Tour Report

UK - Somerset Levels in Winter

30 January – 2 February 2022

Bean goose with Canada goose



Little egret



Marsh harrier chasing wigeon



Grey heron



Compiled by: Mike Dilger First three images by: Neil Havard



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

Sunday 30 January 2022

The group met up at the wonderfully warm and welcoming home of Sarah and Nick at the Worth House Hotel at 2pm on the first day. Situated just west of the village of Wells, this was the third of three winter trips slated for January. The weather on that afternoon was cold, clear and sunny, with little wind.

After introductions and a discussion surrounding Covid protocols the seven guests and Mike Dilger set off for RSPB Ham Wall to catch up with the starling murmuration. Firstly, Mike took the group via North Chine Drove, a location that has become well known for cattle egrets - a recently colonised species and Levels speciality. The group were rewarded almost immediately with at least 50 birds feeding in the pasture fields along the roadside. More cattle egrets were then picked up south of Westhay Moor NNR, in addition to a large flock of mute swans, with a couple of buzzards also spotted perching in trees en route.

The starling murmuration is now considered a major tourist attraction, and due to it additionally being a Sunday, with fine weather to boot, it was perhaps unsurprising to see the reserve car park so busy on our arrival. Suitably togged up for the cold weather, the assembled group then walked through to the main drove, where a group of alders played host to a small flock of lesser redpoll feeding alongside a few goldfinch. Despite being quite tricky to observe in amongst the branches, everyone was eventually able to enjoy good views through Mike's scope. Proceeding further east along the main drove, the group then stopped to admire a number of lapwing roosting along a reed-covered fringe just to the right of the path. The first shoveler of the trip were also noted here too, alongside a couple of teal tucked right in along the water's edge. From this viewpoint, large numbers of lapwing could also be seen in flight, with the gorgeous low light making their large butterfly wings almost appear to flicker black and white.

Moving on to Viewing Platform One, a quick scan across the open water to the north revealed the first great white egret of the trip. Lots of tufted duck could also be seen here, with a few overwintering wigeon also present. A few great-crested grebes could also be observed, with the group able to particularly enjoy a pair which constantly switched their attentions between nest-building and displaying to one another. A female marsh harrier then drifted over the reedbed, and the third egret species of the afternoon, a little egret, was spotted skulking by the edge of the reeds. All these birds were observed against a noisy backdrop of little grebes and water rails calling away from somewhere in amongst the reeds.

Walking towards the Tor View Hide, the group were then able to enjoy their first views of gadwall, with everyone appreciating the 'vermiculations' along the males' flanks. Here too a couple of drake pochard were observed in the deeper water. Many of the shoveler were busy with their 'yin-and-yang' courtship display behaviour that few in the group had seen before. More great-crested grebes and tufted ducks were picked up here too. From the Tor view hide a little grebe was finally spotted out in the open and at least seven snipe were picked up while quietly resting along the edge of the reeds. In a sign that spring would soon start springing, the group then watched a pair of grey herons nest-building in a small bush situated in the middle of the reedbed. This was also the location from where the long-staying ring-necked duck had been most regularly seen, but on this occasion, it couldn't be located and so the group had to settle for another seven or eight pochard instead, which were tucked in right at the back of the open water. Finally, before leaving the hide another marsh harrier was picked up away to the south and along the tree-line that forms the border to the reserve.

The group then carried on further east along the main drove to Viewing Platform Two, which was also the location closest to where the starlings had most recently been roosting. A calling chiffchaff was the first bird to be heard upon our arrival, while on the open water to the north a large number of wildfowl could also be clearly seen. A slightly surprising spot was a flock of long-tailed tits doing a very good impression of bearded tits as they fed amongst the seedbeds of some close by bullrush. As the light levels continued to drop, small starling flocks began to arrive from all points on the compass. This slow build-up was then spectacularly interrupted when Mike spotted a male hen harrier flying in from the east, and all the folk present had terrific



views as it passed close by to the north of the viewpoint before then pitching into the reeds - presumably for the night. At one point both species of harriers could be seen on the wing at the same time - providing an amazing opportunity to compare both species on the wing.

