

# Wye Downs wildlife walk



A circular walk on Wye Downs, taking in a breathtaking landscape, chalk grasslands and woodlands with spectacular views over the surrounding countryside. The route is steep in parts and can be slippery, so please wear boots.

Walking trail: moderate difficulty. The reserve is chalk downland with plenty of ups and downs on the hillsides of the Kent Downs.

Distance: 1.7km.

Start and finish: car park.  
Grid reference TR077455.  
OS Explorer Map 137.

Time: allow up to 1 and a half hours.

Access: the reserve is 2km south east of the town of Wye and 6km north east of Ashford. Please look at the green travel information available on the Natural England website to find out how to access the reserve by public transport. By car, access to Wye is via the A28. The reserve's eastern boundary is marked by a minor road from Wye to the village of Hastingleigh and there is a car park on this road next to the reserve.



## Wye Downs wildlife walk

This walk encapsulates the unique landscape of Wye Downs. You will see wildflower rich chalk grasslands, hazel and ash woodlands and plenty of wildlife, along with a dramatic landscape thought to have been formed around 10,000 years ago. The walk has something to offer at any time of the year with the stunning views and landscape always visible, but to see the outstanding array of wildflowers, come for a visit between May and August.

Natural England own and manage this National Nature Reserve, which covers 134 hectares of chalk downland, woodland and scrub grassland, stretching for 2.4km along the scarp face of the North Downs north-east of Ashford. It is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) as it is one of the best and most extensive examples of chalk grassland in Kent. It supports a wide variety of chalk grassland species including several rare species such as the late spider orchid, early spider orchid and a range of scarce butterfly and moth species, such as the chalkhill blue and Adonis blue butterflies.

Help us safeguard this rich heritage for future generations, tread carefully in the steps of those who have gone before and enjoy your visit.



Wildflowers at Wye NNR

Wye Downs wildlife walk

From the car park, take care crossing the road and turn right through the gate. Follow the fence back along the road. You will see a gateway almost straight ahead but just on your left. Through the gate you will see a steel sculpture of the Devil's Kneading Trough on a flint plinth, head to the sculpture.



### 1 The Devil's Kneading Trough

This sculpture depicts the contour lines of the area of the Devil's Kneading Trough, a dry valley (or 'coombe') believed to have been formed around 10,000 years ago during a period of intense freezing and thawing of the chalk surface. As the last Ice Age was coming to an end, snow and ice melted and streams of water flowed down the slopes, carving out the chalk, forming the coombes (valleys). Take time to read the text on the back of the sculpture and think about how this landscape has been enjoyed and utilised through time.

From the sculpture, walk along the right hand-side of the fence line. The edge of the woodland is on your right and the larger trees are ash. You may see the climbing plant, old man's beard covering some of the smaller scrubs. Go through the kissing gate, it is then a short walk to the next kissing gate on your right. Here you will get your first glimpse of the dramatic Devil's Kneading Trough.



The Devil's Kneading Trough at Wye NNR

## 2 What a view!

Go through the gateway and take a moment to enjoy this fantastic landscape. Remember, this trough was formed thousands of years ago at the end of the last Ice Age. At this point you get good views of the ridges or terracettes that run along the contours of the Kneading Trough. These are thought to have been formed through the centuries-old tradition of grazing sheep and cattle on the banks. During the Second World War the reserve was used for military training and evidence of artillery practice can still be found.

**Now head straight along the pathway on the shorter grass on the top of the hill, keeping the woodland to your right. After a short walk you will see a small glade in the woodland on your right and a path waymarker for the nature trail – head straight on rather than turning right here.**

In the grassland here you will see small mounds in the grass. These are formed by meadow ants. The larger the mounds the longer the ants have been around and thus the longer the grass has been here. Meadow ants are important for some of the blue butterflies that feed on the flowers of chalk grassland.



## 3 The view to the sea

Could this be the best view in Kent?



This is a great place to see what you can spot. Can you see the faint outlines of ridges that

mark the flatter grassy area on the hilltop on the other side of the Devil's Kneading Trough? These are the traces of ancient field boundaries created by Iron Age or Romano-British farmers who ploughed the fertile chalk soil to grow crops.

Look down for the woodland on the left, here the soil is heavy clay and difficult to farm. This is in contrast to your right where you can see ploughed ground or crops depending on the time of year. Here the lighter and fertile soils along the Stour Valley are ideal for arable farming.

