



Coombes Valley Wildlife Walk



Transport



Distance

7 km
4.5 m

Allow

3+hr

Difficulty



Trail Summary

Moderate difficulty. Plenty of ups and downs along woodland paths.

Start and finish:

By public transport: at Lane End turn-off from A523 (signed to Coombes Valley nature reserve). By car: at RSPB Coombes Valley car park. OS White Peak Explorer Map, OL 24. SK 005 530.

Access:

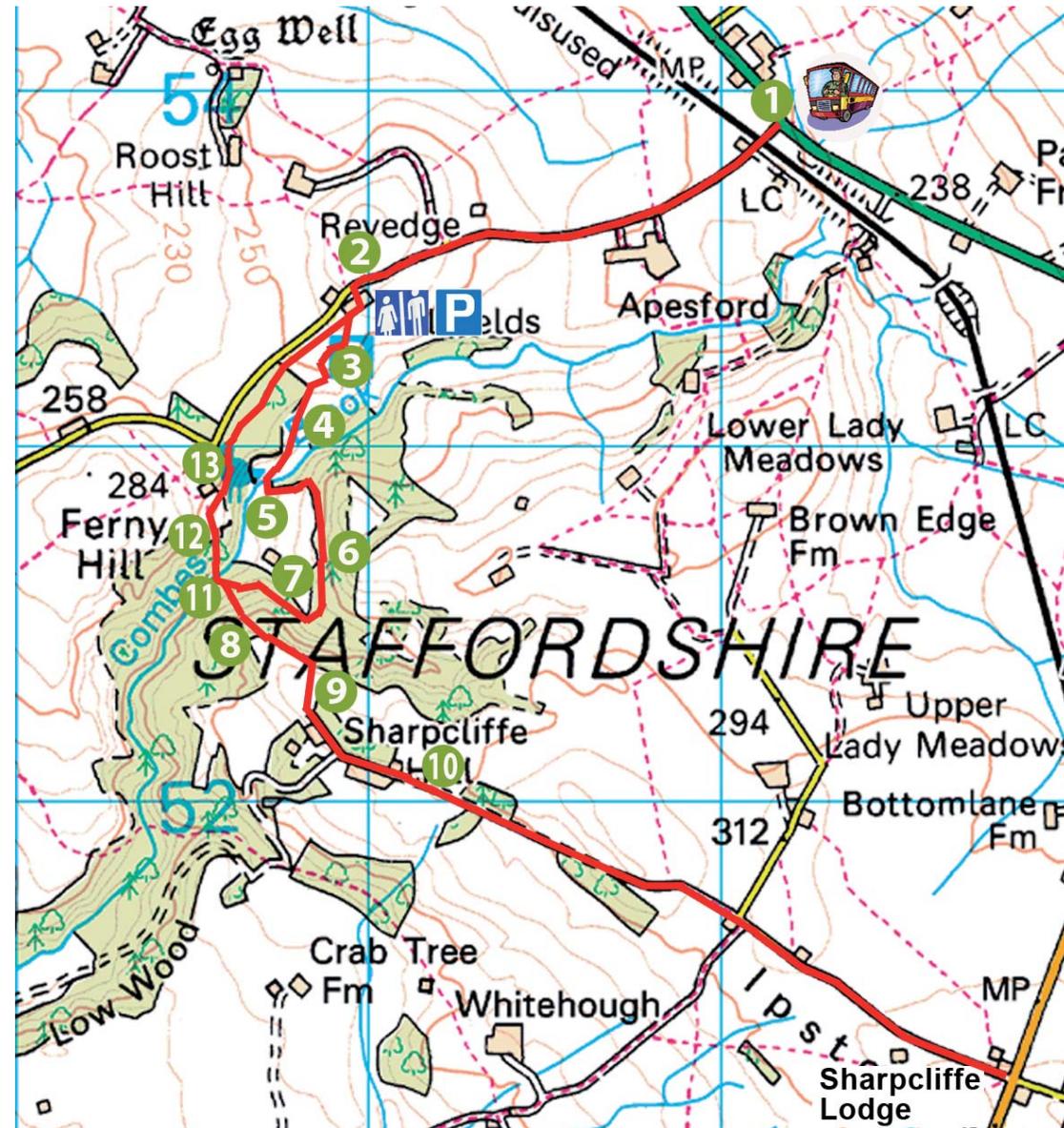
By public transport: the 108 Leek–Ashbourne bus and a few small local transport buses travel the A523 several times a day and will drop you at the turnoff to the reserve. **By car:** Take the A523 Leek–Ashbourne road and look for a turn-off 1 mile / 1.6 km east of Bradnop. A brown heritage sign marks the road to Coombes Valley nature reserve. Free parking, picnic tables, an information barn and toilets at the reserve entrance.

Meander through the wildlife-rich RSPB nature reserve. Explore woodlands, meadows, pastures and the tree-lined avenue of a 17th-century hall that are home to birds, flowers, trees and mammals.



Part-funded by the European Union European Regional Development Fund

Explore a wealth of woodland wildlife.