All the while starling numbers were continuing to build up and although the murmuration was minimal, with most starlings descending directly into the reeds, the number seen was nevertheless huge. The super-flock appeared to have fragmented with starlings descending into at least four distinct locations. The largest of these smaller flocks descended to the north of VP2, where at one point the influx resembled a river of birds. While impossible to count numbers, the many thousands flying in were flanked by at least four marsh harriers which were busy trying to catch any unwary starlings by surprise.

Despite the majority of the starlings dropping into the reedbed at distance, many had descended very close to the group's location, painting the reeds' stems black in the process. Walking happily back to the minibus, a Cetti's warbler was heard, with Mike and a couple of guests getting a brief view of a woodcock, before one lucky guest then caught a fleeting glimpse of a barn owl, during the back to Worth House. And all agreed it had been an excellent first session, as they tucked in to a fine Sunday roast.

Day 2: RSPB Greylake, Bridge at Oath, RSPB Swell Wood, WWW Steart Marshes, & Bridgwater Bay NNR

Monday 31 January 2022

Leaving the hotel at 9am, the weather was partly sunny with an increasing wind as the group headed off for RSPB Greylake in the south of the Levels. The (by now) usual cattle egrets, mute swans & buzzards were all noted as the group passed Westhay Moor NNR. The continued (albeit sporadic) presence of a rare Baikal teal meant that the car park was far busier than would normally have been expected for a Monday morning. Just at the entrance to the reserve a pair of stonechat was noted by one of the guests, and after parking up everyone crossed the road to enjoy this showy species. Also present in the fields were a few redwing and fieldfare - enabling the guests to have good views of both of these winter thrushes as they fed on the ground. A distant marsh harrier and another buzzard were also observed from this viewpoint.

The RSPB have also put feeders in the car park, enabling all to enjoy the house sparrows and goldfinch coming down for the free hand-out. Avoiding the hide for the time-being, Mike then took the group on the circular route around the reedbeds, but with a northwesterly wind increasing in strength it was making it progressively more difficult to listen for calling bearded tits. However, by way of compensation, all did manage to hear both water rail and Cetti's warblers calling from deep in amongst the reedbed. Arriving at the gate just to the west of the hide first, the group were then treated to close views of wigeon, teal, gadwall, shoveler & mallard feeding out on the grazing marsh. In common with most other locations across the Levels, lapwings were seen in very high numbers here as well.

Walking round to the hide it was immediately obvious it was very busy, making it difficult for all the group to fit safely in, but despite a number of long-staying photographers refusing to budge most still managed to see three great white egrets together and catch a female marsh harrier causing havoc amongst the wildfowl on the grazing marsh below. The Baikal teal had not been spotted that morning but by looking across to the east of the hide the group were able instead to enjoy around 300 to 400 golden plover roosting quietly in one of the reserve's other pasture fields. Taking the more direct route back to the minibus, the group took a hot drink before dropping into the close by town of Langport to use their facilities.

Suitably refreshed, the next planned stop was at Oath to look for the cranes. Usually, the bridge at Oath is the best viewpoint from which to scan for this elegant species across Aller Moor, but on this occasion and despite our best efforts, none could be picked up. So, without delay Mike then took the group up to RSPB Swell Wood, whereby a stroke of fortune had resulted in the feeders having recently been filled. This meant that in addition to great, blue and coal tit, a marsh tit was eventually seen, followed by a very confiding treecreeper and a very shy nuthatch!



Mike then took all the lunches across to the heronry hide, whereupon while tucking in to their sandwiches the group were entertained by a very tame robin and a single jay spotted up in the oak trees. Mike also explained that despite the nest-building herons seen on the Avalon Marshes the previous day, it was still a little too early in the year to see the herons returning to these far more exposed nest-sites. After lunch, the group then took a stroll down to the viewpoint, with Mike pointing out a few ferns and ancient woodland indicators along the way. At the viewpoint, which gives a commanding view across West Sedge Moor, a quick scan revealed three distant cranes. To the delight of all these birds then took off, before landing much closer, which enabled all the group to obtain much better views of the products of this very successful reintroduction project. Returning back to the minibus, Mike suggested the group then drive across Curry Moor, which proved to be a good call as 13 whooper swans were quickly picked up in amongst some resident mute swans. As both species were intermingling, this gave a fine opportunity to directly compare and contrast these two closely related species.

