

Explore The Weald Moors

A guide to the habitat, flora
and fauna of east Shropshire's
largest wetland landscape



EXPLORE THE WEALD MOORS

A few miles beyond the historic market town of Wellington one of Shropshire's largest and most elusive wetland landscapes begins to unfold. This is a place for quiet reflection but one where the serenity of apparent wilderness disguises mankind's influence at every turn. Here, you'll find an enduring stronghold for some increasingly rare wildlife, so come with us now and let's explore the fascinating natural heritage of the wild and evocative Weald Moors...



Turn to the centre pages to find your way on to the Weald Moors

The east Shropshire moorlands are a highly sensitive peat landscape characterised by slow-flowing rivers and streams (known locally as '*strines*'), rush-filled drainage dykes and damp pastures. This is some of the lowest and wettest ground in Shropshire, where the high water table has helped sculpt a verdant and accessible landscape with a great — but highly fragile — wetland inheritance.



Lost on Waters Upton Moor: now where did we put that handy Wellington LA21 guide?

The East Shropshire Moorlands

Flat, low-lying, and poorly drained, the Weald Moors had the ideal recipe for wetland development but how did this perfect storm ever arise? For the answer, we must go back twenty thousand years to the end of the last Ice Age when a number of glacial lakes across the northern half of modern day Shropshire drained, leaving a distinctive pattern of ridges and hollows that resulted in what we now know as the 'Meres and Mosses'. While sharing their origins, the Weald Moors are neither of these things.

After the ice receded, peat was laid down along the length of the River Strine (the main moorland watercourse) and its tributaries, while islands of mineral soil formed above them — upon which the moorland settlements



Market Square, Wellington, laid out when the town received its Royal charter in 1244

of today eventually grew up. Much of the history of the Weald Moors is a story of constant struggle, with mankind striving, in one way and another, to usurp its soggy surroundings.

Evidence of this conflict can be seen at The Wall, where the huge earthen banks of a low-lying Iron Age hillfort speak of a time when the moors were a wide expanse of watery fen. That this is no longer the case owes much to a dense network of early Nineteenth Century drainage ditches, designed to hasten the passage of water from the entire area and improve its fortunes for agriculture in an era when its 'Wild' Moors epithet (of which 'Weald' is a derivation) was well earned. Nowadays, the Weald Moors are among the most intensively farmed areas in Shropshire, yet, as we shall see, this is still a place with wilderness at its beating heart.

Wetlands are among the most productive habitats on earth, with a wide range of specialised flora and fauna you will not find elsewhere. Not only do the Weald Moors have



The Weald Moors area is a Shropshire stronghold for the Lapwing

a great ecological back story but a starring role in the present and future of many scarce plants, animals and insects that all call this isolated and characterful landscape home.

A Beginning or an End

Bookending the east Shropshire moorlands are the historic market towns of Wellington and Newport, which both have long-established connections to the area. The three fishes in Newport's town crest, for example, denote a time when the moors formed a significant part of its medieval fisheries, while Wellington's status as east Shropshire's pre-eminent market town was partly founded upon the sales of cattle and livestock seasonally grazed to admiration on the famed moorland pastures.

Today, both towns are excellent gateways to exploration, with a full range of independent shops, commercial services, cafés and restaurants from which to plan your journey onto the moors. Once there, a wealth of officially designated quiet lanes, footpaths and byways await the intrepid cyclist or walker intent on discovery. This guide has been designed to provide you with an entry point into the area's landscape and natural heritage, so, without further ado, let's now begin our very own moorland odyssey.



Exploring the natural heritage of the Weald Moors at Wall Farm

THE EVOLUTION OF A LANDSCAPE

As we begin our journey onto the Weald Moors, there is no better place to start a voyage of discovery than beneath our feet! The peat soil that lends this distinctive landscape so much of its identity is not only one of its most visible features but also its richest — sustaining literally billions of living things.



Three wanderers contemplate the living history book beneath them on Kynnersley Drive

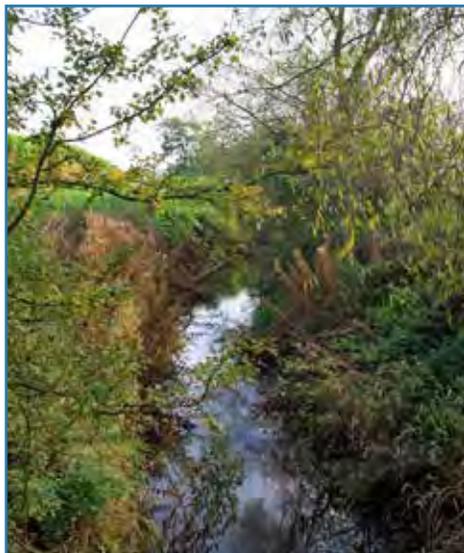
Along with air and water, soil is one of the key ingredients for life — just a teaspoon can contain more living organisms than the entire human population of Earth! While your mind boggles at that astonishing piece of information, you may also wish to consider the huge array of non-microscopic creatures that rely on it, too. Birds, insects and burrowing mammals all require soil to help provide them with food, nutrition and water, while it also gives plants and trees the anchorage they need to survive. In fact, the type of flora to be found in any landscape will be fundamentally linked to its soils and this is especially true of naturally wet areas such as the Weald Moors.

