feeding to gain energy on its own long journey north to Scandinavia. We almost overlooked the rarest birds here: no fewer than seven glossy ibis, which were managing to hide in the newly-grown green reeds, only occasionally emerging or flying around. Meanwhile, a pair of marsh harriers saw off a buzzard that had foolishly ventured into their territory; while on cue a bittern flew right past us, giving excellent views of this elusive member of the heron family. As if to show that this place isn't just about birds, we could hear a loud and persistent Iberian water frog (on which the egrets and bitterns feed) calling behind us!

By then we were getting a little hot and tired in the warm sunshine, so we wandered down the shady path to the Tor View Hide where, as its name suggest, we had excellent views of Glastonbury Tor. Excellent views of birds, too: lots of gadwalls, a pair of coots with three young chicks, and a splendid pair of great crested grebes with three tiny youngsters riding on mum or dad's back! Other birds seen well here included yet another male marsh harrier, a little grebe in full breeding plumage, tufted ducks, pochards and a fine hobby; while we also heard, but did not manage to see, a cuckoo – against a backdrop chorus of reed warblers, proving equally hard to see.

On the way home, we diverted briefly to Tealham Moor, where one small flooded field has proved to be a magnet for waders and songbird migrants. Almost as soon as we got out of the vehicle we saw a splendid male wheatear, showing off his apricot breast, black bandit mask, pearl-grey back and white forehead: a real cracker! In the distance, we had scope views of his scarcer cousin the whinchat (both male and female

perched on an electric fence), as well as a breeding plumage golden plover. As we returned to the minibus we noticed two cattle egrets – both in full breeding plumage with orange wash on the head and upperparts – accompanying a herd of cattle! We then headed back to the hotel for a wash-and-brush-up, tasty dinner and drinks.

Day 2: Wall Common; WWT Steart; RSPB Swell Wood; RSPB Greylake; Catcott Lows

Sunday 1 May 2022

Our second day dawned – as the weather forecast had predicted – cloudy, cool and damp, with rain falling on-and-off (mostly on) for the whole day. Fortunately, we had rejigged the itinerary to ensure that the locations we visited had hides where we could shelter while watching the birds.

We headed west to the Steart Peninsula, specifically to Wall Common, where as soon as we got out of the minibus we had good views of the first of many smart male reed buntings, this one posed next to an equally smart cock linnet. We then walked the short distance to the sea, where with perfect timing the tide had just begun to fall, revealing fertile mud where waders can feed. Immediately a whimbrel flew off, and over the next few minutes at least 25 more headed westwards along the tideline towards Hinkley Point nuclear power station just along the coast. There were also plenty of little egrets, oystercatchers and shelducks; while to our right a flock of about 30 dunlins and 20 ringed plovers were feeding – the dunlins in their very smart breeding plumage, showing of their black bellies. This made it easy to pick out a lone sanderling – in its frosty non-breeding garb – feeding alongside them. As the rain was getting a little heavier, we then took the short drive back along the road to the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust reserve at Steart, where even before we left the car park we enjoyed watching a sedge warbler launching itself into song-flight, and then perching fairly obligingly on top of the reeds as it continued to defend its territory and serenade its unseen mate.

As we approached the Quantock Hide three avocets took to the air; from the hide itself we saw at least 30 more, along with their impossibly cute and tiny young, which were able to feed themselves despite their tender age. There were also the usual oystercatchers, together with 12 ringed plovers, 30 dunlins and a flock of a dozen or so black-tailed godwits (just one in breeding plumage), but the star wader was without doubt the little ringed plovers, a pair of which were nesting on the shingle island just in front of the hide – they did a changeover for us, and then chased away an intruding, possibly unmated bird. Meanwhile the avocets were noisily fending off predatory black-headed gulls, threatening the chicks. We also saw a distant male wheatear and heard a cuckoo calling to the south. As we left the hide the rain had eased off a little, and on the way back we saw a stock dove, heard many reed warblers and the odd sedge and Cetti's, and a close view of another reed bunting and a singing dunnock. We also started to see increasing numbers of swallows, a few house martins and a single sparrowhawk carrying prey in its talons.

