



ORIOLE BIRDING



TOUR REPORT SOMERSET LEVELS & FOREST OF DEAN 18TH – 22ND MAY 2021

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MONDAY 18th MAY – *Light W winds, sunny spells, 14C*

The group convened at around 14:30 at the Swan Hotel in historic Wells, which would be our base for the next two nights. Relieved that a heavy shower had just passed through, we headed off in the tour vehicle – a comfortable nine-seater Vauxhall Vivaro – and arrived at Westhay Moor NNR about 20 minutes later.

Westhay is long-established Somerset Wildlife Trust reserve, being a network of open water, reedbed and the largest surviving fragment of lowland acidic mire in the south-west, all reclaimed from the remnants of industrial-scale peat extraction. The approach track to the reserve gave us excellent views of Cetti's Warbler, Common Whitethroat and Eurasian Reed Warbler, all in the same bush, while several pairs of Great Crested Grebes tended young nearby. Our first two **Eurasian Hobbies** were seen hawking insects, while numerous Common Swifts were ever-present.

Walking to the tower hide we noted flypast **Great White Egret**, Little Egret and Common Buzzard, while the bushes were alive with bird song – mainly Cetti's Warbler, Willow Warbler, Common Chiffchaff, Eurasian Reed Warbler, Eurasian Blackcap, Common Whitethroat, Song Thrush and Eurasian Blackbird. Odonata mainly consisted of Variable Damselflies – a species patchily distributed in Britain, but common here – plus one or two Hairy Dragonflies. A female **Western Marsh Harrier** was seen from the tower hide, with small numbers of Barn Swallows and Common House Martins also on the wing.

Walking to the western end of the reserve, the open water on the peat cuttings held numerous Mute Swans (such a common species on the Levels) and a Great Cormorant. Reed Buntings gave their simple song and a Eurasian Jay flew low over the water. The call of the **Common Cuckoo** had seemingly followed us around the whole reserve, but it wasn't until we were almost ready to leave that we saw one perched.

Heading off west, we drove slowly along Totney Drove, though a landscape seemingly belonging to a previous age, where vegetated reens criss-crossed a complex of damp grazing pastures. At Tadham Moor we spotted a flock of **Western Cattle Egrets**, although being a field back and with the cover of hedges, it wasn't possible to ascertain numbers. This recent colonist is now seemingly firmly established on the Levels. A little further on we were pleased to spot a group of seven very vocal **Whimbrels** heading north. Several **Great White Egrets** were feeding in the reens, sometimes only detectable from a snaky head peering above the vegetation.

Continuing west, we arrived at Tealham Moor, where a male **Western Marsh Harrier** was quartering the fields. Stopping next to view a flooded field, just before where the road swings north, we were delighted to find a drake **Garganey**, with a resting **Wood Sandpiper** eventually giving itself up, too. A lone Northern Lapwing stood vigil, Eurasian Skylarks sang and a **Western Yellow Wagtail** was heard.

Retracing our route along the drove we came across the same group of **Western Cattle Egrets**, but this time in a field directly adjacent to the road, with 31 counted in total. Before arriving back at the hotel, we added **Common Kestrel** and Grey Heron, concluding a productive first afternoon.

WEDNESDAY 19th MAY – *Freshening W breeze, sunny spells, 15C*

Today our plan was to spend the majority of our time at the fabulous reserves of Ham Wall RSPB and Shapwick Heath/Meare Heath, at the heart of the Avalon Marshes.

Walking east from the Ham Wall car park, we were soon onto our first **Western Marsh Harriers** of the day, with a **Great White Egret** not far behind. An expanding breeding colony of Great Cormorants was visible to the south, while a cacophony of bird song included Garden Warbler and Sedge Warbler, one of which of the latter showed remarkably well. Tufted Ducks, Gadwalls and

Pochards were frequent, with Little Grebe also soon located. Pausing by the first platform, we were rewarded with a prolonged flight from a **Great Bittern**, although perhaps surprisingly none were heard at the reserve this morning. A **Common Cuckoo** called, a **Common Kingfisher** shot past, a Stock Dove was perched distantly and two rather unseasonal Eurasian Wigeons were located.

Walking as far as the second platform, we took in the Avalon Hide on our return route, which gave us good close views of **Great White Egret** and **Western Marsh Harrier**, while a Water Rail called unseen. Odonata numbers were relatively low, perhaps due to the freshening and rather cool breeze, although we did note Large Red Damselfly, Blue-tailed Damselfly, Azure Damselfly, Variable Damselfly and Hairy Dragonfly. Two **Eurasian Hobbies** entertained as we headed back to the car park, with several more overhead while we took our lunch at the picnic tables.



