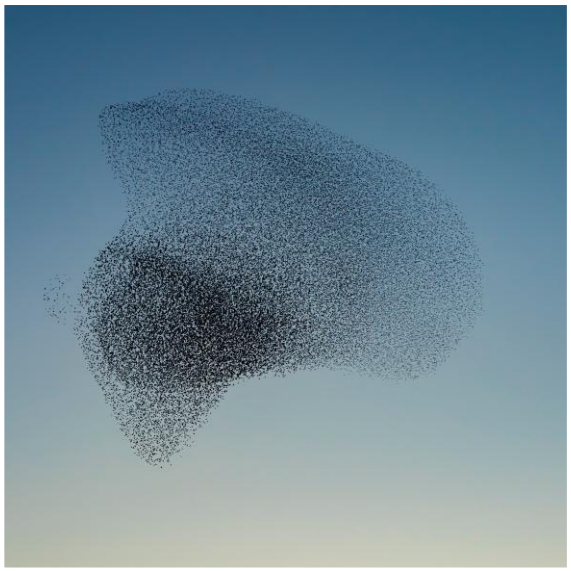
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Tour Report
Somerset Levels in Winter
15 – 18 January 2026

Starling murmuration



Water rail



Eurasian blackcap



Black-tailed godwits



Compiled by Mike Dilger

Thursday 15 January 2026

Day 1:
Meet-up at the hotel - North Chine Drove and Shapwick NNR

The full complement of seven guests met up just after lunch at the warm and hospitable home of Sarah, the owner of Worth House Hotel. Situated just west of the city of Wells, our accommodation for the trip is perfectly positioned for visiting a whole host of wonderful wildlife sites right across the Levels. Following introductions, a chat about the hotel and a brief discussion of the itinerary, Mike Dilger (MD) then took the group off for a few hours' birding before dusk, with the plan being to culminate the afternoon's activities with Europe's largest starling murmuration.

The weather had been decidedly wet all day, but as the group set off in the pouring rain, the forecasts all seemed to indicate that it would quickly ease off. MD took the group first over Godney Moor, via North Chine Drove, with the trip's first birds being the corvid duo of rook and jackdaw. A few cattle egrets were seen distantly in fields to the north, and additionally living up to their name by keeping a small herd of cows company, while a couple of jays flying past the minibus represented a good, early find. Slightly further along the same drove, our second species of egret and first 'great white' was observed on the edge of an adjacent rhyne, with one of the guests also picking up a buzzard perched in a nearby tree. A number of mute swans were also noted in the very wet fields, before then watching a large flock of lapwings heading south.

Initially the plan had been to drop into Catcott, but noting the lateness of the hour, MD took the group instead straight round to the west end of Shapwick NNR (National Nature Reserve) and close to the Avalon Marshes Visitor Centre. By now the rain had indeed mercifully stopped, as the group prepared to walk eastward along the main drove.

At the reserve entrance, a small flock of feeding goldfinches were spotted, before we then picked up the trip's first marsh harrier, which proved to be a male. Moving initially through the wet woodland and scrub, blue tit and chaffinch were added to the list, before MD picked up the call of a single lesser redpoll when it flew over the group. One of the guests then found a great spotted woodpecker along the line of alders adjacent to the track, just before its partner was heard calling from the trees nearby.

A second male marsh harrier was then noted, along with a variety of ducks, as we hit our first open water. Reaching the section of path with Noah's Lake immediately to the south gave us the opportunity to finally pay proper attention to the wildfowl. Nearby, gadwall, shoveler, tufted duck and coot were all in abundance, while lower numbers of mallard, wigeon and pochard were also picked up. The occasional calls of water rail and Cetti's warbler were also heard intermittently as we scanned across the water.

Putting up the scope, MD was also able to show the guests the simply vast numbers of wildfowl roosting on Noah's Lake, with the star species here being a healthy population of overwintering pintail. By now it was getting decidedly dusky, and in no time we began to pick up first starling flocks away on the distant horizon. The starling flock this winter is believed to number around three-quarters of a million birds, but ever since moving from RSPB Ham Wall across to Shapwick NNR at around the turn of the year, they have become much more mobile.

