

Tour Report

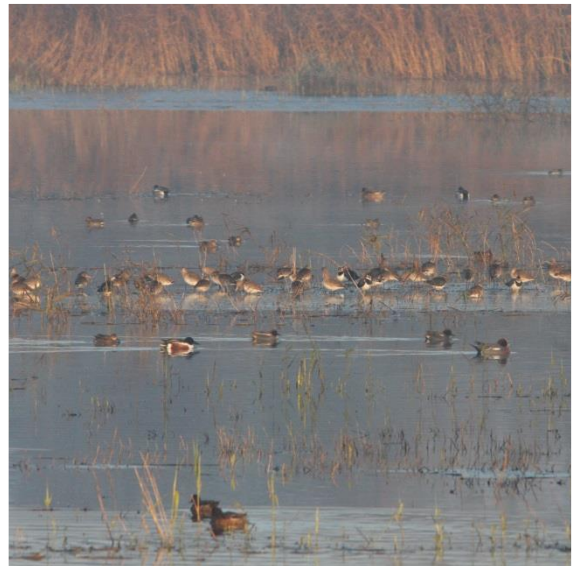
UK – Somerset Levels in Winter

12-15 January 2020

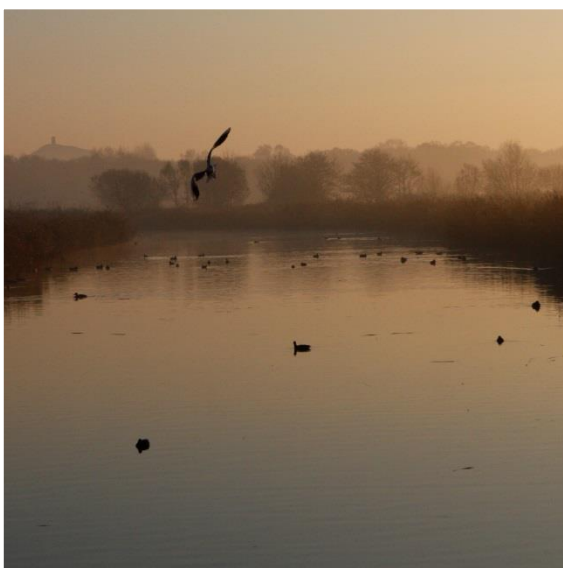
Starling murmuration



Shapwick Heath



Marsh harrier



Shoveler



Tour Leader: Mike Dilger with seven participants

Day 1: Meet-up at the hotel & visit to Shapwick Heath NNR

Sunday 12 January 2020

The group convened at 2pm in the Swan Hotel's front reception area in the centre of Wells so that tour leader Mike Dilger (MD) could formally welcome everyone. After introducing himself, MD then gave a brief outline as to the locations the group would visit and the key species he hoped the group would encounter during the course of their stay. With a very mixed weather picture looking increasingly likely, MD also made it clear that the itinerary would have to be fairly flexible to mitigate for the impending arrival of Storm Brendan! Each group member then introduced themselves, highlighting both their level of birding experience and which species they most hoped to catch up with during their stay on the Levels.

With the weather calm (possibly before the storm), MD suggested they seize the initiative and head straight out to catch up with the famous starling murmuration, a wildlife spectacle for which the Somerset Levels in winter have become justifiably famous. Assembling at the minibus the group then travelled across to the western end of Shapwick NNR to get in position for the evening's entertainment. MD had caught up with the spectacle the previous evening, as the roost location can be quite mobile, so up-to-date information on where the starlings 'are currently going down' is vital to avoid any disappointment. Parking up, it once again became apparent that the murmuration over the last few years has become a major tourist attraction, as we joined the throngs of other folk trudging east along the main footpath to the best viewpoint.

