

Tour Report

UK - Somerset Levels in Winter

9 - 12 January 2022

Glossy ibis



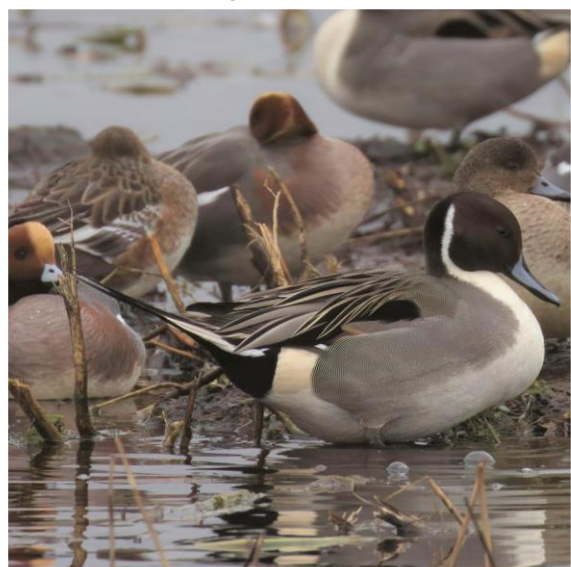
Starling murmuration



Reeds in winter



Pintail and wigeon



Compiled by: Mike Dilger
Images by Mike Stamp & Carol Sudberry

Tour Leader: Mike Dilger with seven participants

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

Sunday 9 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 first of three winter trips slated for January. The weather was dry, still and relatively mild for the time of year, and 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.

With the murmuration already a major tourist attraction, and it being a Sunday, the car park was already busy to overflowing when we arrived. On walking up to the main drove a female pied wagtail was spotted and a magpie noted as we passed through the surrounding willow carr. A great spotted woodpecker was also picked up by a couple of guests too. From the bridge to the west of Walton Heath the guests were able to enjoy their first views of both male and female of gadwall and teal. Large numbers of lapwing to the north of the main drove could also be seen whenever they took to the air. A little further east along the main drove, yet more teal, a small number of shoveler and a few lapwing were noted, with seven snipe quietly tucked in amongst the cut reeds a good find. A little grebe could also be heard calling from somewhere in amongst the reeds and close to the Tor View Hide.

Looking out from Viewing Platform 1 (VP1) a few great crested grebes were quickly spotted, alongside the first great white egrets of the trip and a couple of the far more diminutive, little egret. Wigeon were also present on the water in good numbers, while the constantly agitated lapwing seen earlier were constantly undecided as to whether to stick or twist! Yet more teal could also be seen along the edge of the reeds, alongside a few tufted duck and a single male pochard. Having recently moulted into their breeding plumage, the vast majority of the wildfowl were by now looking spectacular. Coots were ever present on the open water, while a few moorhen could also be glimpsed moving in and out of the fringing Phragmites. In addition to the occasionally whinnying of little grebes, Cetti's warblers could also be heard belting out their loud and strident songs from deep within the reedbed. Wren and robin were also observed from the viewing platform here.

While waiting for the starlings to arrive, Mike suggested a walk down to the Torr Hide, and alongside the tufties, the group were lucky enough to catch up with the long-staying drake ring-necked duck. Despite being still partially in eclipse, the group were able to pick out the subtly different features that distinguish this American vagrant from that of its closely related transatlantic cousin - the tufted duck. Looking across the water to the east and Glastonbury Tor, huge numbers of shoveler and gadwall could also be seen, with many of the former doing their yin and yang courtship display right in front of the group. Mike was able to explain that many species of wildfowl tend to carry out their courtship on their wintering grounds, before then returning to their breeding grounds with their vows renewed for another year. A grey heron was also picked up close to the hide here too.

Moving back to VP1, the starlings had begun to arrive from all points on the compass. While very difficult to estimate numbers, it is thought the Avalon Marshes roost may contain as many as half a million birds, and due to the huge numbers of arrivals the flock on this occasion had split. Many were observed descending to the reeds on Waltons Marsh, with Loxton's Marsh also providing accommodation for the night, while another tranche came down close to the Avalon Hide. While the murmuration was not exceptional, with most birds dropping straight into the reedbeds, all agreed they had never seen so many congregated in one location. And just before walking back to the car park, a peregrine was picked up as it flashed past the group. While then returning along the same route, in the ever decreasing light, a party of long-tailed tits also turned up, to provide the group with the perfect full stop on an action-packed first afternoon. This dusky walk back also enabled the group to build up a keen anticipation of the Sunday roast awaiting them back at Worth House.