Beyond the Horizons

Soil consists of mineral grains ground from the rock deposits and sediments beneath it, which provide it with texture and help to define the way it behaves. Soils dominated by clay, for instance, will hold far more water than those where sand predominates, which tend to drain more freely. At its surface, soil also comprises rotting and partially decomposed

vegetation broken down by organisms in the earth and it's from this buried plant material that the extensive, shallow peatlands of the Weald Moors were largely created.

Typically, organic topsoil is around twenty centimetres thick but in peatland it can extend downwards for many metres. In the case of the Weald Moors, the explanation for this lies in the naturally waterlogged and poorly drained nature of a low-lying landscape fed by acidic rainwater. With nowhere else to go, organic debris simply builds up and decomposes in situ, slowly forming a peat resource beneath, which in itself is highly water resistant. One raindrop, for example, might take ninety years to filter down through ten metres of peat.



The Strine Brook: sinuous peat formations ahoj!



The Newport Canal is an important habitat for aquatic plants

The Living History Book

Forming at a rate of up to one millimetre a year, the process of peat accumulation is an extremely slow one. However, where it remains undisturbed and is able to acquire great depth, it can reveal much about the development of the landscape. The absence of oxygen in peat soil makes it particularly adept at limiting decay and preserving the remains of the organic matter contained within, providing us with a snapshot of life in distant times. On the Weald Moors, the recovery (from depths of over a metre) of insect remains and pollen grains associated with wetland habitats have revealed a picture of the area some seven thousand years ago, when vast reed beds surrounded by slow moving waters and scattered alder woodland appear to have dominated the local scene.

Although the Weald Moors area is still a significant peatland, nowadays it is one where it no longer accumulates, lacking the correct peat-

forming plant life required to sustain and build upon its ancient resources. However, this is still a wet landscape where acidic, poorly draining soils and seasonal waterlogging predominate, and where the water table still lies close to the surface. Indeed, it is the ability of moorland soil to hold water and meet the demands of plants and animals for moisture that defines much of its wetland character, providing the right conditions for a wide range of characteristic flora and fauna that thrive in such conditions.

Species Focus: Fen Plants

Plant life is the structural foundation of wetlands and the tall, landscape defining sedges and grasses that dominated the peat-based fenlands of old are still a regular sight around the Weald Moors today. Growing up to two metres tall, one of the largest and most apparent is Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*), which has the ability to rapidly colonise and form large stands in a variety of water bodies. Sadly, its distinctive purple flower heads (which bloom from August to October) are far less common than they once were and human activity, particularly drainage, has resulted in the disappearance of many reedbeds.

Two more members of the grass family that can be found in a variety of moorland locations are Reed Canary-grass (*Phalaris arundinacea*) and its taller cousin Reed Sweet-grass (*Glyceria maxima*). As well as inhabiting ditches and pond margins, Canary-grass also occurs along roadsides, while Sweet-grass can root in banks or within a water body, where it sometimes forms floating rafts. Another tall aquatic herb of pond and ditch edges that also thrives in a number of wayside verges is Bulrush (*Typha latifolia*), which is also known as Reedmace. Its distinctive, busby-like spadix contains the female flowers, while the male counterparts sit atop on a slender spike. The seed heads break up in the autumn, and are dispersed on the wind over wide areas to colonise new sites.

ONCE UPON A STRINE

Although much of the original fen landscape our ancient ancestors recognised has largely disappeared, water is still a key feature of the Weald Moors ecology. The rivers and streams around which this vast peatland first formed continue to shape its appearance, providing vital habitat and wildlife corridors for an array of species to move around the moorland while making agriculture possible on its once forbidding terrain.

