

World-class Birdwatching



Credit: John Crispin

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.

This 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 Wetlands Trust 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. Leave Cocklemoor car park TA10 9PG and enjoy a scenic walk along the riverbank. As well as swans, coots and several species of duck, you may catch a glimpse of kingfishers and flocks of cranes flying overhead.

There are 2 lovely circular walks: From the car park turn right along the riverbank and over the footbridge, turn left past Shakspeare Glass and follow the path to Huish Drove. Turn left and follow the track to Black Bridge where you turn left and walk along the riverbank back to the car park. The second route is longer (3.5m). When you get to Huish Drove turn right and then left along the disused railway line to the beautiful historic village of Muchelney. Return along the riverbank to Black Bridge picking up the path (as above). Alternatively, exit the car park past the shops and cross Bow Street. Walk through the iron gates to the Walter Bagehot Garden then turn left and stroll along the riverbank to the north (OS Explorer 129).

Enjoy a coffee, snack or light lunch overlooking the river at the **Kitchen Café at the Wharf** or **The Bridge Bakery & Canteen**.



From Langport, drive along the A378 westwards past Curry Rivel until you reach **RSPB Swell Wood TA3 6PX**, 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!

Look out for the remarkable common cranes now living on the Levels. Standing 1-2m, they are Britain's tallest breeding bird with an incredible 2.4m wingspan. Sadly the species was wiped out as a breeding bird species in the British Isles over 400 years ago - a result of hunting and then widespread wetland drainage. Since 2009 The Great Crane Project has been working to create new suitable crane breeding habitats across the levels and moors and aims to achieve a target of 20 breeding pairs by 2025.

Returning to Langport make the short detour to **RSPB West Sedgemoor Nature Reserve** Red Hill, Curry Rivel, TA10 0PH. A Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) it's part of England's largest remaining wet meadow system. Set among the Somerset Levels and Moors, it has the largest lowland population of breeding wading birds such as lapwings, snipe, curlew and redshanks in southern England.

The reserve has restricted access to protect ground-nesting birds and over-wintering flocks. You may be lucky to see some dragonflies and damselflies hunting along the hedgerows and ditches and enjoy the wildflowers in the meadows. In winter marvel at the numbers of ducks feeding out in the fields and watch as they are spooked up into the air by a passing bird of prey.





The next stop on this itinerary is **RSPB Greylake Nature Reserve** TA7 9BP, just off the A361. It's a 25 minute drive from West Sedgemoor Nature Reserve. 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 **The Avalon Marshes**, part of Somerset's Levels and Moors, one of the largest lowland wetlands in Britain. We suggest parking at the Avalon Marshes Centre BA6 9TT (where there are WCs) to have a tea or coffee break and then follow the path along the canal.

A truly magical and fascinating watery landscape, with a rich mix of spectacular nature reserves alongside agricultural fields and pastures, drained by reed-fringed ditches and rhynes. It's internationally important for wildlife, especially the large flocks of migrating birds that fly in each spring and autumn to join the ducks, waders and other animals that are here all year. Visitors come from far and wide to see the Big Three; marsh harrier, bittern and the great white egret. Winter sees truly amazing sights and the starling murmurations are mesmerising.



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.

A short drive away **RSPB Ham Wall Nature Reserve**, BA6 9SX is a wetland teeming with wildlife - from rare species like water voles and otters to magnificent birds like bitterns and kingfishers. Enjoy stunning views across the marshes to Glastonbury Tor and make some time to follow secluded paths through the mystical landscape.

If you have the time follow the **Bittern Trail** a tranquil family-friendly cycle trail running between the Avalon Marshes Centre and Glastonbury passing through Shapwick Heath and Ham Wall. Immerse yourself in a landscape teeming with wildlife and steeped in both history and mythology.
www.avalonmarshes.org/wp-content/uploads/Bittern-Trail-Leaflet-2019-v6.pdf



Useful Information

Disclaimer – please check individual places for latest opening times and guidelines.

Langport Local Information Centre
Langport Library, Whatley, Langport TA10 9RA
E: infocentre@langport.life
www.langport.life

The Bridge Bakery & Canteen, Westover Trading Estate, Langport TA10 9RB
T: 01458 897100
www.thebridgelangport.co.uk

The Kitchen at the Wharf, Great Bow Wharf, Bow Street, Langport TA10 9PN
T: 01458 254354
www.kitchenlangport.co.uk

RSPB Swell Wood Nature Reserve
A378, Taunton, TA3 6PX
T: 01458 252805
www.rspb.org.uk/reserves-and-events/reserves-a-z/swell-wood/

RSPB West Sedgemoor Nature Reserve
Red Hill, Curry Rivel, Langport TA10 0PH
www.rspb.org.uk/reserves-and-events/reserves-a-z/west-sedgemoor/

RSPB Greylake Nature Reserve
A361, Bridgwater TA7 9BP
T: 01458 252805
www.rspb.org.uk/reserves-and-events/reserves-a-z/greylake/

The Avalon Marshes Centre,
Shapwick Road, Westhay, Glastonbury BA6 9TT
T: 01458 860556

For the latest up to date information about the highlights for the season, the Centre and Cafe, see
www.avalonmarshes.org

Shapwick Heath National Nature Reserve
BA6 9TT (Avalon Marshes Centre) or
BA6 9SX Ashcott Corner
www.avalonmarshes.org/explore/nature-reserves/shapwick-heath/

RSPB Ham Wall National Nature Reserve
Meare, Ashcott, Glastonbury BA6 9SX
www.rspb.org.uk/reserves-and-events/reserves-a-z/ham-wall/