Day 2: West Moor Drove, RSPB Greylake, the Bridge at Oath, Langport, RSPB Swell Wood, Catcott SWT Complex & RSPB Ham Wall.

Monday 10 January 2022

The group were greeted with a mild and drizzly morning as they tucked into their breakfast on the first full day of the trip. The damp weather, was however, unable to dampen the spirit of the group, as they set off, with RSPB Greylake, in the southerly part of the Levels, the morning's first destination. Passing along the east of Westhay Moor National Nature Reserve, a big flock of cattle egrets were noted, with a male kestrel picked up in a tree, while two great spotted woodpeckers were also observed up on a nearby telegraph pole. Mike then flushed a green sandpiper from the roadside rhine while parking up, which the group unfortunately missed, but while looking for this unusual overwintering wader, the group did manage to find a single grey wagtail by the roadside sluice. Moving further south, a large finch flock, comprising chaffinch, a couple of brambling and half a dozen reed buntings were also observed by the group. While stopping at the roadside to enjoy the mixed flock, a female marsh harrier was then picked up as it quartered the hedgerows away to the south.

Moving onto a very busy RSPB Greylake, the first birds picked up on the walk towards the hides were two ravens in the field closest to the entrance track. Above this pasture a large flock of lapwing and at least 250 golden plover were then picked up overhead, enabling the group to differentiate between the very different wing shapes of these two commonly associating species. Robins, chaffinches and house sparrows were also noted in the shrubbery surrounding the car park as well. Moving on to the hide, the very recent New Year appearance, of a drake Baikal teal made the hide much busier than would normally have been expected on a Monday morning. The group here were able to pick out huge numbers of teal and wigeon, with a few pintail liberally sprinkled in amongst the two commoner wildfowl species. Shoveler and gadwall were present on the grazing marsh. The shout of "Baikal!" then went up, and Mike and a couple of guests were able to enjoy a brief view of this exceptional rarity before it then disappeared back into the rushes to the frustration of the rest. A female marsh harrier was also enjoyed by the group as drifted over the marsh - which also resulted in most of the wildfowl once again taking to the air in a huge dread. Deciding the hide was perhaps too busy given the still-recent rules around social distancing, we then returned back to the minibus to travel onwards to Oath.

The bridge over the railway is usually the best place to scan for common crane which has been the focus of a very successful reintroduction project. They were immediately located though the telescope, with the group estimating the flocks to contain at least 40 birds, the highest number Mike had ever seen! A dozen then took off to the east, enabling the group to see their huge wingspans in action. But the best was saved for last, as two birds then flew right past the group, apparently on the way to West Sedgemoor, with some even able to take a few photographs of what must surely be Britain's tallest bird.

After a quick pitstop in Langport to use the facilities, the group then travelled up to the ridge linking Langport and the Blackdown Hills. It is here that RSPB Swell Wood is located. Usually the feeders in the woodland car park are a good place to look for marsh tits, but as the feeders hadn't been filled, this uncommon species was reluctant to reveal itself - apart from to two guests who just happened to be looking in the right place, at the right time as one briefly made a fleeting appearance!

Taking our lunch to the heronry hide nearby, the group sat down to enjoy their sandwiches and were rewarded in quick succession with a couple of nuthatch, at least two treecreepers and a very obliging goldcrest which had come down to the pool to bathe. A couple of great spotted woodpeckers were also observed here too. Deciding that a walk in the woods might not yield many more species for the trip, Mike suggested the group head back to the Avalon Marshes, with a quick visit to Catcott Complex before finishing the day once more at RSPB Ham Wall. Managed by the Somerset Wildlife Trust, this reserve has recently punched well above its weight, and as a result has become very popular. Arriving in the car park, it became obvious that the hide was full, so the group took up position behind the screen just to the left. From here they were able to enjoy very close views of a variety of wildfowl, with the star birds being some exceptionally

close drake pintail, which posed beautifully for the photographers in the group. A couple of marsh harriers were also picked up further out on the grazing marsh too.

While chatting to some other birders, they kindly informed us of the presence of a glossy ibis associating with a flock of cattle egret at the nearby Honeygar Farm - a site recently purchased by the Somerset Wildlife Trust. So, after a quick dash round, all were rewarded with great views of what is now proving to be a common vagrant in the West Country. With both cattle and great white egret now firmly established on the Levels there is considerable talk that this might be the next species to begin breeding here over the next few years. And the ibis certainly look totally at home as the group watched it happily feeding in amongst around 50 cattle egret in grass set aside for cattle.