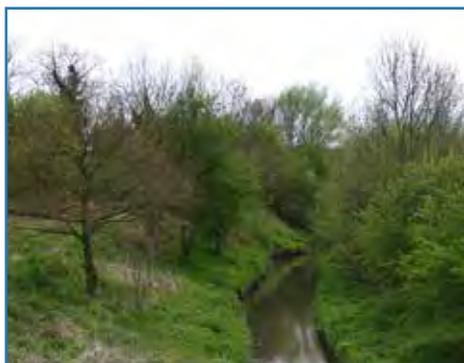


Rodway Bridge: two-wheeled travel offers great moorland waterway views

Running in east-westerly fashion across the entire length of the northern moorlands, the River Strine, together with its tributaries the Strine Brook and Pipe Strine, form the Weald Moors principal waterways. They not only play a vital role in creating the high water table that once fed an extensive wetland but also in channelling water away from this part of the lower Tern catchment (which drains much of north and east Shropshire). Typically, lowland rivers and streams tend to be gentle and slow flowing in nature, allowing life to proliferate in their waters and on their banks. However, this is only part of a much wider story, for a river consists not merely of the channel we see above ground but a large part of what lies beside and beneath it — in the underlying gravels and sands that help carry water downstream, and on the adjoining land over which water flows in times of flood. As such, the river channel, bed and floodplain are really one interconnected whole, all linked by flowing water and the particles and chemicals within. It is these interactions that give life to an abundance of flora and fauna that depend on rivers and streams for their own existence.

Plant Mechanics

While watercourses like the Strine and its similarly named companions bring a degree of permanence to the moorland landscape, in reality they — like all rivers and streams — are ever changing habitats. That this is the case owes much to the plant communities growing within their waters and upon their saturated banks. Rivers constantly deposit and erode sediment, and riverside trees, aquatic and bankside plants help to control the speed and flow of water, shaping sand, silt and organic matter into shifting beds and banks that are transformed from season to season as water levels rise and fall. It is here that opportunities for germination and new plant growth are created, providing a foundation for the typically dense vegetation that lends cover and hunting opportunities to all manner of insects, fish, birds and small mammals. Put simply, plants are the engineers of healthy rivers and streams.



The River Strine at Crudgington Green



FRANK GREENAWAY / VINCENT WILDLIFE TRUST

Otters can construct holts in the root systems of trees, riverbank holes and drains

On the Tarka Trail

Of all the creatures on the Weald Moors that rely on running water, few are more iconic or better adapted to a riparian lifestyle than the Otter (*Lutra lutra*). This voracious, semi-aquatic predator, which has been sighted along the whole course of the River Strine and Strine Brook in recent times, uses an array of adaptations to hunt for the fish that form the main part of its diet. In search of their prey, Otters will exploit virtually every type of waterway, including smaller streams and ditches, utilising webbed toes and a powerful rudder-like tail to propel them through the water. Beneath the surface, they are also

Polecat



Fore

Hind

Vole



Fore

Hind

Otter



Fore

Hind

Making tracks: saturated ground is a great place to search for small mammal footprints

Species Focus: European Eel

Otter will take a wide variety of prey but one of its most distinctive victims is the European Eel (*Anguilla anguilla*), which has been recorded all across the River Strine. These long, narrow bodied and slimy-skinned fish range over a wide variety of habitat during their long lives (which can last up to 85 years!) but wetlands and backwaters are particularly suitable for young eel, which thrive where a diversity of vegetation and cover exists.



Eels will enter fields after dusk to feed on slugs and worms

Eel trapping was once an important part of life on the Weald Moors and was recorded in the Domesday survey of 1086. Sadly, and for reasons not fully understood, its numbers have diminished rapidly in modern times. European Eels are all thought to begin their epic lives off the Gulf of Mexico, in the Sargasso Sea, drifting into coastal areas as larvae and migrating into rivers and streams as elver. Here, they grow to maturity — a process that can take up to twenty years — before once more journeying back to their ocean breeding grounds to spawn.

HEAVENLY WATER BODIES



Aside from the River Strine and its main tributaries, the Weald Moors are blanketed by a plethora of streams, ditches, ponds and flushes. These small water bodies abound in a wide variety of shapes and sizes, forming an aquatic network essential to the survival of a highly diverse assortment of flora and fauna not found in larger rivers and lakes.

For plants and animals that depend on running water, small streams can behave very much like a river in miniature. Lowland watercourses, for example, are important nursery grounds for many fish species, including Brook Lamprey (*Lampetra planeri*) and the bottom-dwelling Bullhead (*Cottus gobio*) — both of which have been found on the moorlands. Sharing a preference for calm waters and clean gravels in which to spawn, they can live out their lives in relatively short stretches of water when conditions are right for them. Natural streams with twisting channels that form smaller pools and riffles generally offer the best habitat but the Weald Moors are home to many more miles of manmade waterways that are capable of making a major contribution to the diversity of local life.