The next stop was WWW Steart Marshes, where after a refreshment stop the group briefly watched goldfinch and house sparrows on the feeders, while a male pied wagtail was spotted in the car park. Walking across to the Quantocks Hide, large flocks of lapwing were continually observed overhead. The hide itself gives fine views across a brackish scrape, with usually large numbers of birds present at this time of year, but due to the now high winds many of the birds were hunkered down instead. In addition to the usual wigeon, teal and gadwall, large numbers of shelduck were also observed. Redshank were one of the few birds to be dotted across the entire scrape, with Mike then spotting the trip's star wader, in the form of around 30 black-tailed godwits, away to the south. A couple of ravens passing over the hide, while calling, were the only other birds of note here.

Returning back to the minibus the group then drove the short distance to the Bridgwater Bay car park, putting on wellingtons. Mike proceeded to take them across the saltmarsh, and all were rewarded with a couple of skylarks and a few meadow pipits before climbing the shingle ridge for a view out into the bay. Unfortunately, the tide was still a long way out, but a huge flock of around 20,000 dunlin away to the north could be seen as they were constantly being pushed off the mud by the steadily advancing tide. Despite huge numbers of other birds being additionally seen out on the mud, they were simply too far out to be clearly identified. Before retreating back to the minibus, a few curlew were picked up on the mud just to the south, with a group of seven then flying straight past the group.

Mike then drove the group even further up the peninsula, before taking a stroll to the bird screen positioned closest to the breach point. On the marshy pool here, much closer views of even more black-tailed godwits redshank, wigeon and teal could be seen against the backdrop of a setting sun. And finally returning once more to the shingle ridge overlooking Bridgwater Bay, three grey plover were picked out before the light was lost, necessitating a dusky retreat to the minibus before then returning back to the hotel. These were happily not the last sighting of the day however, as a barn owl was seen briefly by all as it flashed in front of the minibus's headlights on the way back across the moor!

Day 3: Tealham Moor, Catcott SWT Complex, Shapwick Heath NNR, Ham Wall RSPB, Westhay Moor NNR & Cheddar Reservoir

Tuesday 1 February 2022

Waking up to the last full day, the group could see at breakfast that the wind had still not abated, but despite the cold, overcast nature of the day, it was at least forecast to be dry. The first planned destination was to Tealham Moor to look for a bean goose that had recently been reported. This is considered a rare winter visitor to the UK's West Country, but as Mike took the group along Totney Drove which had been the goose's last reported location, a low-flying helicopter was observed flushing a number of birds off the moor, including seven or eight geese. As the bean goose could not be found, the group had to come to the inevitable conclusion that the bean goose may well have been amongst the small flock of flushed geese. A single Canada goose then passed over the moor, but apart from plenty of black-headed gulls and mute swans the flooded grasslands here held little else of note.



Driving on to Catcott, a full car park meant that the hide would be full, so the group opted to use the screen just off to the left for a view across the grazing marsh. Plenty of wigeon, teal, gadwall and shoveler could be seen a close quarters plus great views of a new duck for the week - pintail. A number of drakes could be seen resting close to the screen, giving everyone an opportunity to enjoy fine views of this handsome bird. Great white and little egrets were also picked up on the marsh, before the long-staying glossy ibis was finally found. First observed while feeding away, before then stopping to have a preen, the ibis then took to the wing, enabling all to see its very familiar silhouette of a down-curved bill and legs projecting way beyond the tail as it flew further off into the marsh.

Buoyed by great views of such a special bird, the next stop was at Shapwick NNR, which is both adjacent to RSPB Ham Wall and positioned at the very heart of the Avalon Marshes. Having parked up, the group then walked west along the south side of the central drain and had great views of both a pair of bullfinch and a family of long-tailed tits at close quarters before eventually emerging into the areas dominated by reedbed and open water. Despite still being windy, the cloud was steadily beginning to break up and by the Tower Hide the group were able to spot two species of egrets, the usual wildfowl and three snipe tucked in amongst the reeds. A couple of female marsh harriers were also picked up above the reedbed to the north of the drove.