On this occasion, the main flock appeared to have moved once again, opting on this occasion to settle in the northeast of Shapwick, making the views distant, but nevertheless the group were still able to appreciate the simply vast number of birds, with some distant murmuration fleetingly enjoyed. In addition to watching the main flock, we were also able to enjoy a number of small flocks heading to join in, including one particular mass passing directly overhead which must have easily contained 50,000 birds. As soon as the main flock appeared to have dropped both down into the roost and out of sight, we took this as our cue to slowly walk back, while noticing a number of late straggler groups pass overhead, with MD suggesting it had been valuable research as to where best to see the starlings the following evening.

Driving back to Worth House, everyone took the opportunity to freshen up before reconvening for the compilation of the trip's first checklist, while enjoying a delightful number of nibbles that Sarah had left out for us to enjoy. Moving on to dine, we then delighted in a fine meal prepared by Sarah and her team, washed down with wine, before then retiring early for the night in preparation for a full birding session the following day.

Friday 16 January 2026

Day 2:
RSPB Greylake, Langport, the Bridge at Oath, Huntspill and Oxenpill Village, north of Shapwick NNR.

After our first 'Full English' Worth House breakfast, we reconvened at the minibus for a day that would be mostly spent across the southerly part of the Levels. The weather was cold, sunny and with a little wind, and as we dropped down onto Godney Moor it was also fairly misty across the moors too.

Driving down Lewis's Drove, a great white egret and heron were first spotted, while flying in formation over the fields, before a few redwings and chaffinches were noted along the line of alders marking the southern boundary of Westhay Moor NNR. A brief pause here also unearthed a small flock of long-tailed tits crossing the road, while further along, a female stonechat was found atop a muck heap and close to a couple of pied wagtails.

Arriving at RSPB Greylake, we immediately noted both dunnock and house sparrows on the feeders, before walking towards the hide via the reedbed. Turning right across the access track, the reserve team had recently cut back a patch of invasive willow, adjacent to the hides, presumably to prevent the reedbed from scrubbing over. And upon scanning this open, wet area, a couple of water rails poking in amongst the vegetation were immediately obvious. Normally difficult birds to see at the best of times, we eventually counted a total of six along this newly cut fringe, with MD declaring this to be easily the most he'd ever seen at any one location. With the group unable to take their eyes off the rails, MD was also able to point out a calling Cetti's warbler, before it was subsequently spotted flitting about in the reeds behind.

Entering the hide, a frankly huge number of ducks were present, as the group went about the task of identifying the various species present. Most numerous were teal, wigeon and shoveler, while an impressive number of roosting snipe were also present. A solitary pair of gadwall represented a good find, in addition to a few sleeping lapwings. A couple of marsh harriers then flew over the scrape, unsettling many of the ducks in the process, with a single great white egret and a solitary greylag goose also added to the list.

Leaving the hide for one more view of the frankly remarkable water rail, we also noted a large flock of lapwings overhead too. But despite the sunny, calm conditions being perfect for spotting bearded tits, on this occasion, none were either seen or heard.

Driving next over to Langport for a quick refreshment break, MD then made a very quick detour to Muchelney Moor to see if the Bewick's swans he'd observed the previous week were still present, but the group could only find a large flock of around 500 lapwings with a few dunlin instead. Passing back through Langport, our next stop was at Oath, where we duly managed to pick out a distant pair of cranes from the viewpoint on top of the railway bridge. While scanning the vast expanse that is RSPB West Sedgemoor, we also noticed a very pale buzzard and three female roe deer resting along one of the rhynes. Walking back down to the minibus, a hovering kestrel, a grey heron and yet another great white egret were also noted close to the commercial willow beds.