The Aquatic Motorway

All straight lines and right angles, drainage ditches might not appear to have a very natural relationship with the landscape — indeed, they



This ditch on Kynnersley Drive is one of many that criss-cross the Weald Moors



Bullhead: a meal time favourite of heron, kingfishers and assorted duck species

exist essentially only to speed water away from wet places like the Weald Moors in a controlled fashion and make them suitable for agriculture. Yet, carefully managed ditches with a regular supply of flowing or standing water can become rich in wildlife and, like a many tentacled beast reaching deep into every corner of the moorlands, their great number makes them a very important local habitat feature.

Those with clear water, a good range of plant life on their banks and margins, and an abundance of insects will often be the best places to search. However, even recently cleared ditches have their own characteristic wildlife and a good drainage system will contain a mixture of both. These are the places where you might find a Barn Owl quartering rough grass margins in pursuit of vole food, or Hobby (now thought by some experts to breed on the moors) hunting dragon and damselflies. Banded Demoiselle are a common sight on Kynnersley and Tibberton Moor in summer, which is a time when you might also glimpse a dusky coated Black-tailed Skimmer (*Orthetrum cancellatum*) basking on a bare bank alongside any stretch of open water.



MARK SISSON

Water Voles lack the aquatic adaptations of Otters and can become waterlogged

In Search of Ratty

While most plants and animals prefer ditches with shallow waters and gentle gradients, a small mammal that displays a preference for steep banks is the Water Vole (*Arvicola terrestris*). These rat-sized, aquatic herbivores (which have small rounded ears and a short, hair-covered tail) excavate extensive burrow systems in the high banks of watercourses, containing entrance points at various levels — including underwater. Voles are generally more active in daylight and often eat at the water's edge, leaving telltale piles of finely chopped vegetation on the 'lawns' of closely cropped grass they create outside their burrows.

Voles consume around 80% of their body weight daily and the amount of bankside vegetation present is critical to their survival in terms of their food, shelter and nesting needs. Although



The Buttery area of Kynnersley Moor is home to several small ponds

they are still relatively widespread, the UK population is in sharp decline with predation by mink perhaps the greatest threat to their long-term survival. However, Water Voles occupy fairly small territories of one to two hundred metres of waterway and the excessive removal of foliage from and over dredging of aquatic channels means local colonies can easily become isolated, or, where silt is simply dragged-up and piled at waterside, buried alive in their burrows.

The Land of Lakes

One type of small water body you will find in manmade, natural, permanent and seasonal form on the Weald Moors is the pond. These wildlife hotspots support a larger proportion of freshwater biodiversity than our lakes or rivers but, much like the Water Vole, they have declined alarmingly in our countryside. Ponds are an integral feature of wetlands and each will hold unique animal and plant communities influenced by their individual surroundings. Much of the life of a pond exists in its shallow edges but it need not contain water all year round to be valuable to local wildlife. Seasonal ponds and flushes (areas of saturated ground where water flows out from underground onto the surface) are especially important for invertebrates because they generally lack predatory fish. These temporary water bodies were traditionally known as 'lakes' on the Weald Moors and are still a common sight in winter and early spring.



Black-tailed Skimmers are a common dragonfly of bare waterside banks

JIM ALMOND

Explore The Weald Moors





THE FARMED LANDSCAPE

Although the unique peatland heritage of the Weald Moors has its origins in the last Ice Age, the modern day character of the area is largely the result of our interactions with the land. For at least the past two and a half thousand years, moorland settlers have sought to eek out an existence amid the reeds, sallows and rushes, all leaving their own indelible mark on the landscape.



Invading Army! Cattle are now the primary occupants of Wall Hillfort's inner defences

A hillfort would probably be the last thing you'd expect to find on some of Shropshire's lowest lying land. Yet, at The Wall (northeast of Kynnersley) stands one of the best examples of its kind in the country. The structure's large earthen banks appear to have been constructed around 300BC and occupied for around 400 years — although its purpose remains a mystery. Analysis of pollen and insect remains trapped in peat indicate that, in use, the hillfort was surrounded by the meandering channels of a watery, reed-based fen. This seems to have been the case until Roman times, after which the influence of those working the land became more apparent.

Moorland Life and Times

For many centuries, the centrepiece of the Weald Moors was a vast swathe of land stretching for over six miles from Sleaford to Newport. The Rough Moor was long regarded as 'waste' where locals could graze cattle and collect timber and firewood. However, many of their activities could only be conducted seasonally, with the wetland character of the

moors penetrating every facet of local life. At Edgmond, for instance, outlying moorland villagers were forced to take their coffins for burial by boat in the winter months!