We then drove south along the M5 to the southern half of the Somerset Levels, to the RSPB reserve at Swell Wood. Rain wasn't stopping the birdsong, and as we walked down to the viewpoint overlooking RSPB vast West Sedgemoor we could hear a varied chorus of blackbird, blackcap, chiffchaff, coal tit and the very high-pitched and rhythmic song of our smallest bird, the goldcrest. From the viewpoint itself we could see two adult common cranes fairly close to us, giving excellent views through the telescope. Well satisfied, we then headed back to the 'inside-out hide' to have our packed lunch, while watching the comings and goings of grey herons (with well-grown chicks) in their nests above our heads, together with a procession of smaller birds coming to feed, drink and bathe right in front of the hide: including great spotted woodpecker, a jackdaw carrying nest material, a blue tit with a caterpillar, chaffinch, robin, wren and, best of all, a very smart nuthatch.

After a short drive via Burrow Mump (and a quick comfort stop at the King Alfred Inn), we reached the RSPB reserve at Greylake, by which time the rain had finally more or less stopped. The walk to the hide yielded a male pheasant, and a continual chorus of reed warblers (one of which we managed to glimpse briefly), a couple of more excitable sedge warblers, and a very loud – but unseen – water rail. From the hide we started to see dozens of swallows plus a few sand martins, all feeding very low over the water; plus a number of

waterbirds including a very obliging great white egret, lapwing, greylag geese (with seven goslings), two cranes, a marsh harrier, a buzzard on the fence, and a very close little grebe which showed off its rather lovely breeding plumage right in front of us, and even caught (and eventually ate) a small fish. By now the swallow numbers were really building up, all feeding now that the rain had at last eased off.

Our final stop today was Catcott Lows (a Somerset Wildlife Trust reserve). From the hide we enjoyed a varied array of ducks, each showing off their unique feeding style. They included mallard, shoveler, gadwall, teal and a splendid drake garganey which, after feeding, then bathed and preened its pristine feathers. There were also nesting greylag and Canada geese, and mute swans, mostly concealed in the vegetation on the small islands. A great white egret flew in to feed, a male marsh harrier flew past, and a cuckoo called; while an elusive garden warbler sang its soft warbling song from the bush right in front of the hide, but only showed itself briefly when flying away. On the way home, we stopped briefly between Burtle and Westhay to watch 20 cattle egrets in a field – but no cattle!

Day 3: RSPB Ham Wall; Hodder's Combe (Quantocks); Shapwick and Meare Heaths

Monday 2 May 2022

We made an early start from the hotel and headed back to RSPB Ham Wall. The weather was cloudy and cool but, thankfully, no rain. At the reserve we were greeted by an even louder chorus of songbirds – mostly newly returned warblers – than the other day, with chiffchaff, blackcap, reed, willow and garden warblers all singing in or near the car park. As we walked along the old railway line we saw our first long-tailed tits of the trip, and heard a calling cuckoo and booming bittern – both birds we hoped to catch sight of later. Despite the early hour, there were about 200 swallows and a few sand martins low over the reedbeds, hawking for insects after yesterday's rain. We stood and waited for a singing Cetti's warbler to appear, and although it did not, we did see a garden warbler carrying nesting material – there were several garden and willow warblers singing along here.

At the first viewing platform we saw a lovely roe deer – a buck with a splendid set of antlers – watching us from just across the watery drain. The 'scrape' was once again packed with birds: this time we enjoyed good views of no fewer than four ruffs – three splendid and variably coloured males and a single female, known as a 'reeve' – plus several noisy redshanks which sparred with the resident lapwings, a breeding-plumage dunlin and a pair of ringed plovers. The usual ducks were present, plus a single drake garganey, two glossy ibis, a pair of little grebes which flew in, a flock of sand martins, marsh harrier male (perched and in flight), a bittern and finally a cuckoo, which flew across and landed in the bare tree at the back of the scrape, giving good scope views.

