



Neston's

Countryside Trail



A circular walk starting at Station Road Car Park, along the Wirral Way, back along Church Lane, looping around Stanney Fields and finishing back in the car park.

Introduction

This walk aims to look at some of the plants and animals found within the Neston town area. The trail starts at the Station Road car park, goes along the Wirral Way then back along Church Lane. It then loops around Stanney Fields, to finish back in the car park.

To start the walk, head along the Wirral way towards Parkgate and stop by the Cherry to your left. This Bird Cherry commemorates the Community Pride Award and was planted in 2008.

Wildlife along the Wirral Country Park



The Wirral Country Park is one long nature reserve. Originally, the railway line ran 12 miles from Hooton to West Kirby. In 1962 the line was closed, and after considerable redevelopment was re-opened in 1973 as the Wirral Country Park, Britain's first Country Park.

The Park has been colonised by a number of tree and other plant species, and is made up of a mixture of open and closed habitats. A varied range of birds,

mammals, invertebrates and fungi inhabit the park including around 20 species of bird, badgers, foxes, and a range of invertebrates. Bats are also known to hunt along the park for insect prey, especially important as bat numbers have declined in Britain in the last 50 years. A single Pipistrelle bat is said to eat up to 1500 midges in a single night. They are great at keeping pesky biting insects at bay!

Linear habitats such as this are excellent places for many species to move between sites. Many species have spread along the length of the park from areas of great diversity (eg. Burton Marshes) to areas less diverse, such as gardens. This connectivity of habitats is one of the most important reasons why the Park is teeming with wildlife.



Tree Identification

There are a huge number of different trees found in the Wirral Country Park, both native and non-native. This mix is a good thing as the diversity of species, size and structure has allowed lots of wildlife to colonise.

Can you spot any of the following trees as you walk along the Park?

Rowan Leaves divided into several leaflets (pinnate), opposite buds. Shrub or small tree.

Ash Pinnate leaves, opposite black buds. Large tree. Seeds in clusters of single winged fruits.

Horse Chestnut Large trees with large showy flowers. Leaves look like palm leaves.

Hawthorn Showy white flowers in May. Spikey stems. Leaves lobed.

Blackthorn Showy white flowers in early spring. Spikey stems but more dense than hawthorn. Leaves unlobed.

Willow (various species) Unlobed leaves. Flowers excellent for emerging queen bees due to blooming very early in spring.

Wild Cherry Distinctive dark shiny bark with diamonds on. Showy flowers and small (and bitter) cherry fruits.

Sycamore Leaves opposite, lobed into five lobes. Fruit held in double winged fruit (helicopters).

Elm Leaves have distinct unequal lobes at base.



Rowan



Willow male catkins



Wild Cherry



Sycamore



Elm



Witches Brooms on Silver Birch

There are lots of Silver Birch along the route. This is a native species readily identified by its weeping habit and white trunk. Look up into the canopy of the tree on the crossroads, you can see several what look like birds nests. These are in fact witches brooms; abnormal growths caused by a virus or bacteria affecting the tree at a genetic level, making it grow abnormally and produce the dense growths. Best spotted in winter, they do no harm to the tree and are common on birch, lime and beech trees.



Grasslands and tall herb habitats

The open area further on the path is a patch of tall herb grassland. It consists of tussocky patches of grassland interspersed with larger herbaceous plants including Meadow Vetchling, Common Knapweed and even

Nettle. The structure of the grass provides an important habitat for species such as overwintering insects, ants, spiders and these in turn provide food for birds and mammals. Small mammals such as Wood mice, Bank and Field voles use long grassland as nest sites. The Neston area also has several sites for Harvest mice, a species that has declined due to loss of habitat. The Dee Estuary and Ness Botanic Gardens contain this unique species that makes its nests in long tussocky grass.

The plants in this area also provide important nectar sources for butterflies. For example, meadow Brown and Gatekeeper butterflies use grasses (Cock's-foot, Bent grass, Fescue etc.) as their primary food plant. Similarly, Nettle is an important food plant for several species of common butterfly including Peacock, Red Admiral and Small Tortoiseshell. In mid-summer you may see the caterpillars of one of these species on nettle.



Shade and sunlight

Banks are excellent places for wildlife. To the right, the warm and sunny sheltered, south-facing slope is an excellent place for bees. Most species of bee in Britain are not social hive bees, but are solitary bees—where a single queen does not produce workers but does all the work herself. Solitary bees nest in bare ground, some in dead wood, while others need stonework. This bank contains the nests of several bee species, their nests identifiable as tiny 'mole hills'. These bees are important pollinators and forage on a wide range of plants found in this area including Green Alkanet, and Cow Parsley.