When Thomas Telford drove the Shrewsbury Canal over the edge of Wappenshall Moor in the late 1700s change was at hand. By then, much of the Weald Moors area was owned by the Lilleshall estate, which had bought it from the Crown after the Dissolution of the Monasteries (the lands having formerly belonged to Lilleshall Abbey). Reclamation of the moorland had been ongoing since the Middle Ages but in a haphazard fashion. By the early 1800s, these piecemeal 'improvements' had largely reverted to nature and the Duke of Sutherland (with the aid of his tenants) wrought a series of changes that permanently altered the moorlands, resulting in the landscape we see today. Essentially, the area was drained in its entirety: existing waterways were widened and straightened, a vast network of interlinked ditches dug, new woodland planted, and embanked roads built to facilitate the works.



Centuries ago, a boat was an essential means of transport for Kynnersley residents

A Foul Mart on My Trail

In a matter of years, the Weald Moors were transformed into some of Shropshire's richest farmland. However, the effect on the delicate peatland ecology was just as pronounced and, within decades, swathes of rich organic heritage had wasted away as the water table fell and the land dried out. With it, not only went a way of life for many locals but also a great deal of the wetland flora and fauna that characterised the area, although not all of it was solely related to habitat change.

In many parts of Europe, the Polecat (*Mustela putorius*) has a marked association with wetlands. Here, however, this opportunistic predator is a generalist found in practically every type of lowland situation, making particular use of hedgerows and woodland edges to hunt its favoured wild rabbit prey. Like the Weald Moors peatlands its fortunes rapidly diminished in the Nineteenth Century, thanks largely to heavy game-related culling. Happily, Wales and central England are in the midst of a Polecat revival and its slender body and



The Polecat: It's strong scent once earned it the nickname 'foul mart'!

buff-black and yellow coat can again be seen on the Weald Moors, as it expands its range eastwards using the area's watercourses as a guide. Polecats are predominantly nocturnal, spending their days resting up in dens (which they often construct in old rabbit burrows), but they can be seen more readily during daylight hours in winter months. Unfortunately, hybridisation with its domestic cousin the Ferret is an increasingly common problem, so if you do catch sight of what you think is a Polecat look for a black and white face with distinctive banded, mask-like markings.

Species Focus: Wetland Trees

Much has changed about the Weald Moors in recent centuries but one constant is the area's trees. Wetland inhabitants such as the willow family are still relatively abundant but telling them apart can be difficult because *Salix* species often hybridise. Those with broader, oval-shaped leaves are known as 'sallows' but, confusingly, both Grey Willow and Goat Willow — the two native species found here — are sometimes called Pussy Willow, owing to the fluffy appearance of springtime male catkins. However, the leaves of true Grey Willows are at least twice as long as they are wide, while the buds are smaller and pressed closer to the twig. Narrower leaved trees such as Osier, White and Crack Willow are also common in water margins and damp places, while poplars such as Aspen remain widespread. A much scarcer species you can find in the northern moorlands is the Black Poplar, Britain's rarest native timber tree. Older examples can become covered in lichen giving them the dark appearance from which their name is taken.



PASTURES OF PLENTY

The modern day Weald Moors landscape might seem far removed from its peat fenland origins but first impressions can often be wrong. For while the myriad drainage ditches and straightened strines that speed water away from the area have altered much of its character, this is still a place with a beating wetland heart just below the surface.



Low intensity grazing with nature in mind is one of the key hallmarks of Wall Farm



Pump Up the Volume: water is drawn back onto the land to re-wet fields for wading birds

Under the careful stewardship of one far-sighted farming family, water has been making a steady return to the verdant landscape of Wall Farm for more than four decades, bringing with it many species that left as suitably wet habitat diminished elsewhere. Beneath its pastures, thick peat deposits preserve an ancient link to the fenland ancestors that built the Iron Age hillfort encircling the farmstead. Above ground, you might also be forgiven for thinking you've stepped back in time, as the sensory delights to be sampled here speak of sights and sounds fast becoming distant memories elsewhere.

summer is critical to their breeding success, providing damp soil in which to search for insects that sustain growing young. By creating a patchwork of long and short grass, grazing cattle also help improve conditions for chick rearing, while the autumnal poaching of soil by their hooves creates the uneven surface required for ground nesting. Within the last century wet grassland has very nearly halved in our countryside, mirroring a decline in the wading bird population. That the Weald Moors is now considered among the most important sites for waders in the West Midlands is in no

Wading the Watery Moors

Before the widespread improvements of the Nineteenth Century, the periodically flooded Weald Moors peatlands made seasonal grazing of cattle and livestock the only practical method of farming. While this meant life was often challenging for local people, these wet pastures, with their temporary water-filled hollows, splashes and pools, were a staple for moorland wildlife, including many of our native wading birds. The presence of high water levels through late winter and into early



Permissive footpaths offer access to the best wildlife habitat on the Weald Moors

small part due to the diligent work carried out at Wall Farm. By raising infield water levels, new feeding and nesting opportunities have arisen, while the creation of ponds and scrapes (shallow water-filled depressions with gently sloping edges) has added all-year round interest, especially for wintering wildfowl. In the grand tradition of old, seasonal grazing of the pasture continues here, providing the ideal backdrop for a wispy-crested, iridescent black-and white-breasted resident that stands as a symbol of hope for the future of the moors.