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It's your day



This walk is a guide through places to stop, listen and watch. To feel the breeze on your face, enjoy the moist oxygen-rich air of the woodlands, and the

exhilaration of coming into open fields after enclosed woodland. There are places to play and places to sit quietly, watch or reflect.

The walk begins along a country lane with views over miles of Staffordshire farmland. If you come by car instead of bus, simply park at the reserve car park and pick up the route at point 2.



If you're not used to wildlife watching, then a good tip is to stand still whenever you hear something interesting or unusual. Be quiet and

listen for the direction of the sound, then turn quietly to look for movements. And because wildlife is always on the move, even retracing your steps can be wildly unpredictable!

The Walk

1. Lane End turn-off

Ask the bus driver to drop you at the turn-off and make your way along the country lane to the reserve entrance. There's little traffic, but what there is can be fast, so take care.

In summer the tirelessly cheerful song of the skylark serenades you along this lane. To each side are farmers' fields (below left). You might see pheasant in the agricultural fields or swooping birds feeding on insects above them.

The hedgerows and grassy verges are home and food to many birds, insects and small mammals. The stone field barn in the distance to your left could well be home to owls or bats.

2. RSPB Coombes Valley information centre

If you're arriving by car, park here and begin.

Take a look at the whiteboard in the information centre to see what to look out for during your visit today. There's a list of seasonal species and recently spotted visitors. There are also displays about work going on in the reserve and some lovely photographs of the wildlife.

Bird books for reference and leaflets about the reserve's activity fun days and schools programmes are available too.

Greenfinches, chaffinches, great tits and blue tits all use the feeders in the picnic area by the car park – even the occasional woodpecker.



Birds of prey float on thermals above the valley – buzzards, sparrowhawk and kestrel. The raucous rookery caws through spring and summer from the woodland over the valley. In late May and June, the field can be white with pignut (a little relative of the carrot).

Go through the kissing gate and follow the track down all the way to the stream. You'll pass several interesting features on your way.

3. Meadow and pasture and hedge

The track takes you through cropped grazing pasture to your left (look out for rabbits). The meadow to your right is cut for hay after mid-July

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to let flowers set seed. Then grazing cows trample in the seed. Bistort and marsh-marigold grow in summer. The RSPB manages the reserve to encourage plants, insects and animals, as well as birds.

Continue along the track.

Bats use the hedgelines to help them navigate while hunting! They feed on moths, butterflies and other hedgerow insects. 8 species of bat and over 500 types of butterfly and moth have been recorded on the reserve.

You'll see hawthorn, small oaks, elder, holly and hazel among the hedgerows and hear the rustlings of birds and small mammals like voles.

Fallen dead wood, brush piles and old mossy logs are home to many creatures and an important part of a woodland ecology. Look out for dead trees and stumps as you explore, and all the creatures that live in them.

Continue down the track.



Birdsfoot Trefoil

4. Scrubland

Mice and voles scurry among the brambles, thistles, blackthorn and hawthorn of the scrublands. In summer this place comes alive with the reds and blues of plants like knapweed, scabious and marsh thistle – it's a good place to watch for butterflies. Insects feed on the flowers, and birds on the insects. There are 1,100 species of beetle, and 1,400 of fly at Coombes Valley! They help support the 129 species of bird seen here so far.

Willow warblers cascade their song through the scrubland in summer.

Continue down the track.

5. Coombes Brook



The stream's clean water is home to many insects, which in turn are great food for birds. Young mayflies, stone-flies and caddis-flies live in the water before they get their wings.

If you're lucky you might see a frog, and elegant dippers (pictured above) or grey wagtails feeding on insects and larvae in the stream.

Cross the bridge and duck to the right off the path into a small wooded area.

You'll see a few coppiced trees and many nest-boxes. The RSPB records which species use which nestboxes each year. Between late April and early July you may see the little black and white pied flycatcher (below right), a speciality of the reserve (May and June are best). Around 40 pairs nest in boxes across the reserve.

Return to the path and follow it up a short way. Go left through a small gate in to the woodland. (If you are pressed for time or energy, you could always continue along the track straight into Clough Meadow and pick up the route at point 7.)



6. Woodland loop

Follow the path as it climbs and descends in a loop through the woodland.



In spring, lesser celandine, primroses, wood anemones and bluebells grow under the trees. In summer, keep an eye out for common spotted orchid (pictured left) in the meadow grass to your right shortly after you enter the woodland. In autumn there are nearly



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200 species of fungi to spot.

Look out for the cracked empty shells of snails eaten by woodland birds.

Holly, oak, mountain ash and birch are the main trees you'll see here.

Eventually you descend over a boardwalk through some wet ground to a junction. Here take the righthand upwards path and go over a stile into Clough Meadow.



Tufts of soft rushes thrive in wet places. Scabious, knapweed and marsh thistle glow purple in the summer – brightened with yellow buttercups, tormentil and birdsfoot trefoil. The grass names make their own poetry:

Yorkshire fog (adding purple tinged tops to the grassland), sweet vernal grass and cocks-foot – and they're food for caterpillars too. Horsetails (photo above left) have existed since before the dinosaurs!