Hairy Dragonfly

Suitably revitalised, we walked west from here, taking in the reserves of Shapwick Heath and Meare Heath. Here we encountered yet more of the expected **Great White Egrets** and **Western Marsh Harriers**, with an accompaniment of vocal **Great Bittern** and **Common Cuckoo**. The sheer number of Common Swifts was truly impressive; this area is clearly an important staging post for the species in Britain, something which also applies to **Eurasian Hobby**, with birds constantly in view.

Noah's Lake didn't produce any surprises, but **Bearded Tits** were heard calling from the adjacent Seventy Acres Hide. Our route back to the car park was interrupted by a fabulous gathering of at least 20 **Eurasian Hobbies** over Meare Heath, hawking insects in front of an atmospheric backdrop of towering cumulus clouds. Superb!



Meare Heath



Eurasian Hobby

By now it was mid-afternoon, giving us enough time to take in a couple of more locations in the vicinity. A short drive to the south is Greylake RSPB, an area of wet grazing meadows, just over the other side of the Polden Hills from the Avalon Marshes, in the north-west corner of King's Sedgemoor. A drake **Garganey** dabbled in a pool near the hides, presumably a breeder here. A **Great Bittern** boomed at very close quarters, but frustratingly refused to show. We were by now becoming a little blasé about **Great White Egrets**, with at least six in view, while **Western Marsh Harriers** were also now becoming de rigueur. A **Common Kestrel** hunted and our first **Common Redshank** was observed.

Driving back north we had time for one more stop on our way back, choosing to call in at Catcott Lows. Formerly arable land, Catcott is one of the lowest points in the Brue Valley and has been converted to grazing marsh. Here we spent a pleasant time enjoying the sights and sounds of the marsh, in lovely late afternoon light, with Glastonbury Tor forming a scenic background. A few Northern Shovelers were new for the trip and several Northern Lapwings reacted aggressively to any passing **Western Marsh Harriers**, no doubt protecting their hidden young. A **Western Yellow Wagtail** was seen briefly, before it was time to make tracks for Wells. A short stroll there before dinner revealed a vocal Common Raven on the cathedral, where this year's nest could be seen on the west façade. Parties of screaming Common Swifts brought the day to a pleasant conclusion.



Northern Lapwing

THURSDAY 20th MAY – *Strong (near gale on the coast) SSE/S winds, rain, becoming heavy at times, 12C*

Following breakfast, we checked out of the Swan. Today we would be transferring to the Forest of Dean, via Steart Marshes WWT, a reserve on the coast of the Bristol Channel, just west of Bridgwater. By the time we arrived a fierce wind had picked up and woolly hats were the order of the day, not exactly ideal to say the least, but we intended to make the best of it. The Quantock Hides, overlooking Otterhampton Marsh, offered welcome respite and afforded close views of the substantial colony of breeding **Pied Avocets**, with plenty of chicks already present. Two incubating **Little Ringed Plovers** were noted on the shingle islands, no doubt benefitting from the protection gained from the aggressive response of the Pied Avocets to any passing potential predator. Further sightings here included numerous Common Shelducks (Bridgwater Bay is a moulting location for the species), a few Dunlins, Northern Lapwings and Eurasian Oystercatchers, a Common Buzzard and Great Black-backed Gulls.

Walking back towards the car park we were surprised to see a Carrion Crow steal a mouse from a Weasel, which had just crossed the path in front of us, while our first Common Linnet of the trip

dropped in. From the car park we drove the short distance to the Steart Gate car park, where it is possible to view the beach. Here there were good numbers of Common Ringed Plovers and Dunlin, although searching for anything rarer among them was well nigh impossible in the conditions. A flock of around 20 Whimbrels, plus a single Eurasian Curlew, flew along the shore and six Little Egrets were in the channels. A few Reed Buntings flitted around and just before leaving a tight flock of Common House Martins arrived off the sea – migration in action.



Pied Avocets

Following lunch at the reserve we headed off to Speech House Hotel, our base in the Forest of Dean for the next two nights, a journey of about 90 minutes. After checking in, our first destination would be Nagshead RSPB, a lovely oak woodland reserve in the south-west of the Forest of Dean, just past the village of Parkend. Waiting in the vehicle for yet another heavy pulse of rain to pass, we made our way down to the woodland in the vicinity of the Lower Hide (noting a **Grey Wagtail** by the pond on the way down). This proved to be a good call, with birds seemingly magically appearing around us as shafts of sunlight penetrated to the forest floor (the trees were still not in full leaf following this cold spring). First up was a female **Common Redstart**, followed by several very showy males. A female **European Pied Flycatcher** was seen briefly, followed by several **Spotted Flycatchers**. Good views of Great Spotted Woodpecker, Eurasian Nuthatch and Eurasian Treecreeper were obtained before we took shelter in the hide from another heavy downpour, noting two male Mandarin Ducks on the pond.