A Peewit By Any Other Name

While Curlew, Redshank and Snipe have been summer visitors to the Weald Moors, the area is one of Shropshire's last strongholds for breeding Lapwing. Once common throughout the county, this charming wader, which can also nest on arable fields of spring sown crops, is now more commonly seen in winter — when numbers are augmented by Scandinavian migrants. These large flocks break up in February, when native birds return to their breeding grounds. Here, the buzzing 'peewit' call that lends the Lapwing its archaic moniker is among the most evocative sounds of spring, and trumped only by the



Lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*) are a familiar sight throughout the year at Wall Farm

visually arresting acrobatic display flights of amorous males. Like most waders, Lapwing have very specific requirements when it comes to nesting, favouring short, damp and bumpy grassland, with bare patches and scattered tussocks. Young birds can often be seen with their parents searching for food at the muddy, shallow edges of standing water bodies but this is a time of great vulnerability. Mortality among chicks is high and the proximity of nesting and feeding sites is critical to their survival — with short distances creating less opportunity for potential predators.

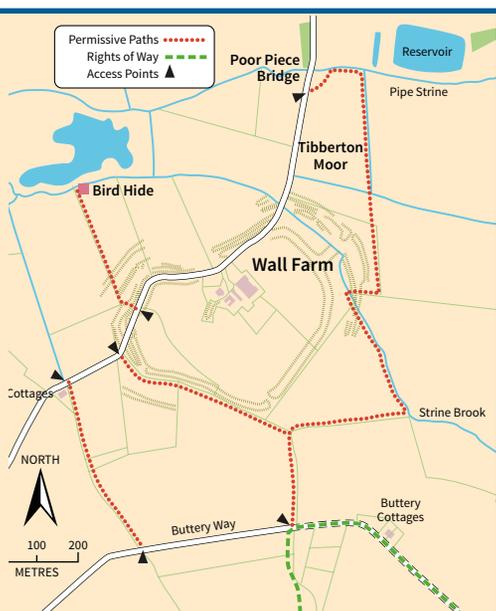
Wall Farm Walks

The owners of Wall Farm have created a network of permissive walking routes showcasing its restored wetland habitat. Here, you can see re-wetted pasture, strines and ditches lined with aquatic flora, or view the local birdlife from a purpose-built hide.

Here are seven species to look out for

1. Lapwing
2. Banded Damoiselle
3. Otter
4. *Tipula paludosa* – Cranefly
5. Celery-leaved Buttercup
6. Little Grebe
7. Reed Canary-grass

Please remember: this is working farmland, so take care! Don't disturb wildlife or livestock and keep dogs under control at all times.



A CHANGING PICTURE

The high water table and dark peatland charms of the Weald Moors make it attractive to a range of wetland connected wildlife but the area is also important for species with no specific links to this type of habitat. Nowadays, crop fields are nearly as common here as those filled with grazing cattle and livestock, adding another nuanced layer to the district's varied natural heritage.



JIM ALMOND

Rattle Those Keys: the Corn Bunting's jangling song can also be heard on fine winter days

Intensive farming on the Weald Moors has had profound consequences for the area — not least in its physical appearance. With miles of hedges, swathes of woodland and acres of autumn and spring sown crops, the modern day moorland shares more common traits with the wider countryside than are characteristic of its own natural heritage. Yet, this expansive landscape, with its linear network of ditches, streams and strines, provides the type of interconnected 'big area' habitat widely recognised as vital in reversing the fortunes of many diminishing plants, animals and insects. Consequently, the Weald Moors are now important for more than just their remaining wetland features alone.

The Jangling Conversation

Perched high up in the food chain, birds are among the best indicators of a healthy landscape and, for one species, the open, low-lying terrain of the moorlands has become a bastion. At one time, the distinctive jangling song of the Corn Bunting (*Emberiza calandra*) issued from power lines, wires and fence posts

across the county but this streaky brown, stout-billed, sparrow-sized bird is much rarer than it once was. Like all birds reliant on farmland, it requires nesting habitat and an all-year round source of food. For adults, this means a ready supply of seeds and grains, which are found amid cereals, such as barley, and weedy stubbles — in which they can be seen in large, gregarious winter flocks. Corn Buntings nest on the ground within fields and marginal areas and benefit from measures adopted by landowners designed to support local wildlife. On arable land in the north and south of the moors, rough, tussocky grass margins have been



