

Tour Report UK – Somerset Levels in Winter 15 – 18 January 2023

Drake garganey with mallard



Starlings at Ham Wall



Great white egret



Short-eared owl being chased by a kestrel



Compiled by Mike Dilger

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

Sunday 15 January 2023

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

This trip represented the first visit to the Levels for all group members as Mike firstly took them across Westhay Moor. Arriving at a busy (due to it being a weekend) car park at Ham Wall, our first port of call was a quick check of the feeders behind the visitor centre. Here we saw great tit, blue tit, blackbird, robin and a female reed bunting in quick succession before we headed up onto the reserve's main footpath.

Almost instantly we were able to see large flocks of lapwings passing overhead, and as we approached the first open body of water, we gained our first views of the numerous waterfowl flocks which are such a characteristic feature of winter on the Levels. Gadwall, wigeon and shoveler were all quickly spotted, with Mike promising the group they'd see all these species at much closer quarters later on. At this point, a kingfisher was spotted by one sharp-eyed guest, with most managing a quick glimpse in Mike's scope before it disappeared out of view.

A little further along, where the reserve opens out, we saw a little grebe briefly, with much closer views of the gadwall, teal and shoveler that Mike had promised. He was also able to scope up a couple snipe sitting quietly in amongst the reeds. Moving further along to Viewing Platform (VP) 1, we added Canada geese, coot and tufted duck to the list, with the trip's first great white egret clearly visible at the back of the water. The first female marsh harrier was seen quartering the reedbeds, while a second great white egret flapped slowly past.

Mike had heard reports from the warden as to the whereabouts of an astonishingly early drake garganey, which was frequenting a small section of open water along with a small flock of mallards, just beyond VP1, which obviously needed investigation! This is normally a rare summer visitor to Britain's wetlands from its wintering grounds in either Africa or the Mediterranean, and we soon tracked it down (this species represented a first for many in the group). Both its supercilium and pale blue flanks were clearly visible while it busily flirted with a female mallard almost twice its size. What a fabulous and totally unexpected find!

Having filled our boots with the drake garganey, we went to get in position for the murmuration, opting for a spot looking out over Waltons Reedbed, just west of VP1. Pretty soon the first few starlings arrived, with small groups quickly coalescing to create a 'flag' for later arrivals to gather around. Then, in the space of just a few minutes, the numbers began to explode, as starlings poured in from all directions. At this point we spotted a peregrine harassing the main flock, as well as a marsh harrier. With most birds appearing to congregate in the main flock, this appeared to split as the starlings began descending in two main areas - both in front of the group and in the reedbed adjacent to VP1.

At this point a female sparrowhawk passed overhead, and while huge numbers of starlings continued to pour in, we could clearly hear the calls of Cetti's warblers and water rails from deep within the reedbed above the constant whirring of wings. By now the reeds below had become blackened with birds, and the starlings, which had been quiet in the air, suddenly began chattering. As the volume continued to rise, both the sight and sound of the roosting starlings made for quite a visceral experience. To add to the spectacle, large numbers of starlings were constantly lifting off, before repositioning themselves elsewhere in the roost, which gave the impression of a black river flowing above the reed tops. With the birds finally appearing more settled and the light fading fast, Mike suggested the group return to the car park, with everyone delighted to have bagged such a fine display.

Day 2: Catcott SWT Complex, Honeygar Lane, Huntspill River along Stockland Reach, Shapwick NNR - New Tower Hide & Noah's Hide, Waylay Moor NNR, north of Shapwick.

Monday 16 January 2023

After plenty of rain overnight, fortunately the clouds had decided to depart by the time we reconvened at breakfast, meaning the first full day of the tour would hopefully be dry, if still a little breezy.

Suitably replete after a sumptuous breakfast, all boarded the minibus and Mike drove the group across to Catcott Complex, a site at the western end of the Avalon Marshes which is managed by the Somerset Wildlife Trust. A few little egrets were spotted on the drive across Westhay Moor, with a number of fieldfare both seen and heard calling from some roadside trees.