Emerging from the hide after the rain, the birds again started to reappear, at similarly low elevations, perhaps unsurprising in the conditions. A male **European Pied Flycatcher** joined the female and we enjoyed further **Common Redstart** sightings. Heading back up the slope to the main reserve, we had time to walk the short loop, although the conditions underfoot were very muddy. This proved somewhat quieter, although a lovely male **European Pied Flycatcher** was located a short distance north of the car park, with Song Thrush, Stock Dove, Eurasian Nuthatch, Eurasian Treecreeper, Goldcrest and Eurasian Siskin also recorded.

What a wonderful couple of hours it had been and as an added bonus we even had the whole reserve to ourselves!



Common Redstart

FRIDAY 21st MAY – *Fresh to strong SW winds, intermittent light rain, 11C*

Today would prove something of a slog in the unpleasantly cool and windy conditions, but at least the rain was mostly light.

Our first stop was to the mixed habitats of Crabtree Hill, a short distance from the hotel. A **Hawfinch** was heard in the first area of oak woodland, but sadly couldn't be located. The heath was quiet overall, apart from Common Whitethroat, Common Linnets and a Garden Warbler, with Common Ravens and a **Common Kestrel** overhead. One of the group chanced on two **Common Firecrests** on our way back to the vehicle, but they soon disappeared.

Next to Yew Tree Brake, which was almost devoid of birds, bar a Common Buzzard. This area is normally reliable for Tree Pipit (and to a lesser extent Common Crossbill), but if any were present today, they were keeping their heads down.

Following a warming drink back at the hotel, we opted for a change of scenery and headed to Symonds Yat Rock, where a viewpoint affords superb views of the precipitous rocks, under which the River Wye snakes. No sooner had we arrived at the viewpoint than a **Peregrine** was seen to fly into and perch in a tree adjacent to the rock face, shortly after giving a close fly past and away. Eurasian Jackdaws were taking food to nests in the caves and a pair of Stock Doves was perched nearby. Common House Martins and Common Swifts were feeding over the river and a female **Goosander** was resting on a shingle island with Mallards. A Eurasian Nuthatch had adopted a nest box at the viewpoint, with the entrance characteristically modified with the addition of mud.

After a brief stop at Brierley, we headed to Cannop Ponds, parking the vehicle next to a bird feeding site along the approach road. A **Marsh Tit** came in and fed several times, before being ousted by a pair of Mandarin Ducks, which flew onto a bird table to feed. Interestingly, the male kept guard

while the female fed, only tucking in himself after she had finished. Also here was a Eurasian Nuthatch, Mallards with young, Chaffinch, Great Tit and Blue Tit. We didn't alight from the vehicle here, but could see a Mute Swan on the nest, Little Grebe and Tufted Duck.



Eurasian Nuthatch

Driving along to the southern end of the ponds, we checked the outflow stream, where a **Grey Wagtail** was present. The bird feeders at the stone works held Eurasian Siskin, Mandarin Duck and Great Spotted Woodpecker. While here we also checked an area of woodland across the road where Wood Warbler has previously occurred, but alas not today.

After a drive around Parkend we called it a day and headed back to the hotel. An evening walk to look for Eurasian Nightjar was considered, but the return of heavy rain put paid to that idea.

SATURDAY 22nd MAY – *Light NW winds, becoming brighter, 14C*

For our final morning we opted for a pre-breakfast circular walk from the hotel. Although overcast and cool, it had at least stopped raining, which was a relief. Several European Greenfinches were busying around the car park, a **Common Redstart** was singing from over the road to the west and some newly arrived House Martins were prospecting. Heading towards Spruce Ride, we came across a very obliging Garden Warbler at the woodland edge.

The volume of birdsong was impressive, with Song Thrush, Eurasian Blackbird, Eurasian Wren, Eurasian Blackcap and Common Chaffinch dominating. Also noted were Stock Dove, Eurasian Bullfinch, Mistle Thrush, Goldcrest, Willow Warbler and Common Chiffchaff. Best of all was a singing **Wood Warbler** found in the Speech House Woods just north of the hotel, a nice finale to our stroll.