Passing initially woodland and scrub habitat, the group were soon free to start compiling their trip list, with blue tit, great tit and robin, perhaps unsurprisingly, the first birds recorded. Shapwick Heath is of course dominated by huge swathes of habitat comprising Phragmites reed and open water, which was initially created as a result of peat extraction. And so as we proceeded further west, the group became transported into a watery world, with wetland habitat stretching for (almost) as far as the eye could see. Taking up position to the north of where MD suspected the murmuration would take place, waters rails and Cetti's warblers instantly made their presence felt from somewhere close by in the reeds. The former sounds like a pig squealing, while the latter's song is reminiscent of someone dropping a saxophone in the reedbed, and MD explained that despite such distinctive calls, both species would be notoriously difficult to spot.

As the light steadily began to drop, the first starlings began to appear and seemingly proved the cue for three species of raptor to arrive in quick succession. Marsh harriers are abundant across the Levels, and as two drifted into view, this gave MD the opportunity to talk about the sexual dimorphism of this specialised and much sought-after bird of prey. A large female sparrowhawk then treated us to a fly-by, doubtless hoping for a starling-sized meal later on, immediately followed by a buzzard at a distinctly loftier altitude than the harriers quartering the reeds.

By now, starlings were arriving from all points of the compass as small flocks headed to join the 'mother ship' some 800m to the south of our position. The wind and occasional flurry of rain were not helping, but despite this, and with dusk rapidly approaching, up to a million swirling and whirling starlings could soon be seen on the horizon, marvelling everyone with the flocks' constantly morphing shape. With a flick suddenly apparently switched, the lower layers of the murmuration began peeling off as the first starlings streamed down into the reedbed, almost like iron filings to a magnet. This carried on for around five minutes, until the entire flock had disappeared from view for the night, leaving a totally starling-less sky.

Returning to the Swan, MD quickly conducted the checklist before dinner and drinks. As we had planned to see the starlings leave at dawn, everyone then retired for an early night.

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Day 2: The West of Shapwick NNR, RSPB Greylake, the bridge at Oath, RSPB Swell Wood & Catcott Complex Somerset WT Reserve

Monday 13 January 2020

All seven members of the group reconvened in the pre-dawn darkness at 6.30am to travel over to Shapwick for the starling departure! With the weather overcast and forecast to become steadily windier and wetter as the day proceeded we were keen to hit the ground running. Parking at the west end, MD took the group along the ancient Neolithic Sweet Track to get the group as close as possible to where the starlings had spent the night. With a full moon, torches were barely needed to guide the way and the group were able to clearly hear the deafening chattering of starlings waking up while approaching the reedbed. As dawn arrived, the noise became ramped up even more as parties of starlings flew close above the reed tops, with the sound reminiscent of an approaching train whenever they changed direction. With the airborne flock steadily increasing in size, the rest of the flock then suddenly lifted off to give us the most astonishing view as close to a million starlings filled the sky. With mouths wide open at this spectacle, it was surprising that no one took a direct hit from the monstrous flock above our heads! Walking back out, MD then picked up a marsh harrier quartering over the reedbed where the starlings had spent the night, followed quickly by another five ... presumably on the look-out for an easy meal of any starling casualties that hadn't made it through the night?! Returning to the Swan for a well-earned breakfast, the general consensus was that the sound had in many ways been the most memorable component of the morning's avian encounter.