Heading next up to Swell Wood, it had finally begun to cloud over as we took our lunch and a hot drink in the Heronry Hide. MD then put a spot of bird food out, before a most delightful hour was spent both lunching and birding. Marsh tit is the speciality here, and we were delighted to see an individual of this species being almost the first bird to be drawn in, followed by coal, great and blue tits. A family party of long-tails then made it a quintet of tits, with a nuthatch also delighting the assembled throng. One of the guests then spotted a pair of treecreepers on the trunk of one of the oak trees just off to the right of the hide, and it was with

somewhat of a heavy heart that we finally left our wonderful lunch spot.

Back at the minibus, MD pointed the minibus towards Huntspill. And after a quick refreshment stop at the M5 Services took the group to the top of the road at Huntspill, which lies adjacent to the sea wall, which itself looks out across the eastern end of Bridgwater Bay, the Steart Peninsula and Steart Island. Due to the heavy rains having filled the small ditch running along the western fringe of the saltmarsh, fringe were were unable to cross over onto the sea wall itself, so we walked instead north along the grassy raised bank in the direction of Burnham. Plenty of gulls were in evidence en route, with all appearing to be either black-headed or herring.

Using the scope to scan across towards Steart Island, we were immediately able to pick out large numbers of both shelduck and redshank on the mud, along with a few distant feeding avocets in the channel. A long line of oystercatchers were easily visible on the island too. A little further north, and just north of where the channel separates Huntspill from Burnham, a couple of grey plovers were picked out from amongst a few more curlew, redshank and a couple of cormorants. Taking one more look over towards Steart, and with the tide now quickly rising, we then noticed a flock of feeding dunlin close to yet more shelduck. With the time now slipping away, and the group keen to get another shot at the starling murmuration, we returned to the minibus, while passing a few calling meadow pipits on the way.

Leaving Huntspill, a perched buzzard close to the entrance was noted before we headed back over the M5 and across Tealham Moor. MD commented on how much water was currently present on the moor, with the water levels having patently bounced back very quickly since the very dry summer. While passing over the moor, we encountered both the day's second female stonechat and another kestrel, while the trip's first little egrets were also added to our tally, before taking a quick break at the Avalon Centre.

Having seen where the starlings had gone to roost the previous evening, MD then took the group to a small road he'd used before, south of the small village of Oxenpill, to wait for the starlings to arrive. This spot also represents the closest and most easily accessible location to the northeast of Shapwick NNR. But much to our chagrin, the starling flock had moved once again, this time seemingly back across to Ham Wall. However, we were still able to marvel at the frankly vast flocks of starlings passing directly overhead, en route to the RSPB Reserve, with splendid views of the vast flock together as one, in addition to some brief murmurations. Here too, while waiting for the starlings to turn up, we spotted a few fieldfares in a tree, a pair of ravens passing overhead and a quick fly-by from a green woodpecker.

As dusk quickly descended, it had also begun to rain, so we headed back to the Hotel, via North Chine Drove, for an opportunity to rest and refresh before dinner. Subsequently, meeting up a short while later to compile of the day's checklist, we then headed straight out to the Burcott Inn, close by, for a delightful dinner to end a day of non-stop birding action.

Saturday 17 January 2026

Day 3:
Catcott SWT Complex, Shapwick NNR eastern end & Ham Wall RSPB VP1 & VP2

The group set off for their second full day of the tour, with the weather cold but mercifully clear and still - in essence, the perfect conditions for winter birding. All aboard, MD first took the group along North Chine and Lewis's Drove, adjacent to Westhay Moor NNR, where the group were able to compare and contrast the subtle differences between cattle egret and little egret while admiring a pair standing right alongside each other.

Hitting a small shower, we carried on towards Catcott, before passing a couple of redwings and some chaffinches feeding in a field close to the road. While stopping briefly to watch a grey heron, MD then spotted a kingfisher crossing the road in front of the minibus. Stopping immediately to try and show the group this charismatic species, it could not, unfortunately, be relocated, with most having seen little more than a blue flash.