On the left is a north facing slope that is much cooler. Here shade-tolerant plants such as Ivy, Bramble, Wild Garlic, Bluebells and ferns are common. These two banks combined is an excellent habitat providing a range of food and nest sites for birds and insects alike.

After the bridge, turn right, then right again onto Moorside Lane. After 300m, turn left onto Old Quay Lane.

White Poplar



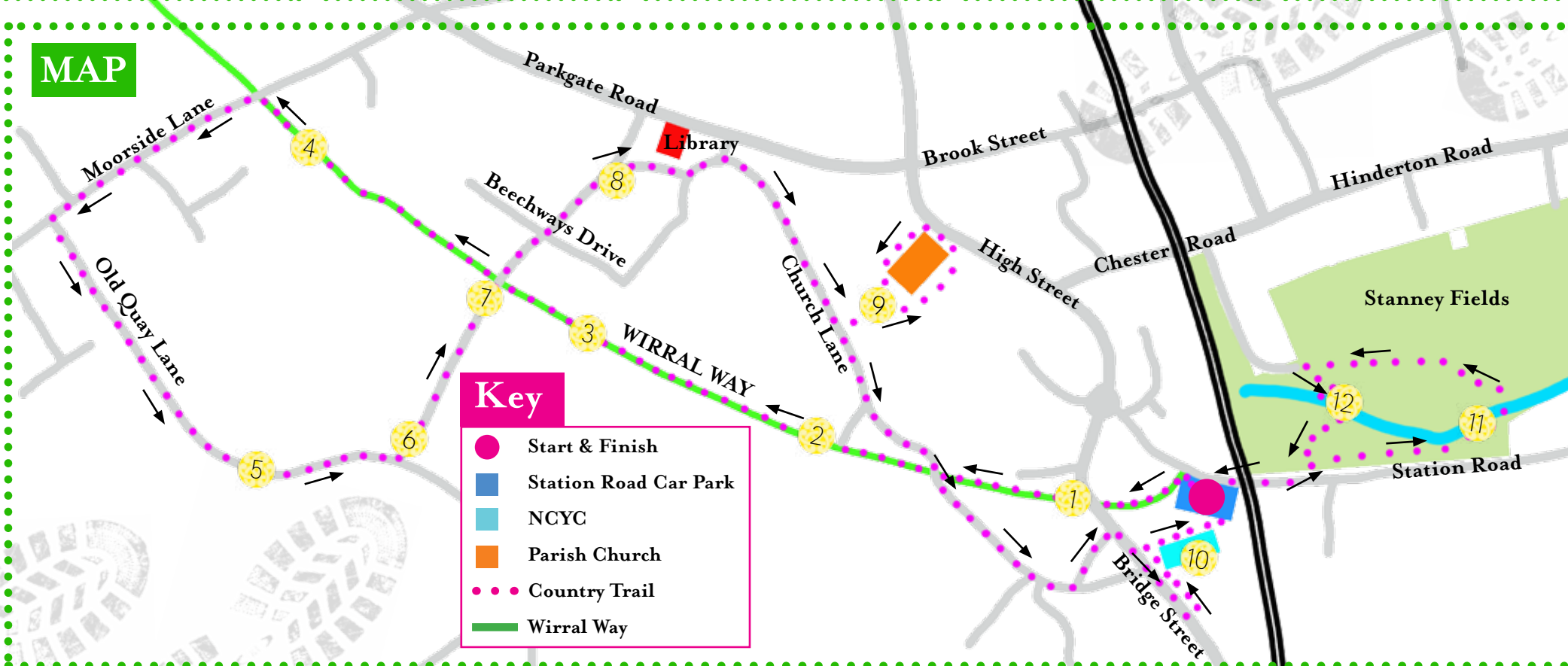
To your right, the tall trees are a stand of Poplars. Poplar is a genus of about 30-100 species. Botanists greatly disagree how to identify them as they freely hybridise, causing much confusion.

In this stand we see two types, the white-leaved trees are White Poplar, and the taller columnar trees are Lombardy Poplar. Both trees are commonly planted as a fast-growing windbreak although less than they were as they can both be somewhat invasive. White Poplar in particular has the dreadful habit of producing basal shoots (suckers) some distance from the main trunk.





MAP





How to date a hedge



Hedges are important habitats in the British Countryside. They are in themselves rich and diverse habitats as well as being historic ancient features in the landscape. How do you tell how old a hedge is? There is a rule that allows us to date hedges with some accuracy. Take a 30m length of hedge and within this count the number of different species of trees and shrubs, and multiply by 100. For example, in this

hedge there is Blackthorn, Hawthorn, and Wych Elm, making it around 300 years old. Some of the oldest hedges in the country are thought to be over 1000 years old, although there is none as old as this known on the Wirral.