After a full Somerset cooked breakfast the group then drove down to the southern part of the Levels – south of the Polden Hills – where first stop was RSPB Greylake. The water level has recently dropped here, which meant that the footpaths were just about navigable with Wellington boots. Taking the Easy Access Trail, the group went straight to the hide and upon opening the hatches were confronted with the most astonishing numbers of wildfowl at very close quarters. Wigeon and teal were by far the most numerous ducks on view, with a generous smattering of shoveler and gadwall – all looking resplendent in their breeding plumage, having recently completed their moults. A few drake and duck pintail were also picked up in amongst the throng, which pleased many, with a small posse of snipe very close by proving even more thrilling for the photographers in the group. Little grebes were also picked up together with a few little egret and the occasional grey heron, with the 'great whites' as yet proving a touch more elusive. MD was able to teach the group the different wildfowl calls, with wigeon, teal and gadwall soon learnt by all. Marsh harriers and the occasional grey heron frequently caused dreads as the entire flock took to the air before then deciding it had been a false alarm and settling down. Leaving the hide, the call of 'golden plover!' went up, as a large flock of several hundred flew straight over our head, accompanied by a similar number of lapwing, enabling the group to clearly see the two species' differing 'jizz' in the air. Back in the carpark, the group then had a lovely view a female kestrel sitting on a telegraph post, before reminding us why this bird is also called 'windhover' while searching for its lunch. Finally, before jumping in the minibus, the feeders at the reserve entrance then revealed a single female reed bunting in amongst the house sparrows, as it darted out of the shrubbery for food.

Heading off to RSPB Swell Wood, a number of the group had stated they were desperate to catch up with cranes, and once again the viewpoint from the railway bridge at Oath didn't disappoint, as MD scanned north-east across to Aller Moor to pick up at least 26 cranes, feeding away in the fields. The group were thrilled as each took it in turn to admire this marvellous Somerset speciality with MD's telescope. Suddenly two of the cranes took off, giving us an opportunity to see this amazing bird in flight. Resembling a 'plank crossed with a pool cue', we followed them until they disappeared out of view, doubtless moving off to feeding grounds further east.

Reaching Swell Wood RSPB Reserve, the plan had been to enjoy lunch while watching the comings and goings from the feeders, with marsh tits usually the star attraction, but frustratingly the feeders had not been filled, so the group took their lunch down to the heron hide. Duly satiated, MD then took the group into the woods, along the 'square route'. With the woods both windy and quiet, small woodland passerines were proving thin on the ground, so the group enjoyed fungi-spotting as puffballs and King Alfred cakes

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were pointed out amongst many more. Reaching the viewpoint, the group were then able to enjoy majestic view across the moor, with the first very distant great white egret of the trip spotted. MD explained that the clients could have their money back if that was the best view they were to get of this sought-after species – a bold, but fairly safe bet with Ham wall on the itinerary at some point! Leaving the viewpoint, an overwintering chiffchaff was virtually the only bird seen well, until three-quarters of the way round, when we finally hit a large mixed flock. Hardly knowing where to look, blue tits, great tits, coal tits, goldcrests and one obliging tree creeper all revealed themselves in rapid fashion, together with a flock of goldfinch in a tall oak tree. Upon arriving back in the carpark feeling distinctly happier, we also then discovered the feeders had in the meantime been re-filled, so we delayed our departure to allow time for the message to get through to the birds as well. And sure enough after a 15-minute wait, we had wonderful views of at least two marsh tits, coming to help themselves to the free hand-outs. Nuthatch was also enticed in, making another welcome addition to the trip list.

Due to the weather looking increasingly inclement, MD then suggested the group head back north and to Catcott, which offered sanctuary in the form of a comfortable hide close to the carpark. With the wind rattling the hide, we gazed out on a wide range of wildfowl keeping their heads both down and into the wind, while adding feral Canada and greylag geese to the trip list. With the weather if anything worsening, and given the early start to the day, the group wound their way back to Wells, with a speculative and fruitless hunt for cattle egrets along North Chine Drove en route, before heading in for the warm and dry sanctuary offered by the hotel.

Day 3: WWT Steart Marshes, Ham Wall RSPB Reserve, Shapwick NNR & Catcott Lows SWT reserve

Tuesday 14 January 2020

After a somewhat later start than the previous morning, and another substantial breakfast, we departed Wells to head off into the strong westerly winds to try our luck at WWT Steart Marshes. At the very western end of the Levels, this new and exciting reserve is located where the River Parrett meets Severn Estuary, and with a spring tide that morning MD was keen to see what the high tide roost was like. Heading first to the Mendip Hide, which overlooks saltmarsh creek, the group encountered huge flocks of lapwing and golden plover overhead with the latter calling. Settling into the hide, the tide was somewhat lower than had been hoped for, but the group were still able to pick out large numbers of shelduck sifting the mud for *Hydrobia* snails. A few distant redshank were also picked up on the mud, whilst their incredibly distinctive calls echoed around the marsh.