Mike then took the group along to Noah Hide. This hide gives commanding views across Noah Lake, but due to the continuing strong wind, most of the birds were tucked up along the east-facing fringe of the reedbed, on the other side of the lake. Nevertheless with the hope of scopes the group were able to spot at least 30 pintail, mixed in amongst the assorted wigeon, shoveler, tufted duck, gadwall and pochard. Activity was not just confined to the water though, as two marsh harriers and a buzzard were also observed along the reserve's western perimeter. Another marsh harrier was also seen in the process of being chased off by a pair of ravens. The presence of mute swans, cormorants and great-crested grebes were also noted on the lake.

Returning to the car park, the group then walked over to use the facilities at RSPB Ham Wall. The sun was also finally beginning to make an appearance as the group then walked to the edge of the car park to see what might be occupying the small section of sun-bathed scrub out of the wind. It was distinctly warmer and more sheltered here and so was full of birds, with the group watching a number of species coming down to bathe. Blue tits, great tits and chaffinch were all seen in quick succession, before a grey wagtail and wren then made an appearance. The distinct call of a chiffchaff was also then heard before a small bird dashed over everyone's heads and into the hedge line. It was assumed that this might be the calling chiffchaff, until Mike caught a glimpse of its green mantle and white supercillium - the group had found their very own firecrest! Unfortunately, it refused to show itself again, but most of the group had managed to obtain at least a brief view of this rare winter visitor to the Levels!

Mike suggested that this had possibly been the only sighting of firecrest managed at this site all winter as the delighted group then headed off to Westhay Moor. This large site is managed by the Somerset Wildlife Trust and as it was still quite windy the group headed to the most sheltered part around 20 Acre Lake. Spotting a lovely male goldcrest on the way, the star waterbird here was a drake goldeneye in full breeding plumage. Better was to come, however, further along the drove, in the form of two male and a female goosander. These birds had also recently finished moulting, with the males' breasts looking almost salmon-coloured in the late afternoon light.

Due to the long distance back to the minibus, Mike suggested the group continue up the drove while he jogged back to collect the minibus. Returning to the car park, he then drove round to pick up all the guests as they headed onwards to their last destination of the day.

Cheddar Reservoir is situated in the very north east of the Levels and in winter can turn up some interesting gulls and wildfowl. Climbing up to the rim of the reservoir, the group were firstly confronted with a large gull roost, as lesser black-backed and common gulls were seen alongside the more abundant herring and black-headed gulls. Great-crested grebes were also abundant on here, with very few in breeding plumage, in



contrast to the grebes seen elsewhere on the Levels. Wildfowl were also present in healthy numbers, as wigeon, gadwall, teal and a few pintail and pochard were all recorded. Right over on the far side of the reservoir a flock of seven goosander were then picked up, but with light fading the group reluctantly headed back to the hotel for a delicious risotto, followed by pavlova prepared by our hosts.

Day 4: East bank of the River Parrett, Westhay Moor Drove, Tealham Moor - Kid Gate Drove & RSPB Ham Wall

Wednesday 2 February 2022

After two and a half days of decidedly mixed weather, the group finally awoke to both beautiful clear skies and very little wind for their last morning of the tour. The coast was the destination of choice as the group set off early to take advantage of a high tide, with the plan being to then return for a late breakfast back at the hotel.

Driving west from the hotel, Mike parked the minibus just north of the Huntspill sluice and on the east bank of the River Parrett, with the first area to be investigated being the surrounding coastal scrub. A quick search here instantly revealed both the trip's first singing song thrush and a healthy population of greenfinch. As both of these species have suffered alarming declines across much of the UK - for very different reasons - to encounter both here was particularly pleasing.

