

An Itinerary for Birdwatchers

Compiled by a South Somerset Tourist Information Assistant and local resident.



The county of Somerset has a number of rich and diverse habitats for wildlife, especially birds. Much birdlife, including migrating birds and breeding waders, can be found on the Levels and Moors. They stretch south of Langport, to Taunton and Bridgwater in the West. In total, they cover an area of approximately 250 square miles or 57000 hectares. The following itinerary takes you to places where you can view birds and other wildlife for free – but if you can help with a donation, organisations such as the RSPB, the Wildfowl and WetlandsTrust and Somerset Wildlife Trust will be very grateful. Please remember to take binoculars and waterproof footwear, as paths can often get very muddy.

Start your day in the market town of **Langport**, located on the meandering River Parrett. Park in the Town Square car park and follow the public path next to the river. You can either walk or cycle along a disused railway path to Muchelney Abbey or go North and follow the River Parrett path under bridges and next to fields. As well as swans, coots and several species of duck, you may catch a glimpse of Kingfishers and flocks of Cranes flying overhead. Have a coffee, snack or a light lunch at the Kitchen Café at Bow Wharf.

From Langport, drive along the A378 westwards past Curry Rivel until you reach RSPB **Swell Wood** TA3, home to the largest colony of breeding grey herons in south-west England - more than 100 pairs, together with a small number of little egrets. Between March and June is the best time to come and see the spectacle. At other times of the year, enjoy walking along the two nature trails, with some of the best views over the Somerset Levels. You may even be lucky enough to see a dormouse in the woods!

The third stop on this itinerary is RSPB **Greylake Nature Reserve** TA7 9BP, just off the A361. It's a 25 minute drive from Swell Wood. Structures have been put in place to keep the water levels high and the RSPB volunteers have created miles of new ditches and shallow water-filled gutters, and dug out numerous shallow pools or 'scrapes'. Here you can see numerous waders, including lapwings, snipe, curlews and redshanks nesting in summer, as well as bearded tits, yellow wagtails, skylarks and meadow pipits.

In winter, the land floods and flocks of golden plovers and other wading birds arrive. You can see wigeons, gadwall, teals, shovelers and Bewick's swans at this time of year. There is lots of other wildlife to see here too including dragonflies, water voles, otters and roe deer. There is a boardwalk which meanders from the car park to the hide and provides excellent disabled access.

If you still have the time and the energy, make your way North to **Shapwick Heath** BA6 9TT is a 394.0-hectare (973.6 acre) biological Site of Special Scientific Interest and national nature reserve situated between the village of Shapwick and Westhay. It aims to ensure that wildlife is enhanced and capable of sustaining itself in the face of climate change while guaranteeing farmers and other landowners can continue to use their land profitably.

The Sweet Track, an ancient causeway crosses the site. It is one of the oldest engineered roads known and the oldest timber trackway discovered in Northern Europe. The adjoining Shapwick Moor has been purchased by the Hawk and Owl Trust as a reserve.

Shapwick provides a lovely easy walk through the most stunning parts of the Somerset Levels. Park at the Avalon Marshes Centre (where there are WC's) have a tea or coffee break and then follow the path along the canal. Regular sightings here include bitterns, marsh harriers, sedge warblers, great and little egrets and a range of migratory birds. There is also a starling roost and in winter months, the murmurations are spectacular. You will also see many species of butterfly.

Somerset Crafts at the Avalon Marshes Centre are open 10am to 5pm seven days a week excluding Christmas Day and Boxing Day. For a snack, you can visit Eco Friendly Bites, open from 10am to 4.30pm seven days a week (closes Christmas week). Currently not open on Mondays.

For more information – contact the Yeovil Tourist Information Centre on 01935 462781 or visit www.discoversouthsomerset.com

Disclaimer – please check individual websites for opening times and consider traffic and weather conditions. All information correct at time of compiling in May 2016.