Moving across to the freshwater/brackish part of the reserve, we then retired to the Quantock Hide, where we were able to pick out common gulls, ironically uncommon in this part of the world, from in amongst the herring, lesser black backed and black-headed gulls. With all the birds suddenly flushed, MD was able to get most of the group onto a peregrine falcon flashing across the site as it headed north-west towards the coast. With rain adding to the incessant wind, we decided to head back to the minibuses, hoping that conditions further inland might be a touch more reasonable. Not before stopping for a toilet break in the carpark, however, with MD able to get the whole group onto a couple of meadow pipits perched along the fence line, in addition to a large flock of goldfinch working the feeders.

Heading east, the group drove straight to RSPB Ham Wall, surely the crown in the jewel of the Somerset Levels. Normally an incredibly well visited reserve, we arrived to a completely empty carpark, hardly a surprise given the weather, but nevertheless a first for MD seeing the site totally deserted! Walking east from Ashcott Corner, there was very little on show in the wood and scrub, but as soon as we hit reedbed proper, just north of Tor View Hide, the deeper water suddenly revealed abundant numbers of both tufted duck and pochard, both renowned for their diving abilities; in amongst them could be spotted large rafts of sheltering gadwall and a couple of greater crested grebe still in winter plumage. Scurrying towards the Avalon Hide, MD spotted two great white egrets taking refuge out of the wind, in the reeds, and upon closer inspection, a grey heron and at least three little egret were huddled together as well. This allowed a great opportunity to compare and contrast their size and MD to keep both his promise and his money!

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Lunch was taken at the Avalon Hide, with the wind rattling the entire structure, and the highlight of our break out of the wind was the discovery of a wing of a teal, alongside some of its feathers – patently a victim of the local Ham Wall peregrine! With the wind still very strong and the rain beating down, the group then beat a hasty retreat back to the carpark, after little more than a cursory glance for the overwintering yellow-browed warbler. Obviously, the bird had more sense than to stick its head above the parapet given the awful weather. Taking stock, MD decided the wet wood and scrub surrounding both Ham Wall's carpark and Shapwick's eastern carpark might be a good place to look for the overwintering firecrest, as their sheltered nature offered some respite from the relentless wind. A couple of goldcrests were picked up alongside a single chiffchaff at Shapwick before we crossed the road to try our luck on the Ham Wall side. This area instantly felt more interesting as coal tits and goldcrests were picked up amongst the tits and finches. Lifting her binoculars, one of the clients said 'What's this?', to which MD's response was 'FIRECREST!' Posing for at least ten seconds, everyone in the group managed a great view of this tiny but charismatic bird. It was MD's first firecrest for over a decade and represented glorious vindication for all the group's sterling efforts in simply awful conditions. Retuning to the minibus, we then celebrated our cracking find with a packet of biscuits from MD's rucksack ... we know how to party!

With dusk approaching we thought we'd push our luck to find the hen harrier reported to be roosting at Catcott, but after a fruitless search we cut our losses and returned to the Swan Hotel. After warming showers, the group were then entertained with a talk by MD about his recent filming trip to the Philippines with BBC World News, before another delicious dinner preceded drinks in the 'Gin Bar'.