Further west and closer to the Godwin Peatworks, and in the same field as noted on the first afternoon, we noted, once again, at least six or seven feeding cattle egrets, along with a couple of male pheasants. And with the weather now beautiful once again, arrived at Catcott.

Looking out of the hide, the partly resident glossy ibises were on this occasion nowhere to be seen, but there were plenty of wildfowl, in the form of wigeon, teal, shoveler and one drake pintail. Plenty of marsh harriers were patrolling the grazing marsh further back too. Additionally, large flocks of lapwings were an almost constant presence on the wing, along with a couple of small parties of Canada geese, while the seemingly omnipresent great white egrets barely got a mention!

Driving next over to Ham Wall RSPB, we took a hot drink on the benches by the visitor centre, while delighting in blue tits, great tits, chaffinches and robins. One of the guests then spotted a male blackcap in the scrub behind the visitor centre, with a second male and a female subsequently located close by.

Leaving the minibus parked at Ham Wall, we then walked across the road and onto Shapwick, before moving slowly westwards and out into the open. Here, mute swans were immediately obvious, along with tufted ducks, gadwall, shoveler and a couple of cormorants. MD heard the brief call of a little grebe from somewhere in the reeds, as a jay flew past the group.

Moving on to Noah's Hide, MD met up with his wife and son, who were also out birding(!) as the group took in the simply huge numbers of wildfowl on the lake. Mostly composed of wigeon, with a few great crested grebes close by, a few white-fronted geese were next to be spotted. MD then spotted four bean geese, which are a very rare bird on the Levels, but these were only briefly viewable before disappearing behind the reeds. The day's second kingfisher then briefly entertained as it flashed past the hide on a couple of occasions.

One of the other birders in the hide then alerted us to the presence of the drake American wigeon right at the back of the lake, but it was only seen briefly and intermittently by the guests, due to the difficulty in picking it out from the vast number of ducks close by. Moving out of the hide, a fabulous view of a great white egret then ensued, before MD found an adult and juvenile whooper swan out on the water and at the junction with the main path. Walking all the way back to the car park, the group then enjoyed a leisurely lunch on the picnic benches at RSPB Ham Wall.

Heading off onto the reserve proper for the first time, with MD's son also joining the group as an extra pair of eyes, we were able to enjoy a large aerial flock of lapwings as we crossed the bridge. Upon reaching Viewing Platform 1 (VP1), among the large numbers of birds present, the star was easily the black-tailed godwit, with a flock of around 50 roosting out on the marsh. MD then spotted a single ruff in amongst the black-tails, and with the godwits taking to the air with a flock of around 400 lapwings in regular dreads, this created the most wonderful sight.

With birds seemingly constantly in flight, everything suddenly went up as a peregrine falcon flew straight over the scrape, to much excitement from the assembled birders. Having created such pandemonium, it took quite some time before the birds could be persuaded to settle down again. The next bird of prey to then grace our presence was a male sparrowhawk, which flew low and straight over the water, in the process creating similar havoc among the assembled throng once more.

With the sun now beginning to set, the starlings steadily began to assemble, but once again appeared to have slightly outmanoeuvred us by settling in reedbeds towards the southeast of the corner of the reserve and over towards Sharpham and Street. It had nevertheless been a wonderful day, but it took quite a time to get back to Worth House due to the traffic jam leaving the car park with all the other starling admirers.

Back with an hour to spare, the group then reconvened for the compilation of the day's checklist before a delightful last Worth House dinner, consisting of lasagne, with bread and butter pudding for dessert. A wonderful last evening was had by all before finally bidding each other goodnight, in the full knowledge that

tomorrow would be the last day of the trip.

Sunday 18 January 2026

Day 4:
WWT Steart Marshes and Wall Common

For the trip's final morning, we met up for breakfast before driving westwards to the coast. Normally MD would have included a visit to WWT Steart Marshes as part of his 'South Levels' day, but due to the mobility of the starlings, necessitating more attempts to see the murmuration than would normally have been the case, this meant postponing Steart until the final morning.