We returned to the hotel for a lake breakfast, after which we drove over the levels to West Somerset, to Hodder's Combe in the Quantock Hills. This is one of the most beautiful birding locations in the county: and as we left the car park we were greeted by a chorus of woodland birds, their songs augmented by the acoustics provided by the valley sides: these included blackbird, song thrush, chiffchaff, blackcap, dunnock, wren, robin, blue and great tits and a single willow warbler. As we entered the combe itself, we heard both great spotted and green woodpeckers, and watched several goldcrests flitting about in the canopy, 'hover-gleaning' for tiny insects. This was soon followed by the first of our target birds: a pair of wood warblers, the female calling just above our heads, while the male sang a few metres away. These stunning little woodland sprites have just arrived from their winter-quarters in West Africa, and fill the spring air with their striking songs. The stream that runs through the valley is home to at least four pairs of grey wagtails, and we soon found these elegant birds; to our delight, these were newly-fledged youngsters, being fed by their parents. Grey wagtails have very brief incubation and fledging periods; even so, we were surprised to see the chicks out of the nest so early in the spring. As we walked on, we came across coal and long-tailed tits, more wood warblers (we estimated there were at least three pairs here), and finally, just after the sun briefly emerged, a splendid male pied flycatcher.

After a picnic lunch on the village green, we headed back across the Polden Hills to the Natural England reserve at Shapwick and Meare Heaths – the far end of the railway path from Ham Wall. This is a rather wilder and less manicured reserve, and as we walked along the path we noticed a bashful cattle egret hiding in the long vegetation by a fearsome Jersey Red bull, a male kestrel hunting and perched in a tree, and further along the path several hobbies hawking for and catching insects above the reedbed, and one bird perched. Over the distant Noah's Lake, the swifts were finally back – showing, as Ted Hughes so brilliantly put it, that "the globe's still working". On our return walk we caught sight of a single jay – not a common bird here on the levels – and then enjoyed a refreshing cuppa and (for some of us) homemade cake at Sally's café, by the Avalon Marshes Centre.

On return to Worth House we discovered that our day total was a very respectable 77 species, and our trip list had reached 97 (including birds we had only heard). On to our last day, when we hoped to reach 100 species for the whole trip!

Day 4: Rivers Huntspill, Parrett, and Brue; West Huntpill churchyard and rectory; Cheddar Reservoir

Tuesday 3 May 2022

After our final excellent breakfast, we said our goodbyes to our wonderful hosts Sarah and Nick and headed west, through Wedmore and Mark villages to Stephen's coastal 'three rivers' patch of the Huntspill, Parrett and Brue, just after high tide. We paused inland, at a bridge over the River Huntspill, where we heard lesser whitethroat, sedge, reed and Cetti's warblers and blackcap, and saw one or two swallows; then to our delight the local resident kingfisher whizzed right under the bridge and headed downstream, showing off its dazzling plumage. That was our 99th species of the trip, and was swiftly followed by the 100th: a greenfinch!

We then drove the short distance down to Huntspill Sluice, where we were greeted by a chiffchaff singing – this, and a second bird, gave excellent scope views as they performed in full view. After a second, very brief, view of the kingfisher, good views of cock linnets showing off their rosy-pink breeding plumage, and a distant avocet from the sluice itself, we headed along the edge of the copse. Here we heard singing chaffinch, greenfinch, blackcap, dunnock and whitethroat, and had a raven pass briefly overhead accompanied by a chorus of skylarks. Along the sea wall, next to the River Parrett, we saw and heard several passing whimbrels, and came across no fewer than four wheatears along the rocks, which showed their distinctive white rumps as they flew off. As the tide began to fall, we saw more waders on the far side of the Parrett – about 15 each of ringed plovers and dunlins. Two little egrets flew across, as a small flock of starlings and the odd pied wagtail fed on the grassy area with the sheep. Stert Island held a flock of about 200 oystercatchers and no fewer than 105 bar-tailed godwits (many in breeding plumage); the godwits resting before heading north to breed in the High Arctic. Then, to Stephen's amazement, he caught sight of a flock of 25 Arctic terns flying through the gap between the island and Stert Point – only the second time he has seen this species here. On the way back we saw more whimbrels, a couple of curlews and a meadow pipit.

We then dropped in to a heronry where we enjoyed fabulous views of all three of the breeding herons here: grey heron, little egret and a newcomer, cattle egret – squabbling amongst themselves as they nested cheek-by-jowl with one another – two cattle egrets even seemed to be taking over a rook's nest, next to the slightly astonished rook! For our final brief stop we visited the Axbridge end of Cheddar reservoir; although there were comparatively few birds here compared to the winter, we did see great crested grebes and a splendid male red-crested pochard, bringing our number of species for the trip to 106, a remarkably high total. These included some 10 different warbler species, 16 waders, 8 'long-legged waterbirds' (herons/egrets/spoonbill/crane), and 15 ducks, geese and swans.