Following breakfast, we checked out and headed to New Fancy View, where the remnants of old colliery workings afford a splendid vista over a large part of the forest, looking north. The undoubted highlight here was two flights from a displaying **Northern Goshawk**, such an impressive raptor. The only other bird of prey was a very distant Common Buzzard, while Grey Heron, Greylag Geese, Common Woodpigeons, Lesser Black-backed Gulls, Common Swifts and Common Ravens were also in flight. Otherwise, a range of common woodland birds was logged, including Great Spotted

Woodpecker, European Greenfinch, Eurasian Siskin, Dunnock and European Robin. It perhaps wasn't quite warm enough for the basking Adders present here to show, but a Common Lizard was seen scuttling off from a favoured spot.

With less than an hour before we needed to conclude the tour, we re-checked the area of woodland where we had previously logged Hawfinch and Common Firecrest. No joy with them, but a **Common Redstart** was singing lustily.

Heading off shortly after, we agreed that a good team effort had reaped its rewards, with a number of memorable sightings to take away, in spite of the inclement conditions encountered at times.

THE SOMERSET LEVELS AND FOREST OF DEAN IN SPRING
- MAY 2021

Species order, names and taxonomy follows - Clements, J. F., T. S. Schulenberg, M. J. Iliff, D. Roberson, T. A. Fredericks, B. L. Sullivan, and C. L. Wood. 2018. The eBird/Clements checklist of birds of the world: v2018. Downloaded from <http://www.birds.cornell.edu/clementschecklist/download/>

[illegible]

17	Rock Dove (Feral Pigeon)	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓	✓			✓	
18	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>			✓		✓	H	
19	Common Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
20	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓					
21	Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>							
22	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>							
<i>Rallidae (Rails and Coots)</i>									
23	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>			H				
24	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		H	✓		✓		
25	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
<i>Recurvirostridae and Charadriidae (Stilts, Avocets, Plovers and allies)</i>									
26	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>				✓			
27	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>				✓			
28	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓	✓	✓			
29	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>				✓			
30	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>				✓			
<i>Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)</i>									
31	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>		✓		✓			
32	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>				✓			
33	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>				✓			
34	Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>		✓					
35	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			✓				
<i>Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skuas)</i>									
36	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>			✓	✓			
37	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
38	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>				✓			
<i>Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)</i>									
39	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓	✓	✓			
<i>Ardeidae (Heron, Egrets and Bitterns)</i>									

40	Great Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>			✓					
41	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		✓	✓			✓		
42	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		✓						31 at Tadham Moor
43	Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		✓	✓					
44	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		✓	✓	✓				
Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)										
45	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		✓	✓					
46	Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>						✓		New Fancy View
47	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)										
48	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>			✓					
Picidae (Woodpeckers)										
49	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓		
Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)										
50	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			
51	Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>		✓	✓					Maximum c. 20
52	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>					✓			
Corvidae (Crows, Jays and Magpies)										
53	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓		
54	Common Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
55	Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
56	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>			✓					
57	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
58	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			✓		✓	✓		
Panuridae and Alaudidae (Reedling and Larks)										
59	Bearded Tit	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>			H					
60	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓	✓	✓				
Hirundinidae (Swallows)										
61	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		

62	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Paridae (Tits)									
63	Coal Tit	<i>Pariparus ater</i>				✓	✓	✓	
64	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>					✓		
65	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
66	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
67	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>			✓				
Sittidae and Certhiidae (Nuthatches and Treecreepers)									
68	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>				✓	✓	✓	
69	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>				✓		✓	
Troglodytidae (Wrens)									
70	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		H	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Regulidae (Kinglets)									
71	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>				✓	✓	H	
72	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>					✓		
Scotocercidae and Phylloscopidae (Bush and Leaf Warblers)									
73	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		✓	✓	H			
74	Wood Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus sibilatrix</i>						✓	
75	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>		✓	✓		✓		
76	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Sylviidae (Sylviid Warblers)									
77	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>		H	✓	H			
78	Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>		✓	✓	✓			
79	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		H	✓	✓	✓	✓	
80	Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>			H		H	✓	
81	Common Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	H	
Muscicapidae (Old World Flycatchers)									
82	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>				✓			
83	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		H	✓	✓	✓	✓	

84	European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>				✓				Nagshead RSPB
85	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>				✓	H	H		
<i>Turdidae and Sturnidae (Thrushes and Starlings)</i>										
86	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>			H	✓	✓	✓		
87	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
88	Eurasian Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
89	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓		
<i>Prunellidae (Accentors)</i>										
90	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>			✓	✓	✓	H		
<i>Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)</i>										
91	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>				✓	✓			
92	Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>		H	✓					
93	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
<i>Fringillidae (Finches)</i>										
94	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		H	H	✓	✓	✓		
95	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>			✓	✓		✓		
96	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>					H			
97	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>					H	✓		
98	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>				✓	✓			
99	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
100	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>				✓	✓	✓		
<i>Emberizidae (Old World Buntings)</i>										
101	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		✓	✓	✓	H			
<i>Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)</i>										
102	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		