Unfortunately, the weather looked to be very wet, and with little wind looked like the rain would persist for most of the day, but the group appeared undeterred by this pessimistic outlook upon our arrival at the reserve's car park. With it misty as well as rainy, we used the facilities before donning waterproofs and heading over to the Quantocks Hide. Despite the poor weather, the number of lapwings and golden plovers was astonishing, with most of the reserve's birds appearing to be roosting on Otterhampton Marsh and periodically taking to the skies in dreads.

Settling into the hide, a couple of skylarks were quickly spotted on the closest island, in addition to over a thousand golden plovers and quite possibly an equal number of lapwings, while a few dunlin weaved in and out of the two larger and more numerous species. In the creeks across the site, at least half a dozen avocets were noted, while wildfowl were well represented by shoveler, teal, wigeon and shelduck.

In addition to the wetland birds, the group also picked up a pair of linnets on one of the islands, while a pair of pied wagtails walked busily past the hide and along the water's edge. Walking back to the car, the weather, if anything, appeared to be getting worse, so MD suggested the group drive slowly up towards Steart Point to see if, by any small chance, any short-eared owls might be on the wing.

Looking in the partly flooded fields next to the road, a flock of around 30 redshanks was noted, while the next field along held three or four curlews. Turning around with the drizzle now on the verge of becoming rain, one of the guests suddenly spotted a decidedly wet short-eared owl perched on a post right by the side of the road, but by the time we'd clocked it, most of the guests only managed to catch sight of it flying away. Nevertheless, it was thrilling even to get a brief view of such a stellar species, given the awful weather. Skylarks were also picked up on the wing, before MD suggested the group head back to Worth House instead for an early lunch and to have the opportunity to dry off!

Heading back to Worth House, we enjoyed a fine lunch provided by Sarah and her team, before compiling the checklist of all the species recorded that morning. Due to the precise location of the starling roost having been very difficult to track down, MD suggested that he would be able to extend the tour a while longer to include one last attempt at the murmuration, and with six of the seven guests able to stay on for the rest of the afternoon, everyone managed to take a break before reconvening at 3.30 pm.

Having seen where the starlings had dropped in the previous evening, MD suggested they head over to Sharpham first. Via a birding pal, he'd also received word that two drake ring-necked ducks were in one of the pits just to the northeast of Sharpham, with the group immediately locating the two males close to the track. Considered the American version of tufted ducks, this species also represented a lifer to all the members in the group, with the prominent exception of our two American guests, of course!

Moving next around to Sharpham, and with the light levels quickly dropping, the first starlings passed directly over our position, only to then proceed in a northerly direction. Guessing that they had moved yet again, MD encouraged everyone back into the minibus as a quick dash a mile north ensued, to a viewpoint across to the southeastern corner of Ham Wall. We had finally, and after our fourth attempt, picked our position well, as we saw the entire flock pass overhead, before murmuring and dropping into the reeds, around 250m away and behind a line of trees. It was a terrific end to the trip and a delightful affirmation of

that phrase, ‘all good things come to those who wait’!

Back at Worth House, all that then remained was for MD to send a quick email to all the trip members, giving everyone the opportunity to share their respective photos at a later date. Bidding farewell to each other, everyone then either headed off to their respective homes or retreated to their rooms for an extra night at Worth House, before also heading home the following day. And despite the runaround from the starlings, the group had nevertheless gelled beautifully and enjoyed a plethora of wonderful wildlife sightings - in essence, the very definition of a very successful trip.