Rodway Moor: at one time crops could only be grown above the peatlands



JIM ALMOND

The Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla flava*) can be seen in arable and pastoral situations



Where arable fields and pasture co-exist they can benefit a wide range of farmland species

allowed to develop, providing habitat for plant communities, crop-pollinating insects and other invertebrates. Yet, by its very existence, this cultivated environment offers many other opportunities for sustenance. Yellow Wagtails, for instance, are summer migrants traditionally associated with wet areas but, on Eyton Moor, they have developed a winning affinity with the long-flowering potato crop. Elsewhere, pungent, brilliant yellow early summer displays of oil seed rape have become important for the equally threatened Linnet that nest in the surrounding hedgerows and scrub. Both Skylark and Yellowhammer (another bulky, but canary coloured, bunting) have a strong association with farming areas containing a mixture of arable and pasture land and they, too, continue to show in good numbers here.

Who's the Daddy?

For Corn Bunting and other farmland birds, insects are a key ingredient in the rearing of chicks. Like their avian counterparts, invertebrates also rely on hedgerows and other linear features for food and refuge, taking advantage of a wide range of habitat features to establish the various niches in which their lives are played out. An order of insects often sought out for the feeding of young birds are Hemiptera — a major group unified by a piercing proboscis (situated in the middle of the head) and other sucking mouthparts that enable its members to feed on liquids. Among the more common species you may encounter

are the various shield bugs that inhabit a wide variety of deciduous trees and shrubs.

On damp, grazed moorland pastures, craneflies are a conspicuous insect of late summer and autumn. Their larvae (known as leatherjackets) begin life beneath the soil and are a popular avian snack, particularly among the massed ranks of starlings and rooks. Cranefly have a strong connection to wetlands and their presence is often a good indicator of habitat quality, particularly where standing and running water are present. Two of the most frequent groups you'll find on the Weald Moors are true and limonid craneflies. While they are closely related, they can usually be distinguished by the way they hold their wings at rest, which are held at right angles to the body in the former, and swept back in the latter.



NIGEL JONES

Tipula fulvipennis: the ubiquitous 'Daddy Longlegs' is right at home in wet grassland!

THE VANISHING MOORLANDS



By area, peatland represents the largest semi-natural habitat in Britain but its true extent is not fully known because so much of what remains exists in a degraded state. The Weald Moors are no exception and large tracts of wetland heritage have already been lost forever— with more likely to follow.

Whether walking or cycling across the Weald Moors, you'll find plenty of evidence of the area's dwindling peat deposits. Many roads that cross the moorlands, for example, exhibit a bumpy, undulating quality belying centuries of drying out and wastage of the peat reserves beneath them. However, this is not an historical phenomenon but an ongoing process. On freshly ploughed fields dustings of dark organic topsoil represent the last remnants of a peat store once metres thick. In other locations, the shrinking of the land can also be measured against the exposed root systems of trees formerly hidden below ground.



The undulating nature of roads such as the Rodway are typical of shrinking peatlands



The shape of things to come? Restored wetland at Wall Farm

The Drowning Dream

Undisturbed peatlands have an extremely high moisture content but water movement beneath the ground is a very slow process. As such, the drying effect of drainage is limited to reducing the surface waterlogging that creates the right conditions for peat-forming vegetation to thrive — something that stopped on the Weald Moors long ago. However, around the channels themselves, water stored within the existing deposits can more readily seep into ditches, causing peat to dry out, shrink and subside over an ever widening area. This perpetual cycle of drying, wastage and loss is made worse because oxygen more easily penetrates the stored reserves, leading to rapid decomposition. While much has inevitably been and will continue to be lost, there are still many places on the Weald Moors where deeper peat deposits of one metre or more exist and they represent perhaps the best chance of salvaging the area's wetland heritage. The re-wetting of pasture seen at Wall Farm offers a glimpse of a future that reconciles the area's competing interests but there are many other pressures affecting the moorlands that also influence its ongoing suitability for wildlife.

Arrested Development?

The potential for wetland habitat exists wherever the water table lies close to the surface but the quality of the supply nourishing local rivers, streams, ditches and ponds is equally essential for the health of the landscape and the flora and fauna that depend on it. The degradation of habitat associated with poor water quality and fluctuating water levels is an ongoing problem in many areas. Nutrient-loaded sediments and pesticides washed into watercourses can all serve to reduce the availability of plant food for species such as Water Vole (by encouraging algal growth and the silting-up of riverbeds – which also affect the spawning grounds of fish). Additionally, the excessive clearance of bankside vegetation not only facilitates the easier passage of pollutants into the water but denies many creatures essential habitat they need to complete their lifecycles. Ponds, which support up to two thirds of all terrestrial wildlife, are a vital constituent of wetland areas but their number has halved in the past hundred years, while a range of invaders, from Mink and Himalayan Balsam to Signal Crayfish, continue to cast an ominous shadow over the future of many aquatic species. In low-lying areas, less obvious but equally profound pressures, including those posed by urban development and abstraction for drinking water, are also capable of disrupting the local hydrology, while pollutants running off roads and pavements in built-up areas often find their way into rural watercourses, too.