7. Clough Meadow

This is a lovely place to sit for a while, looking at the meadow wildflowers, distant tree banks or the open skies above. You may see a buzzard overhead. On spring and summer evenings male woodcocks 'rode' (or display) as the light fades. They fly over their territory with slow fluttering wingbeats and make a distinctive call: a quiet croak and 2 whistles.



When you're ready, leave Clough Meadow over the stile next to Clough Meadow cottage.

In summer a flash of red reveals the pair of redstarts who sometimes nest in the cottage walls. In the evening pipistrelle bats emerge from the building.

Pass the cottage and at the junction, go right, down the steps and over a little bridge. At the next choice, go left uphill along the public footpath.

8. Woodland path

In springtime there are woodland wildflowers to enjoy. Listen for the many bird species and keep an eye on the ground, as we nearly trod on a frog on this path!

In winter, the fallen leaves make it easier to spot birds among the branches. Fieldfares and redwings feed on the berries.

Beech trees cast dense shade in the summer, they have shallow roots and the leaves are slow to decompose, so not much can grow under beech. More plants grow under oak and ash, which have lighter canopies.

When you reach the top, cross into the open field before you.

9. High pasture

Birds of prey sometimes circle above these grassy open fields. They are looking for scurrying small creatures to swoop on and eat.



Kestrels sometimes hover overhead.

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Cross the field diagonally down to a gate at the bottom left. Go through this gate and pass behind the farm buildings. It might look as though you are entering private property, but this is a footpath with right of way. Take the lane to your left as you arrive near the Hall's gates.

10. Sharpecliffe Hall and Bradshaw Lane

Sharpecliffe Hall was built in the 1600s. You are about to walk the full kilometre of its tree-lined avenue to the gatehouse lodge.



Among the big old trees of the avenue, you'll spot beech, chestnut, ash, lime, sycamore... all providing shelter, habitat and food to fungi (photo above), insects and birds.

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The higher rocky area on the left is Sharpecliffe plantation, with heathland plants and small birch

trees growing among the boulders. Look out for the runaway rhododendrons. These are not good for wildlife, as the intense cover means little can grow beneath them, and nothing eats them either. The RSPB removed large swathes of rhododendron from their reserve for that reason.

As you near Sharpecliffe Lodge and the road, turn to retrace your steps back along the lane and over the field. To find your way back into the woodland, look out for the Staffordshire Moorlands yellow arrow marker and a blue RSPB sign on a tree.

Descend the woodland path, keeping an eye out for the many things you may not have seen coming in the other direction. When you reach a choice of route, go left down to the pond.

11. Pondlife

Lucky visitors might see kingfishers perching at the pond. Brown hawker and emperor dragonflies come at the back end of the summer. The azure



damsselfly (below left) is just one of the pretty damsselfies that visit, and newts frequent the pond.

From the pond, continue along the path over the narrow bridge and uphill.



12. Old walls and open spaces

There are lots of nooks and crannies in old walls to provide cover for invertebrates, such as snails, spiders and beetles, and a base for lichens and mosses. The walls once marked out fields and the RSPB is gradually cutting some trees to restore patches of open land to the reserve.

There's been a dramatic decline in woodland bird numbers in the last few decades (up to 80% of some species). The reasons are complex. The RSPB is managing Coombes Valley to help make a good home for birds. Creating open spaces and making lighter coppiced woodlands encourages more diverse flowering plants and shrubs to grow. More



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insects feed on them and more birds can feed on those insects and live in the trees and shrubs.

Carry on along the path. Eventually you need to loop back round to the right and will pass a log-circle open-air classroom on your left and woodstacks on your right.



Fly Agaric

13. Woodstacks

Stacked or fallen wood is home to many insects, invertebrates and maybe sleeping hedgehogs too.

Continue along the path. At the Derek Potter Walk sign, go right along a wide grassy path lined by young oak. At the gate, turn left up the hill to rejoin the track you first came down.

14. Home again!

Now you've had a look around, perhaps you'll want to revisit the reference books in the information centre.

Discover more about RSPB Coombes Valley Reserve online - <http://www.rspb.org.uk/reserves/guide/c/coombeschurnet/index.asp>

For directions visit <http://www.rspb.org.uk/reserves/guide/c/coombeschurnet/directions.asp>

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We hope you enjoyed your walk! Please tell your friends.

There are more **Peak Experience** self-guided trails for you to download at www.peak-experience.org.uk

There are two other wildlife trails:

Wild Edale - a journey in the gritstone uplands of the Dark Peak.

Wild White Peak - explore the Wye Valley and Deep Dale.

Inspired by the landscape? Send us photos or stories from your walk to share with others on www.MyPeakExperience.org.uk

And if you or your children were inspired to create poetry, songs, paintings or drawings we'd love to see them.

Credits

Text: Adapted from a route supplied by Emma Mortimer, additional text by Jarrod Sneyd, edited by Georgia Litherland.

Photos: Georgia Litherland, Ray Manley (PDNPA), Emma Mortimer and courtesy of the RSPB. Produced in partnership with the RSPB.

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