Day 4: Westhay Moor NNR, via Westhay Moor Drove, Jack's Drove & Cheddar Reservoir

Wednesday 15 January 2020

The final morning was to prove the calm after the storm, and depleted by two clients who were admittedly tired after battling the previous day's wind, the rest of the group headed out to track down cattle egrets, which had so far evaded the group. Heading to Westhay Moor NNR, MD took the group along Westhay Moor Drove and immediately spotted a group of three cattle egrets in the company of three little egrets, much to everyone's relief. Virtually the only place in Britain to see this species which has recently colonised the Levels, it was great to see them out in the fields, and on this occasion well away from cattle. Buoyed by this success, MD took the group to the reserve proper and with the sun shining for the first time all trip took the group for a stroll around the last remnant of raised mire left in the county. With the wind gone and the sun out, a couple of ravens made their first appearance of the trip and were accompanied by a couple of mewling buzzards, doubtless putting down the first markers for the oncoming breeding season. Otherwise the reserve was quiet for birds, with ducks and grebes aplenty on the various meres, the highlight was a family party of 12 long-tailed tits crossing in front of the group as we returned to the minibus.

Heading west, MD then spotted a flock of fieldfare crossing the road before taking the group out along Jack's Drove, where the group were instantly rewarded with a very obliging pair of stonechat, which sat perfectly for the snappers in the bus, in addition to a few passing skylark and meadow pipits. With very little time left before the merry group disbanded, MD took them for a quick scan across Cheddar Reservoir. Frequently the location for a host of rare winter visitor over the years, on this occasion we had to settle for a raft of pochard and tufted ducks, with an occasional great crested grebe thrown in for good measure.

Returning to the hotel to compile our final checklist, the general consensus was that given the very trying weather conditions, we had had an excellent flavour of what the Levels in winter can offer, with a grand total of 73 bird species recorded. Additionally, the trip will stand out for the memorable clients, who both gelled beautifully as a group and frequently laughed in the face of very challenging meteorological conditions!

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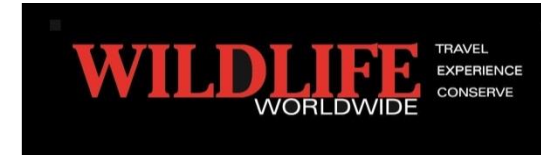
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Checklist



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4
	BIRDS	Aves				
1	Canada goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>		✓	✓	
2	Greylag goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓	✓	✓
3	Mute swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		✓	✓	
5	Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		✓	✓	
6	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>		✓	✓	✓
8	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>		✓		
10	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		✓	✓	✓
11	Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>			✓	✓
12	Tufted duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>			✓	✓
13	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
14	Little grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		✓	✓	
15	Great crested grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>			✓	✓

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16	Cattle egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>				✓
17	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
18	Great white egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		✓	✓	✓
19	Little egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
20	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
21	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	✓			
22	Marsh harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
23	Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓	
24	Water rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
25	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓		✓	✓
26	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
27	Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>		✓		✓
28	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓	✓	✓
29	Golden plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		✓	✓	
30	Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		✓	✓	
31	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			✓	
32	Black-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
33	Common gull	<i>Larus canus</i>			✓	
34	Herring gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
35	Lesser black-backed gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			✓	✓

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36	Rock dove/feral pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓			✓
37	Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
38	Collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	
39	Great spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			✓	✓
40	Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓	✓	
41	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			✓	
42	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
43	Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
44	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
45	Carrion crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
46	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>				✓
47	Coal tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>		✓	✓	
48	Marsh tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>		✓		
49	Blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
50	Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
51	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>			✓	✓
52	Cetti's warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
53	Long-tailed tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓		✓	✓
54	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓	✓	
55	Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>			✓	

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56	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		✓	✓	✓
57	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓		✓
58	Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		✓		
59	Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>		✓		
60	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
61	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>				✓
62	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>				✓
63	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>			✓	
64	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
65	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>				✓
66	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓
67	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>			✓	✓
68	Pied wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓		✓
69	Meadow pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>			✓	✓
70	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓
71	Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>			✓	
72	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓
73	Reed bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>			✓	✓
	MAMMALS	MAMMILIA				
1	Grey squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>		✓	✓	

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2	Roe deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>			✓	
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