

PLANTS AND WILDLIFE YOU MAY SEE ON YOUR WALKS

Most walks include a mixture of arable farmland with old hedgerows, as well as small areas of woodland and several follow the River Ivel or Pix Brook for part of the way. All these habitats provide a rich variety of plants and creatures, though some are better in Spring and Autumn, when blossoms, fruit or leaf colour are at their best.

Hedgerows and arable fields

The first flowers are the snowy blossoms of blackthorn, followed by hawthorn, whose white flowers attracts bees, hoverflies and other insects. In some areas, elder is also found, with large panicles of creamy white flowers in May/June and black berries in September - both excellent for home-made wine.

The red haws, purple sloes and black elderberries of Autumn feed local blackbirds, starlings and thrushes, as well as Winter visitors like redwings and fieldfares. Other hedgerow plants include dog rose, guelder and brambles - whose flowers are loved by bees and fruit eaten by birds. Look out for butterflies here also, as many lay eggs on bramble leaves.

Field poppies, ox-eye daisies, teasels, white cow parsley, lilac scabious, purple knapweed, white or pink campion and yarrow make up a colourful field-edge through the summer and are a magnet for insects, especially butterflies and hoverflies

The fields bordering Etonbury Wood can host large over-wintering flocks of corn buntings, accompanied by yellowhammers, skylarks and sparrows. Pheasants and partridge scour the fields for seeds and during Spring and Summer, yellow hammers call their 'Little bit of bread and nooo cheese' from tall twigs. Look out for swallows skimming across the tops of grain crops to catch insects, as well as chaffinches, goldfinches and linnets and in Autumn for flocks of lapwings. Swifts nest in the centre of Stotfold and are often seen and heard, especially in the vicinity of the traffic lights adjacent to the Methodist Chapel. Because of the increased rabbit population, buzzards are now regularly seen and more uncommon raptors often pass through - red kites, hobbies and osprey may be seen from time to time.

What to look for near the rivers and brooks

These are rich in marginal plants, from watercress which was a commercial crop in the 19th century, to golden marsh marigolds, the vibrant pink spires of rosebay willowherb and the pink and cream of great willowherb. Look out for an attractive invader from Asia, Himalayan Balsam, with large, snapdragon-like flowers in shades of pink. Cricketbat willows, alder and some very large, old ash trees border the water courses and you may see brightly-coloured kingfishers sitting on overhanging branches, or more likely speeding out of sight. There are otters and water voles along the river, though you will need to be up very early and be very lucky to catch sight of these shy creatures.

Dragonflies and damselflies are found not only near the river, but catching insects which feed on the arable 'weeds' growing at the field edges. If you cross any bridge at dusk, look out for bats catching insects over the water. You should see mallards, coots, mute swans and moorhens on most parts of the river and hear the songs of reed and sedge warblers. The lake at Radwell also has little egrets and a wide variety of waterfowl at most times of the year.

What to see in woodland

Etonbury Wood has a wide variety of native trees and shrubs - oak, ash, rowan, hornbeam, small-leaved lime, wild cherry, hawthorn, wayfaring tree, hazel and guelder rose - and evergreen Corsican pines. In early summer look out for blue fleabane in the poor soil beneath the young trees. As the

name suggests, it was widely used for many centuries as a strewing herb to deter fleas. If you go near Stotfoldbury or Centenary Wood in Spring, you should see carpets of snowdrops under the trees. These areas are full of birdsong, blackbirds, thrushes, great and blue tits and the occasional tapping of woodpeckers.

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March 2012