The group then walked the short distance up onto the riverbank, which gave commanding views over the River Parrett and all the way across to the Steart Peninsula. Here a couple skylark made their presence known above the fringing saltmarsh, which preceded a small flock of linnet, which were easily identified by their trademark flight calls. On the other side of the river a high tide roost of at least 300 avocet was then spotted, and even at a distance it was the most wonderful sight watching the flock periodically take to the air. Further to the north, another high tide roost of around 100 oystercatchers could also clearly be seen while waiting for the waters to recede on the south side of Steart Island.

A small flock of Canada geese was also picked up on the 'Steart side', with dunlin and redshank flocks regularly observed up as they flew past. The scoping of these birds was then interrupted by three ravens cronking away as they flew overhead, which was then followed by the fly-past of a single meadow pipit. A large flock of at least 50 curlews was then observed towards the tip of the peninsula, which revealed their presence while lifting off to feed. Taking a stroll a little further along the river bank, five grey plover were then picked up, and upon lifting off gave the group a clear views of this species' trademark black armpits.

All agreed it had been well worth getting up early as we returned back for a late and much anticipated breakfast. After everyone had then checked out of their rooms, it was decided that there was still time for one last attempt at finding the tundra bean goose on Tealham Moor. On the way, Mike took the group along Westhay Moor Drove to look for finch flocks, which proved a good call after chancing upon a very large group of small birds feeding in some stubble. In between feeding bouts the flock kept returning to a line of alders and birches, and despite the majority being chaffinch, at least 12 brambling and around 20 reed bunting were seen - all in all a great find!

Driving on to look for the bean goose, it was a case of third time lucky as the individual was quickly picked up with five Canada geese and a few mute swans. This represented a new species for many of the group and all enjoyed crippling views in particularly good light of this rare winter visitor from the Arctic tundra. Much smaller than the Canada geese, the petite, distinctive and bicoloured bill was perhaps this goose's most defining feature. Buoyed by this brilliant sighting, the group then dropped in to Ham Wall for one last look at where they had found the firecrest, and it was rediscovered almost immediately. A sunning peacock butterfly was then observed, which represented the first butterfly of the year for all present - and served as the perfect full-stop to the end of a brilliant trip.



With time running out, we then finished off with a sandwich lunch back at Worth House, while finalising the trip's checklist. The only bit of business left was for the group to bid fond farewells and safe travels as everyone headed for home.



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	Whooper swan	Cygnus cygnus		✓		
5	Shelduck	Tadorna tadorna		✓		✓
6	Shoveler	Spatula clypeata	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Gadwall	Mareca strepera	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Wigeon	Mareca penelope	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Pintail	Anas acuta			✓	
11	Teal	Anas crecca	✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Pochard	Aythya ferina	✓		✓	
13	Tufted duck	Aythya fuligula	✓		✓	✓
14	Goldeneye	Bucephala clangula			✓	
15	Goosander	Mergus merganser			✓	✓
16	Pheasant	Phasianus colchicus	✓	✓	✓	✓
17	Little grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis	✓			Н
18	Great crested grebe	Podiceps cristatus	✓		✓	
19	Glossy ibis	Plegadis falcinellus			✓	
20	Cattle egret	Bubulcis ibis	✓	√	✓	✓
21	Grey heron	Ardea cinerea	✓	✓	✓	✓
22	Great white egret	Ardea alba	✓	✓	✓	✓
23	Little egret	Egretta garzetta	✓	✓	✓	✓
24	Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo	✓	✓	✓	✓
25	Marsh harrier	Circus aeruginosus	✓	✓	✓	
26	Hen harrier	Circus cyaneus	✓			