Hope is what you say and do

The Weald Moors area falls within several regional landscape designations that recognise its importance for wildlife. As a constituent of the Meres and Mosses Natural Area, the moorland forms part of a vast tract of land that is as ecologically important to Britain as the Lake District and the Norfolk Broads. Within its framework, there is a long-term vision for landscape-scale restoration of the whole area and through the work of conservation groups such as the RSPB (and its Shropshire Futurescapes initiative) there exists a vision for the preservation of wetland on the Weald Moors.

Wellington LA21 Group is a not-for-profit community group that looks for local solutions to the global environmental challenges affecting us all. As part of our work, we maintain an active commitment to helping promote, protect and encourage access to the Weald Moors, providing a link between local people and the landowners and organisations working to conserve the area. To learn more about the moors, our work and how you can get involved, please visit our website:

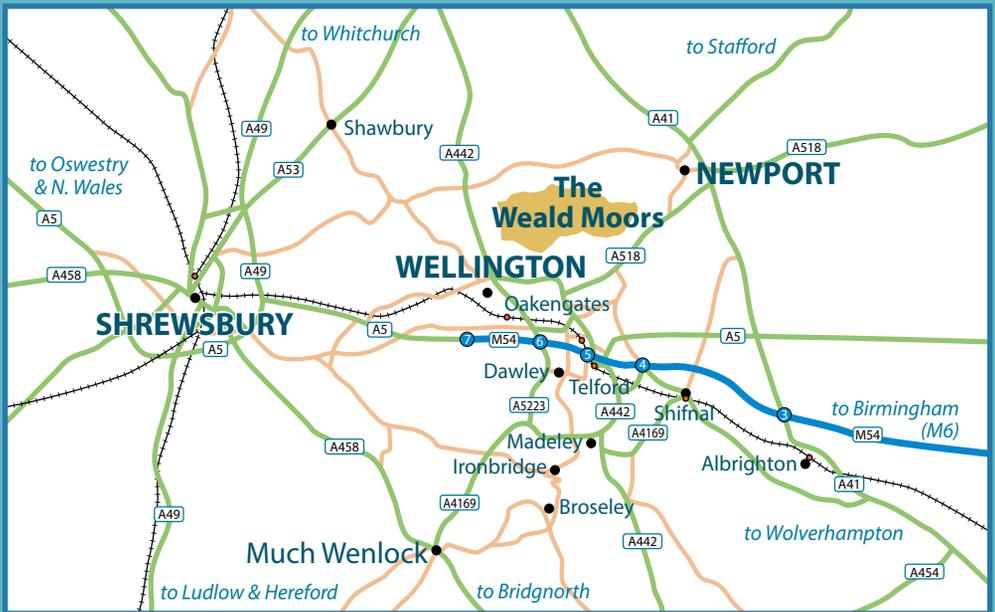
www.wellingtonla21.org.uk



Under the Big Sky: the Weald Moors' are a precious but fragile ecological heritage



The Buttery Way offers easy access to and from the Weald Moors



Visiting the Weald Moors

Explore the Weald Moors is a select guide to the natural heritage of east Shropshire's largest wetland area, which stretches for over seventy square kilometres between the historic market towns of Wellington and Newport. Designed with both cyclists and walkers in mind, the trail utilises a mixture of major and minor roads, officially designated 'quiet lanes', byways and footpaths.

When visiting the area please remember to take care at all times and follow the Countryside Code: consider other people enjoying the outdoors; leave gates and property as you find them and follow paths unless wider access is available; leave no trace of your visit and take litter home; keep dogs under control; plan ahead and follow advice and local signs. Wellington, the historic capital of east Shropshire, is an officially designated Walkers Are Welcome town, with mainline rail links to the West Midlands and Mid-Wales. Two National Cycle Network routes (NCN 55 and 81) also converge on the town, which has a wide range of independent shops, cafes, pubs and restaurants. Secure cycle parking is

available at a number of town centre locations while spares and repairs can be purchased from Perry's Cycles at 33 Tan Bank. For much more Information about the habitat and flora and fauna of the Weald Moors, please visit our website: www.wellingtonla21.org.uk

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Written by **Marc Petty**
 Design & Artwork: **MA Creative Limited**
 Illustrations: **Lucy Carmel**
 Photography: **Gordon Dickins**

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