On arrival at Catcott everyone took up their positions in the hide, where very high water levels meant that huge numbers of wildlife were present. The most abundant species were undoubtedly wigeon, teal and shoveler, with wader interest provided by plenty of lapwing. A marsh harrier was spotted over the back of the scrape too. After stopping to enjoy a robin in the car park, we dropped into Honeygar Lane to search for egrets and little owls. The latter were, once again, conspicuous by their absence, but over on Honeygar Farm plenty of little and great white egrets could be seen, feeding alongside some cattle in a field.

As we drove across to the coast at Huntspill, the skies cleared, but the wind was stiffening, and as we stopped at the bridge over the river were able to enjoy a very close great crested grebe on the water. With high tide approaching, we moved onto the sluice and were rewarded with two particularly close avocets and a few redshank alongside a high tide roost of shelduck. Moving round to walk along Stockland Reach and the adjacent saltmarsh, we spotted a song thrush before encountering plenty of skylarks and meadow pipits on the saltmarsh as we walked along the sea wall. Out in the estuary a large flock of dunlin was also noted as the advancing water started to push the birds off the mud and further out into the bay. Much closer, just beyond the saltmarsh, we could see a number of grey plover and knot along the water's edge, with the grey plovers' black arm-pits clearly visible when they were in flight.

Despite the cold wind the dunlin murmuration was a sight to behold, with large numbers of both Canada geese and shelduck also sheltering out of the wind, and on the eastern edge of the Steart Peninsula. In the scrubby grassland adjacent to the sea wall a single male stonechat and pied wagtail were both noted. But with the wind by now so cold, the group voted unanimously to descend the ridge instead of following the service road back to the minibus.

Driving back inland, we took a sheltered lunch in the car park at the eastern end of Shapwick NNR before walking down to the New Tower Hide. Happily, the overwintering drake American wigeon, which had given the previous group the slip, deigned to make another appearance, and all the group enjoyed delightful views while the bird divided its time between dozing and stretching. Moving onto the more exposed location of Noah's Hide, we were far more exposed to the elements, however this didn't prevent us getting fine views of a large flock of pintail in amongst yet more wigeon, tufted duck and a few great crested grebes. Out on the water a vast flock of coot looked more like a black oil slick from a distance.

Extra interest at Noah's Hide was provided by a couple of particularly showy marsh harriers, which caused pandemonium whenever they flew over the wildfowl on the water below. A female flew straight past the hide before perching in a nearby bush, enabling everyone to gain fabulous views of a species that is decidedly uncommon away from its natural reedy habitat. Further raptor interest was provided by a buzzard patrolling the tree-line at the back of the water, where we also noted a number of cormorants air-drying their wings.

Returning to the minibus, our next port of call was Westhay Moor NNR, where we took a very muddy walk down the drove to reach 30 Acre Lake. The water level was extremely high, making it a tricky for anyone without wellies to even get in the hide! Once inside, the only birds of note we spotted initially were a few

great crested grebes. But with a little persistence, the group managed to spot a pair of goosander, which had initially been tucked away out of sight, before ultimately showing very well.

With time for just one last visit before dusk, Mike suggested driving to Walton Drove to look for barn owl, but on passing the western end of Shapwick NNR we spotted the ethereal glow of an adult hunting in a field to the left of the road. Jumping quickly out of the van, everyone managed to see the barn owl, but sadly only Mike and a couple of guests were lucky enough to see a male hen harrier flying briefly past the trees before drifting out of view.

Relocating the barn owl once more, we watched it plunge into the grass, and in the process presumably catch a vole. After a short while it flew up into the trees, where it was mobbed by a couple of magpies before it disappeared with its prey over the trees. Everyone agreed that the owl sighting was the perfect end to our first full day on the Levels.

Day 3: RSPB Greylake, Bridge at Oath, Langport road, RSPB Swell Wood, Wall Common CP, Steart (Bridgwater bay), WWT Steart - Quantocks Hide

Tuesday 17 January 2023

When we woke to our second full day, the wind had thankfully died overnight, to be replaced by a cold, hard frost. Our destination was the southerly part of the Levels i.e. the entire area south of the Polden Hills. As we crossed Westhay Moor the contrast between the two days could not have been more stark, as all the fields had suddenly become frosted, while a number of rhynes were even frozen over.