The guests were keen to have another crack at the starlings and so after driving back to RSPB Ham Wall, walked up the main drove near VP1. There were far fewer visitors this time and after enjoying a couple of drake pochard and close views of both great white and little egret, a most enjoyable murmuration followed. Having learnt where the birds had roosted the night before, the group must have been no more than 50m from where tens of thousands were descending into the reeds. This gave the group a front row seat as the whole section of reed turned black with noisy roosting birds.

Day 3: Shapwick Heath NNR, Bridgwater Bay, WWT Steart Marshes, Cheddar Reservoir

Tuesday 11 January 2022

Once again, the group were met with more mild and drizzly weather as they convened for breakfast on the last full day of the tour. With a visit to the coast on the cards it was important to get the tide right at Bridgwater Bay, so the group started with a visit to Shapwick Heath NNR. Starting at the eastern end of the reserve, a walk through the wood and scrub revealed three bullfinch, which were initially heard, before then being located in a tree. Commencing further west, the group came out into the open, and with extensive stands of reeds on either side of the drove stood next to the new hide while enjoying great crested grebes, great white egret and a large variety of wildfowl. Moving then down to Noah's hide, the group then chanced upon a mixed flock in the wet woodland with blue, great and long-tailed tits, in addition to great spotted woodpecker. The view from Noah's hide was one of wildfowl as far as the eye could see. Large number of mute swans could also be seen, but the overwintering whoopers, despite being briefly heard, had obviously decided to remain hidden. By way of compensation, at least three marsh harriers were observed perching across the site, while a couple of heron contemplated looking for lunch along the edge of the reeds. A single moorhen was also observed just below the hide.

Walking quickly back to the car park, Mike then took the group over to WWT Steart Marshes. Managed by the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust, this latest addition to the charity's portfolio covers large freshwater and brackish scrapes alongside where the River Parrett emerges into the Bridgwater Bay. While using the facilities, the group were able to watch goldfinch & house sparrows on the feeders alongside a single meadow pipit on the fence. With everyone suitable refreshed, Mike then drove down to the lower car park, before taking the group across the wet saltmarsh and up on to the shingle ridge overlooking the bay. Very large flocks of dunlin were the main attraction here, as they were constantly pushed off the mud by the advancing tide. Alongside these dinky waders, there was also the welcome discovery of at least a dozen grey plover dotted along the tideline. In the small amount of remaining saltmarsh left uncovered a few curlew and oystercatcher were additionally picked out with the help of the scope, while a flock of at least twelve turnstone were also noted in amongst a far more populous dunlin. A small flock of shelduck were also present roosting on the water, while even from a considerable distance the red legs of redshank could easily be observed through binoculars. While watching the activity from the crest of the ridge a steady stream of meadow pipits were observed passing the group, with a 'wheest' from a single rock pipit also heard while flying past. Finally as we crossed back over the saltmarsh, at least two skylarks were flushed, with their distinctive chirruping contact call heard by all.

Driving back to the main WWT car park, an impressive number of at least 50 pied wagtails were observed feeding a recently sown arable field, before the group then took their lunch down to the Quantocks Hide. So-called as it overlooks the Quantocks to the west, the extensive and recently erected hide is also positioned adjacent to a brackish scrape. Pride of place in front of the hide, upon our entrance, were three avocets, and while the group tucked into their sandwiches, it was fascinating watching these elegant waders tucking into their own lunch too, as delicate sideways swishes of their bills expertly separated innumerable invertebrates from the turbid waters.

In addition to the wigeon, teal and tufted duck, large numbers of shelduck were roosting on the scrape and feeding redshank were common in the shallower waters too. Further back on the scrape huge numbers lapwing and golden plover could be seen taking a break from the rigours of feeding, and then great excitement ensued when a female merlin was picked up as it perched on some old wooden fencing. As Mike lined the scope up on this fabulous pint-sized predator, all were then able to enjoy great views of this widespread but rarely seen member of the falcon family.

Suddenly all the lapwing and golden plover lifted off as one and the group watched open-mouthed as a peregrine screamed across the scrape in a brazen attempt to grab any duck or wader not paying attention. As the peregrine then swung behind the hide, everyone ran out to see it land on one of a number of pylons, which bisect the reserve. Through the scope it was obvious this was a young bird, which had probably fledged in 2021 - and marked the end of a very exciting ten minutes end-to-end entertainment.