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Checklist for Somerset Levels in Winter with Mike Dilger

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

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26	Water rail	*Rallus aquaticus*	H	✓	H	H
27	Moorhen	*Gallinula chloropus*		✓		✓
28	Coot	*Fulica atra*	✓		✓	
29	Crane	*Grus grus*		✓		
30	Oystercatcher	*Haematopus ostralegus*		✓		
31	Avocet	*Recurvirostra avosetta*		✓		✓
32	Lapwing	*Vanellus vanellus*	✓	✓	✓	✓
33	Golden plover	*Pluvialis apricaria*				✓
34	Grey plover	*Pluvialis squatarola*		✓		
35	Curlew	*Numenius arquata*		✓		✓
36	Black-tailed godwit	*Limosa limosa*			✓	
37	Ruff	*Calidris pugnax*			✓	
38	Dunlin	*Calidris alpina*		✓		✓
39	Snipe	*Gallinago gallinago*		✓		
40	Redshank	*Tringa totanus*		✓		✓
41	Black-headed gull	*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*		✓		✓
42	Herring gull	*Larus argentatus*	✓	✓	✓	✓
43	Woodpigeon	*Columba palumbus*	✓	✓	✓	✓
44	Collared dove	*Streptopelia decaocto*	✓	✓		✓
45	Tawny owl	*Strix aluco*	H		H	
46	Short-eared owl	*Asio flammeus*				✓
47	Kingfisher	*Alcedo atthis*			✓	
48	Great spotted woodpecker	*Dendrocopos major*	✓			
49	Green woodpecker	*Picus viridis*		✓		
50	Kestrel	*Falco tinnunculus*		✓		
51	Peregrine	*Falco peregrinus*		✓	✓	
52	Jay	*Garrulus glandarius*	✓		✓	
53	Magpie	*Pica pica*	✓	✓	✓	✓
54	Jackdaw	*Coloeus monedula*	✓	✓	✓	✓
55	Rook	*Corvus frugilegus*	✓	✓	✓	✓
56	Carrion crow	*Corvus corone*	✓	✓	✓	✓
57	Raven	*Corvus corax*		✓		
58	Coal tit	*Periparus ater*		✓		
59	Marsh tit	*Poecile palustris*		✓		
60	Blue tit	*Cyanistes caeruleus*		✓	✓	

61	Great tit	*Parus major*		✓	✓	
62	Skylark	*Alauda arvensis*				✓
63	Cetti's warbler	*Cettia cetti*	H	✓	H	
64	Long-tailed tit	*Aegithalos caudatus*		✓	✓	
65	Chiffchaff	*Phylloscopus collybita*			✓	
66	Eurasian blackcap	*Sylvia atricapilla*			✓	
67	Goldcrest	*Regulus regulus*			✓	
68	Wren	*Troglodytes troglodytes*		✓	✓	
69	Nuthatch	*Sitta europaea*		✓		
70	Treecreeper	*Certhia familiaris*		✓		
71	Starling	*Sturnus vulgaris*	✓	✓	✓	✓
72	Blackbird	*Turdus merula*	✓	✓	✓	✓
73	Fieldfare	*Turdus pilaris*		✓		
74	Redwing	*Turdus iliacus*		✓	✓	
75	Robin	*Erithacus rubecula*	✓	✓	✓	✓
76	Stonechat	*Saxicola rubicola*		✓		
77	House sparrow	*Passer domesticus*		✓	✓	
78	Dunnock	*Prunella modularis*		✓	✓	
79	Grey wagtail	*Motacilla cinerea*				✓
80	Pied wagtail	*Motacilla alba*		✓		✓
81	Meadow pipit	*Anthus pratensis*		✓		
82	Chaffinch	*Fringilla coelebs*	✓	✓	✓	✓
83	Linnet	*Linaria cannabina*				✓
84	Lesser redpoll	*Acanthis cabaret*	✓			
85	Goldfinch	*Carduelis carduelis*	✓		✓	✓
86	Ring-necked duck	*Aythya collaris*				✓
87	Bean goose	*Anser fabalis*				✓
88	American wigeon	*Mareca americana*				✓
	MAMMALS					
1	Grey squirrel	*Sciurus carolinensis*		✓		
2	Wood mouse	*Apodemus sylvaticus*			✓	
3	Roe deer	*Capreolus capreolus*		✓	✓	✓