After stopping briefly to observe a large flock of lapwing perched somewhat forlornly in a field transformed into an ice rink, we also spotted a flock of at least 50 redwing and fieldfare a little further on, as they attempted to eke out a meal from another frozen field. Egrets were present close by, and we finally managed to catch up with a dozen or so cattle egrets amongst a larger flock of little and greats. Here Mike explained that a flock of three different species of egrets would have been unheard of only 10-15 years ago. While watching the egrets, we saw a single buzzard, before two ravens flew past - calling as they went.

Our first scheduled stop of the day was at RSPB Greylake, where after such a cold night the house sparrows and chaffinches in the carpark were undoubtedly grateful for the birdseed Mike had brought along. Mike then led the group to the hide via the reedbeds, where it was astonishing to see that all the standing water had completely frozen over. During the short walk large flocks of lapwing could be seen overhead as they continued their search for frost-free pastures, while a few snipe whizzed past. Upon reaching the track just before the hide, we saw a couple of moorhen walking on the ice and heard a very loud Cetti's warbler singing right beside the path.

The number of duck in front of the hide was minimal due to the lack of open water, but despite the absence of wildfowl everyone enjoyed close-up views of a handful of snipe roosting amongst the bullrushes, as the obligatory marsh harrier drifted past the hide. On the walk back to the car park, the whole group next enjoyed terrific views of a Cetti's warbler as it made a brief appearance at the edge of the reeds, before darting out of sight across the drove.

Our next stop was at the bridge over the railway at Oath a little further south. This would normally be the best place to look for cranes, as it gives a great view over Aller Moor to the north-east. On this occasion, however, virtually the entire moor, along with West Sedgemoor to the south-west, had been transformed into an enormous lake by the recent heavy rains, and the shallower areas appeared to be iced over. Deciding it would be very difficult to spot cranes here, Mike suggested trying the area north of the road to Langport instead, where it runs parallel to the River Parrett.

Scanning the frozen fields here, a buzzard, marsh harrier and a female sparrowhawk were spotted in quick succession, before Mike heard the distant bugling call of cranes. Appearing from behind a line of trees right

in the centre of Aller Moor, some cranes suddenly flew in the direction of West Sedgemoor. And although they were somewhat distant, everyone managed to get terrific views. While we were enjoying the cranes, Mike heard the first mistle thrush of spring, which was eventually located singing from a bush to the south of where the group had been watching the cranes. Mistle thrush is never an easy bird to find on the Levels, so this represented our second excellent sighting in the space of just a few minutes.

After a quick refreshment stop in Langport, we drove straight to RSPB Swell Wood for a hot drink and to see whatever was coming to the woodland feeders in the car park. Coal, great and blue tit were quickly identified before a nuthatch made an appearance. But the marsh tit made us wait quite a while before its distinctive black cap was spotted in the branches close to the feeder and while it was collecting grain that had been spilled on the floor. All were thrilled with this uncommon woodland bird, and Mike suggested saving time by heading straight to Steart Marshes.

Arriving to Steart later than we would have wished, we headed straight for Bridgwater Bay to look out over the estuary. Plenty of skylarks were seen crossing the brackish saltmarsh, and as the tide was well in we had excellent views of grey plover, dunlin, curlew and redshank at the water's edge.

We walked back to Wall Common car park, and with the sun now out enjoyed lunch while watching three greenfinch and a pair of reed bunting in the scrubby vegetation. We then drove the short distance back to where we had last seen the short-eared owl, before walking up onto the bank. The few photographers present confirmed that the owl had not been seen for a while, however almost immediately Mike spotted it quartering the saltmarsh. The owl came steadily closer before flying straight past us and out of sight. Thrilled with such a wonderful sighting, we then watched a large flock of skylark and linnets feeding in the fields close by, before the short-eared owl reappeared. Flying straight past us once again, it dived and appeared to catch something in the grass no more than 50 metres away from us.

