

The Somerset Levels; 19th February 2013

Malvern Group trip to Shapwick Heath National Nature Reserve, Westhay Moor National Nature Reserve and Ham Wall National Nature Reserve. Report by Roger Hales

After months of cold, grey days the forecast for our trip to the Somerset levels was for day-long sunshine. We set off at 8.30 for the two hour drive to our first destination, Shapwick Heath, the site of an elevated Neolithic footway which ran for over 2km across the Somerset swamp and is the oldest known routeway in Britain.

The area is now famed for its mixed habitat of grassland, wet woodland, fen and scrub, attracting Otters, many species of duck and water-loving plants. Here our best sighting was of a male Goldeneye diving in one of the peat-blackened lakes. From here we also enjoyed the calls of an elusive Cetti's Warbler.

Having walked back along the muddy, rich, black footpaths we rejoined the coach, which took us onto our next venue whilst we tucked into our lunch boxes. Westhay Moor is a restored peat moor now renowned for reed beds, home to thousands of ducks and waders.

The Levels, drained for agriculture for a thousand years, have only recently been slowly allowed to return to their natural status of flood plain and wildlife haven. This region of the Avalon Marsh is only 3m above sea level and was formed 10,000 years ago in the last glacial period. Ancient man dug its peat, harvested willow, fished and took wildfowl from this rich resource. For centuries the area was far too wet to use in winter; they were summer lands, the derivation of the name Somerset. Glastonbury Tor is an impressive sight in the distance rising from the flatlands.

Nowadays it is still very wet underfoot and Wellingtons were essential wear if a full exploration of the reserve's many paths and six hides was to be enjoyed. From these vantage points we spotted Great White Egret which now breed in the Levels, an elegant pair of Marsh Harriers as well as Snipe and many waterfowl.

Our final destination was Ham Wall nature reserve, transformed by the RSPB from old peat workings into reed beds, lakes and scrub. Here we saw Bittern, Reed Bunting, both Little and Great Egrets and many duck species. By good fortune (or inspired planning!) the week's "mega" bird for the whole UK just happened to be present on this very reserve! A Pied-billed Grebe, a rare vagrant visitor from the USA similar to our Little Grebe, was spotted by one of our group whilst we all waited for the day's star attraction to appear.

As dusk fell and the temperature dropped rapidly, we were rewarded by the stunning spectacle of an enormous Starling murmuration. Hundreds of thousands of birds from the surrounding countryside mass to their roost in the reed beds. Most nature lovers will have seen this on television, but actually experiencing the sheer scale and ebb and flow of these vast flocks of birds, wintering here from all over Europe, can't be over-stated.

This brought a very special end to a day that had lived up to promise both in terms of sunshine and the pleasure of being close to nature.