27	Buzzard	Buteo buteo	✓	✓	✓	✓
28	Water rail	Rallus aquaticus	Н	Н	Н	
29	Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus	✓			✓
30	Coot	Fulica atra	√		✓	✓
31	Crane	Grus grus		✓		
32	Oystercatcher	Haematopus ostralegus				✓
33	Avocet	Recurvirostra avosetta				✓
34	Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus	✓	✓	✓	✓
35	Golden plover	Pluvialis apricaria		✓	✓	
36	Grey plover	Pluvialis squatarola		✓		✓
37	Curlew	Numenius arquata		✓		✓
38	Black-tailed godwit	Limosa limosa		✓		
39	Dunlin	Calidris alpina		✓		✓
40	Woodcock	Scolopax rusticola	✓			
41	Snipe	Gallinago gallinago	√		✓	
42	Redshank	Tringa totanus		✓		
43	Black-headed gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus		✓	✓	✓
44	Common gull	Larus canus			✓	
45	Great black-backed gull	Larus marinus				✓
46	Herring gull	Larus argentatus	✓	✓	✓	✓
47	Lesser black-backed gull	Larus fuscus			✓	✓
48	Stock dove	Columba oenas		✓		
49	Woodpigeon	Columba palumbus	✓	✓	✓	✓
50	Collared dove	Streptopelia decaocto	✓	✓	✓	√
51	Barn owl	Tyto alba	✓	✓		
52	Kingfisher	Alcedo atthis		✓		
53	Great spotted woodpecker	Dendrocopos major	✓	✓	✓	
54	Green woodpecker	Picus viridis				√
55	Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus		✓	✓	√
56	Peregrine	Falco peregrinus		✓	✓	
57	Jay	Garrulus glandarius		✓		
	July	Garraras grantaurras		√		



58	Magpie	Pica pica	✓	✓	✓	✓
59	Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula	✓	✓	✓	✓
60	Rook	Corvus frugilegus		✓		✓
61	Carrion crow	Corvus corone	✓	✓	✓	✓
62	Raven	Corvus corax		✓	✓	✓
63	Coal tit	Periparus ater		✓	✓	
64	Marsh tit	Poecile palustris		✓		
65	Blue tit	Cyanistes caeruleus		✓	✓	✓
66	Great tit	Parus major	✓	✓	✓	✓
67	Skylark	Alauda arvensis		✓		✓
68	Cetti's warbler	Cettia cetti	Н	Н	Н	
69	Long-tailed tit	Aegithalos caudatus	✓	✓	✓	
70	Chiffchaff	Phylloscopus collybita	Н		Н	
71	Firecrest	Regulus ignicapilla			✓	✓
72	Goldcrest	Regulus regulus		✓	✓	
73	Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes	Н	✓	✓	✓
74	Nuthatch	Sitta europaea		✓		
75	Treecreeper	Certhia familiaris		✓		
76	Starling	Sturnus vulgaris	✓	✓	✓	✓
77	Blackbird	Turdus merula	✓	✓	✓	✓
78	Fieldfare	Turdus pilaris		✓	✓	Н
79	Redwing	Turdus iliacus		✓	✓	✓
80	Song thrush	Turdus philomelos			✓	√
81	Mistle thrush	Turdus viscivorus	✓			✓
82	Robin	Erithacus rubecula	✓	✓	✓	✓
83	Stonechat	Saxicola rubicola		✓		
84	House sparrow	Passer domesticus		✓		✓
85	Dunnock	Prunella modularis		✓	✓	✓
86	Grey wagtail	Motacilla cinerea			✓	
87	Pied wagtail	Motacilla alba		✓	✓	√
88	Meadow pipit	Anthus pratensis		✓	✓	✓



89	Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs	✓	✓	✓	✓
90	Brambling	Fringilla montifringilla				✓
91	Bullfinch	Pyrrhula pyrrhula			✓	
92	Greenfinch	Chloris chloris				✓
93	Linnet	Linaria cannabina		✓		✓
94	Lesser redpoll	Acanthis cabaret	✓			
95	Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis	✓	✓	✓	✓
96	Siskin	Spinus spinus			✓	
97	Reed bunting	Emberiza schoeniclus				✓
98	Bean goose	Anser serrirostris				✓
	MAMMALS	MAMMILIA				
1	Rabbit	Oryctolagus cuniculus				✓
2	Brown hare	Lepus europaeus		✓		
3	Grey squirrel	Sciurus carolinensis		✓	✓	
4	Roe deer	Capreolus capreolus		✓	✓	✓
	BUTTERFLIES	RHOPALOCERA				
1	Peacock butterfly	Aglais io				✓