Out of nowhere a female kestrel suddenly dashed in and attempted to steal the owl's hard-won prey. Hunkering down, the owl seemed to decide that hiding in the grass was the best policy, while the kestrel watched from the branches of a nearby tree. This stand-off continued for the next half an hour, as neither refused to budge! Deciding that we might be losing valuable light while waiting for the birds' next move, we decided to leave them to it, but were nevertheless thrilled that the 'shorties' had delivered memorably once more.

Leaving the minibus at WWT Steart's main car park we walked the short distance to Quantocks Hide, where we saw more wigeon, shoveler, teal and lapwing. Although we were unable to find any golden plover at first, while leaving the hide we spotted a huge flock in the distance, with the birds flickering golden in the late afternoon light. With golden plover in the bag, and a long drive back due to the road closure, Mike suggested heading back to Worth House, where after an hour's rest and relaxation we enjoyed a delicious meal courtesy of our hosts.

Day 4: Burrow Mump & Cheddar Reservoir

Wednesday 18 January 2023

As we met for our final breakfast, the ever-changing forecast intimated that the rain would give way to snow later in the morning, which quickly proved to be the case as we headed for Burrow Mump, near Burrowbridge. By the time we reached the Pollen Hills it was snowing steadily, and Mike had to take care with the brakes as the van descended to Burrow Mump car park.

Southlake Moor, like much of the floodplains in the south of the Levels, was completely flooded, meaning that the best views were from halfway up the side of the Mump. From this vantage point the usually wildfowl species could be seen in good numbers, but despite Mike's best efforts, the group couldn't pick out any whooper swans from among the large numbers of resident mute swans on this occasion.

However a dunnock we picked up in the car park provided some recompense, and made another welcome addition to the checklist. We also saw good numbers of redwing and fieldfare in the trees here. Mike suggested that the whoopers might be on Curry Moor further west, but unfortunately access to this area proved impossible as the high water had closed both access roads. With time for one last stop, Mike suggested heading to Cheddar Reservoir instead, so after a quick refreshment stop in Langport we retraced our steps back north.

Despite the lack of wind, the exposed nature of Cheddar Reservoir left us in little doubt that we were still firmly in the grip of winter. However, even with the cold, we managed to pick up a large flock of coot, great crested grebe, black-headed gull, common gull and cormorants. After a lot of scanning, Mike eventually managed to pick up the over-wintering great northern diver, but as it was a long way off, the group opted for a leisurely lunch back at Worth House.

Here we tucked into the food and compiled our final checklist before saying our goodbyes after the enjoyable and informative few days we had spent together.

Checklist



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4
	BIRDS	<i>AVES</i>				
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	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		✓		
14	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		✓	✓	
15	Little grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	✓			
16	Great crested grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
17	Cattle egret	<i>Bubulcis ibis</i>			✓	✓
18	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
19	Great white egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
20	Little egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
21	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
22	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	✓	✓	✓	
23	Marsh harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓



24	Hen harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		✓		
25	Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓	✓
26	Water rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	H			
27	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓		✓	
28	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
29	Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>			✓	
30	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		✓		
31	Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		✓		
32	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
33	Golden plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>			✓	
34	Grey plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>		✓	✓	
35	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		✓	✓	
36	Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>		✓		
37	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓	✓	
38	Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓		✓	
39	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		✓	✓	
40	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>		✓		
41	Black-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
42	Common gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓		✓
43	Great black-backed gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓		
44	Herring gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	
45	Rock dove / feral pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓		✓
46	Stock dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>			✓	
47	Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
48	Collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓	✓	✓
49	Barn owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>		✓		
50	Short-eared owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>			✓	
51	Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	✓			
52	Great spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		✓	✓	

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

82	Meadow pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓		✓
83	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
84	Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>			✓	
85	Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>			✓	
86	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
87	Reed bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓		✓	
88	Garganey	<i>Spatula querquedula</i>	✓			
89	American wigeon	<i>Mareca americana</i>	✓			
90	Great northern diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>				✓
	MAMMALS	MAMMALIA				
1	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		✓		
2	Brown hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>			✓	
3	Grey squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>			✓	✓
4	Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>		✓		
5	Roe deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>		✓	✓	✓