Ancient Oak tree

It is said "oaks grow for 300 years, rest for 300 years and slowly die for another 300 years". As the tree ages it adapts to the world around it by growing when conditions are favourable, and declining when they are not. As such, large old trees are often gnarled and scarred. This is brilliant for wildlife, as most of the wildlife interest is in the deadwood contained within the dead and dying parts of the tree, especially its rotten centre. An estimated 2500 species in Britain are dependent on ancient trees, most of which are insects and fungi.



Wildlife Lawns



Lawns are a much understated wildlife habitat. The short turf contains species such as Birds-foot Trefoil, White Clover, Butter-cup, Yarrow, and Selfheal are all plants you can find in lawns, and with sympathetic cutting, can be good places for wildlife. Birds-foot Trefoil in particular is an excellent plant for bees and butterflies as it the food plant for various species of Blue Butterfly and a favourite of bees. If mown and the cuttings removed, you can retain a

low nutrient soil, rich in wild flowers.



Churchyards

Churchyards are important habitats for wildlife. They contain several habitats that with the longevity of management can contain a huge number of interesting species. Old grasslands, buildings, stonework and veteran trees are common features of many churchyards and provide a rich tapestry of wildlife. Old walls in particular provide an important habitat for lichens and mosses and Britain is a centre of diversity for such plants.



One tree of note is the evergreen oak to the right of the path as you approach the church. This is a Turner's Oak, a hybrid between Holm Oak and Common Oak. It is an evergreen tree occasionally found in large estates.



Neston Community and Youth Centre

What can be done to help wildlife at home? Wildlife friendly gardens are easy to create, and can be productive too. At the Community Centre, volunteers as part of the Wildlife Connections Project, run by Chester Zoo, have created a wildlife friendly space. Firstly, all the wildlife in the centre is being recorded, with 55 plant and seven bird species so far recorded.

Then, a mix of wildlife friendly plants are planted to encourage wildlife in the garden. Alongside these fruit and vegetables are planted to encourage insect predators to help reduce pests and diseases. All this work has been done by volunteers and in a small space that anyone could replicate at home.





Gardens and garden plants

As you enter Stanney Fields Park, pass the skate park to your left, and turn right on to the grass and pass between the copses to your left and right. The copse off to your left is a mixture of trees and shrubs including Silver Birch, Common Alder, White Poplar, Common Oak and Dogwood. Follow the path to your left and down the steps, and turn right.



Neston has lots of good gardens that provide excellent habitat for wildlife. Urban areas are an important patchwork of different habitats rich in wildlife. To your left is a now somewhat overgrown planted area with many different ornamental plants including Cotoneaster, St John's Wort, Barberry, Dogwood, Butterfly Bush, Lilac, Dogwood, Honeysuckle, Flowering Current and Bridal Wreath. All are excellent sources of nectar and pollen for bees and butterflies.



This group of plants is excellent for a variety of wildlife, especially as combined they have a very long flowering season. Although native plants are the best for native wildlife, non-native plants provide

abundant food throughout the year. Especially important are those plants that flower very early and very late in the season. Ivy is one of the best native wild-flowers for bees, and will flower as late as November. Unfortunately there are no species of native wildflower that flower consistently in winter, so gardens can provide very important winter food supplies, especially plants like Grape (Mahonia).

The shrubby nature of this planting also provides a valuable nesting habitat for birds such as Blackbird, Hedge Sparrow (Dunnock) and Robin.



Streamside vegetation



Follow the path along and turn left along the avenue of cherry trees. At the back of the British Legion Building, turn a sharp left down a set of steps. Follow the path to the left and stop by the stream waterfall.

In this area is a small brook with a range of plants and animals adapted to wet aquatic habitats and wet soils. The streamside vegetation has been planted with exotic shrubs, but due to the wet soil, native species including alder, willow and birch have invaded. Willow has separate male and female flowers and both are excellent early nectar and pollen sources for bees and other early emerging invertebrates. In early spring willow is the number one plant for emerging queen bees. These plants also provide excellent shelter for many species of bird including House Sparrow, Chaffinch, and various species of Tit including flocks of Long-tailed Tits.



Within the stream itself you are likely to find a host of mini-beasts. The diversity of the fauna is dependent on a number of factors, but water quality and availability of shelter are the key factors. In ponds and streams of good water quality and a range of vegetation, you are likely to find a very diverse and interesting fauna. In the stream through Neston, there are lots of interesting beasts including Water Boatmen, Pond Snails and Whirligig beetles. If you are lucky, you may spot a dazzling blue Damselfly or Dragonfly. Both are voracious predators, especially the aquatic larvae.



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