Leaving Steart behind, there was still an opportunity to visit one more location before dusk descended, with Mike suggesting a quick visit to observe the gull roost at Cheddar Reservoir. By now the temperature was dropping appreciably, and with the drizzle having finally disappeared for good the group were able to enjoy a huge numbers of gulls - as common gulls and at least a hundred lesser black-backed gulls were picked out from in between the more numerous herring and black-headed gulls. It was also interesting to note that some of the black-headed gulls were slowly acquiring their far more familiar breeding plumage. Great crested grebes were also identified by the group, before Mike managed to pick up a single female goosander on the other side of the reservoir. But shortly afterwards the fading light then forced a return back to Worth House for hot showers and a fine meal courtesy of our hosts.

Day 4: RSPB Greylake and Westhay Moor NNR

Wednesday 12 January 2022

After two and a half days of decidedly mixed weather, the group finally awoke to beautiful clear skies for their last morning of the tour. A number of the guests were keen to look for Cetti's warblers and bearded tits so Mike suggested they travel back down to RSPB Greylake, which is probably the best place on the Levels to see these two reedbed specialists. On arrival at the car park two things were immediately obvious: firstly, it was very foggy and secondly due to the continued presence of the Baikal teal, the car park was once again pretty full. Deciding to give the hides a wide berth Mike instead suggested the group take the circular walk around the reedbed.

Almost immediately after entering into the reedbed we had terrific views of a very loud Cetti's warbler, which represented the first ever sighting of this shy and retiring bird for many of the guests. Walking around, water rails could clearly be heard 'sharming' from in amongst the reeds, but unlike the Cetti's flatly refused to show themselves, as did the elusive bearded tits. Here the mist ebbed and flowed, but the group were still able to enjoy super views of a small flock of redwing and a couple of stonechats through the gloom. In the alders nearby a small flock of siskin were then seen and head as they flew overhead, while two song thrushes feeding along the path were a welcome bonus. We could also hear unseen lapwing and teal calling out in the fog.

Upon returning to the car park, and after taking in coffee and biscuits, the group then returned back north, with the intention to finish the tour at Westhay Moor NNR. By now the weather was marvellous, without a

cloud in the sky, and despite the muddy state of the ditches, all enjoyed an amble around the reserve with the sun on their faces. Highlights at this large reserve managed by the Somerset Wildlife Trust were a pair of goldeneye, with the male moulting into his breeding plumage, and four gorgeous goosander in perfect breeding condition. In addition to all three species of egret, a few lesser redpolls were additionally identified by their distinctive calls while passing overhead.

With time running out, Mike ran back for the minibus, while the rest of the group walked the short distance up the ditches to the road at the north of the reserve, where they were subsequently picked up. A most excellent and enjoyable tour was then concluded with a sandwich lunch back at Worth House before everyone exchanged contact details and bid fond farewells.



Checklist



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4
	BIRDS	AVES				
1	Canada goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>		✓		H
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	Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>				✓
14	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>			✓	✓
15	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
16	Little grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	H	H		H
17	Great crested grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
18	Glossy ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>		✓		
19	Cattle egret	<i>Bubulcis ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
20	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
21	Great white egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
22	Little egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
23	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
24	Marsh harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		✓	✓	
25	Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓	✓



26	Water rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	H	H	H	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	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			✓	
37	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>			✓	
38	Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓			✓
39	Green sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>		✓		
40	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			✓	
41	Black-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
42	Common gull	<i>Larus canus</i>			✓	
43	Herring gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	
44	Lesser black-backed gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			✓	
45	Stock dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>		✓		
46	Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
47	Collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	
48	Tawny owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>				H
49	Great spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
50	Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓		
51	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>			✓	
52	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	✓		✓	
53	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
54	Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
55	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
56	Carrion crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓

57	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓		
58	Coal tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>		✓	✓	
59	Marsh tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>		✓		
60	Blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓
61	Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓
62	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>			✓	
63	Cetti's warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	H	H	H	✓
64	Long-tailed tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓		✓	✓
65	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	H			✓
66	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		✓		
67	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
68	Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		✓		
69	Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>		✓		
70	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
71	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
72	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>		✓		
73	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		✓		✓
74	Song thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓	✓	✓
75	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
76	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓	✓	✓
77	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓
78	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>			✓	✓
79	Grey wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		✓		
80	Pied wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	
81	Meadow pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>			✓	
82	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓
83	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>		✓		
84	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>			✓	
85	Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>				✓
86	Lesser redpoll	<i>Acanthis cabaret</i>				H
87	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>			✓	✓

88	Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>				✓
89	Reed bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		✓	✓	✓
90	Ring-necked duck	<i>Aythya collaris</i>	✓			
91	Baikal teal	<i>Sibirionetta formosa</i>		✓		
	MAMMALS	MAMMILIA				
1	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>				✓
2	Grey squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>		✓		