We then headed back to Worth House Hotel where we said our goodbyes, greeted Mike Dilger and his guests who were starting the next tour, and headed home.

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Checklist

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

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28	Buzzard	*Buteo buteo*	✓	✓	✓	✓
29	Water rail	*Rallus aquaticus*		✓		
30	Moorhen	*Gallinula chloropus*	✓	✓	✓	✓
31	Coot	*Fulica atra*	✓	✓	✓	✓
32	Crane	*Grus grus*		✓		
33	Oystercatcher	*Haematopus ostralegus*		✓		✓
34	Avocet	*Recurvirostra avosetta*		✓		
35	Lapwing	*Vanellus vanellus*	✓	✓	✓	
36	Golden plover	*Pluvialis apricaria*	✓			
37	Ringed plover	*Charadrius hiaticula*		✓	✓	✓
38	Little ringed plover	*Charadrius dubius*		✓		
39	Whimbrel	*Numenius phaeopus*	✓	✓		✓
40	Curlew	*Numenius arquata*				✓
41	Bar-tailed godwit	*Limosa lapponica*				✓
42	Black-tailed godwit	*Limosa limosa*	✓	✓		
43	Ruff	*Calidris pugnax*	✓		✓	
44	Sanderling	*Calidris alba*		✓		
45	Dunlin	*Calidris alpina*		✓	✓	✓
46	Snipe	*Gallinago gallinago*	✓		✓	
47	Redshank	*Tringa totanus*	✓		✓	
48	Wood sandpiper	*Tringa glareola*	✓			
49	Black-headed gull	*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*	✓	✓	✓	✓
50	Great black-backed gull	*Larus marinus*		✓		
51	Herring gull	*Larus argentatus*	✓	✓	✓	✓
52	Lesser black-backed gull	*Larus fuscus*	✓	✓	✓	✓
53	Arctic tern	*Sterna paradisaea*				✓
54	Stock dove	*Columba oenas*	✓	✓	✓	✓
55	Woodpigeon	*Columba palumbus*	✓	✓	✓	✓
56	Collared dove	*Streptopelia decaocto*		✓	✓	
57	Cuckoo	*Cuculus canorus*	✓	✓	✓	
58	Swift	*Apus apus*			✓	
59	Great spotted woodpecker	*Dendrocopos major*		✓	✓	

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

92	Song thrush	*Turdus philomelos*			✓	✓
93	Robin	*Erithacus rubecula*	✓	✓	✓	
94	Pied flycatcher	*Ficedula hypoleuca*			✓	
95	Whinchat	*Saxicola rubetra*	✓			
96	Wheatear	*Oenanthe oenanthe*	✓	✓		✓
97	House sparrow	*Passer domesticus*	✓	✓	✓	✓
98	Dunnock	*Prunella modularis*	✓	✓	✓	✓
99	Grey wagtail	*Motacilla cinerea*			✓	
100	Pied wagtail	*Motacilla alba*	✓	✓	✓	✓
101	Meadow pipit	*Anthus pratensis*				✓
102	Chaffinch	*Fringilla coelebs*	✓	✓	✓	✓
103	Greenfinch	*Chloris chloris*				✓
104	Linnet	*Linaria cannabina*	✓	✓		✓
105	Goldfinch	*Carduelis carduelis*		✓	✓	✓
106	Reed bunting	*Emberiza schoeniclus*	✓	✓	✓	
	MAMMALS	***MAMMILIA***				
1	Rabbit	*Oryctolagus cuniculus*	✓		✓	
2	Roe deer	*Capreolus capreolus*		✓	✓	
	REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS	***REPTILIA AND AMPHIBIA***				
1	Marsh frog	*Rana ridibunda*	✓			
	BUTTERFLIES	***BUTTERFLIES***				
1	Brimstone	*Gonepteryx rhamni*	✓			
2	Small white	*Pieris rapae*	✓			
3	Green-veined white	*Pieris napi*	✓			
4	Orange-tip	*Anthocaris cardamines*	✓			
5	Holly blue	*Celastrina argiolus*	✓			
6	Small tortoiseshell	*Aglais urticae*	✓			
7	Peacock	*Aglais io*	✓			
	DRAGONFLIES	***DRAGONFLIES***				
1	Hairy dragonfly	*Brachytron pratense*	✓			