There is also an energy story in front of you. It tells of the changing methods of energy production through time. See if you can spot the windmill. This would have harnessed the wind using its sails to grind wheat into flour by turning millstones like the one not too far from your feet. A fairly recent addition to the horizon is a windfarm which on a clear day can be spotted in the distance, once again utilising wind energy, just like the windmill all those years earlier. You can also see Dungeness power station. Use the panoramic panel to pick out some other landmarks.

Whilst you admire this magnificent view, listen out for skylark and meadow pipit flying above the grassland.



**Keep to the path and go carefully down the steps. These steps were built by Natural England volunteers and the land beside them has been cleared as part of ongoing scrub management.**

## 4 Manhattan of the plant world

From here you will see the woodland edge. Look and listen out for willow warblers and chiffchaffs darting about. This mosaic of woodland, grassland and bushes provides a perfect home for wildlife. Colourful butterflies such as the chalkhill blue and Adonis blue find their home here. Look out for meadow browns, green hairstreak, skippers and gatekeepers in the longer grass. If you look very carefully you should be able to see different bugs and beetles and you might even spot a lizard or an adder. They like basking on this warm bank and the rough grass that is found here. Also look out for the burnet moth which is active during the day.



The land beside these steps has been stripped back of hawthorn and hazel as part of ongoing scrub management. It is important to get the right habitat for different species. For example, one of the rarer moths found here likes the longer grass. Too much grazing and the moth suffers, too little and scrub invades the grassland. Here the scrub is being cleared back to restore the grassland for the moth and many other species associated with the grassland.

**Now continue to wind down the steps where you will reach a wooden gate.**

## 5 Wildflower wonders

**At the kissing gate at the bottom of the steps look to your right for the large tree with two trunks. This is a field maple. Its leaves have the characteristic lobed maple shape and this tree loves the chalky soils found on the Downs. Go through the gate and take the path to the right into the field.**

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The chalk soils are ideal for wildflowers when they are managed as grasslands. Look by the gate for lady orchids which flower between April and June with spikes of pink petals decorated with purple patterns. Wildflowers are not only beautiful but they provide food for bugs and butterflies. Take a look at the panel here. It shows some of the butterflies you can see feeding on wildflowers in the open grassland.

**Walk through the open grassland until you reach a nature trail post.**

## 6 The plant vampire

There are lots of flowers to look for amongst the grass in spring and summer. Look out for a low growing yellow flower – this is yellow rattle. If you visit after it has finished flowering you can spot it by its dry capsules of seeds that rattle when shaken. It is a parasite that takes some of its nutrients directly out of the roots of neighbouring plants. However, as it takes, it gives also. The yellow rattle limits the spread of grasses so allowing other flower species to thrive.

The insects and seeds in the grassland flowers provide food for the yellowhammer, a small yellow and brown striped bird that lives in the hedgerows. Listen out for its tuneful song 'a little bit of bread and no cheeeeeeese!'



**Carry straight on. Do not turn right up the other path. You are now in Denton's Field. Here the grassland opens out into a larger field. In the late spring and early summer this is a great place to see both orchids and butterflies.**

## 7 Plunkett's Glade

Just before you go through the kissing gate there are more orchids to look for. The pyramidal orchid has tiny pink or purple flowers forming a small pyramid shape. Look out for the slender stem of the bee orchid with its pink and brown flower head crafted to give the appearance of a bee. The tall spike of small green flowers, each resembling a human figure, is the man orchid. All flower between April and June. If you are looking for these flowers, tread carefully to make sure none are damaged.



Pyramidal orchid at Wye NNR

Bee orchid at Wye NNR

There are more butterflies and moths to spot flying amongst the flowers. You might glimpse marbled white, common blue, gatekeepers, and burnet moth.



Gatekeeper at Wye NNR

**Go through the kissing gate and carry on until you reach an opening in the trees.**

## 8 The coppice woodland

As you enter this open space in the woodland, you will notice some trees that have been cut down and goats introduced to restore flower-rich grassland. The woodland here has been managed to provide wood for charcoal, firewood, fence posts and baskets for

centuries. You can spot a coppiced tree because it has numerous thin trunks springing from one point in the ground known as a stool. The trunks are cut down to the ground on a regular basis and re-grow. Some of the stools are hazels which would have been coppiced over 100 years ago.



Natural England coppice the woods here to create open areas, where the light and warmth can reach the ground. Wye Community Farm use the cut wood to make charcoal by slowly burning it in a covered kiln. It is then sold locally.

If you are visiting in autumn look closely for different types of fungi, such as the wood mushroom, honey fungus and puffball.

**Follow the path round to the right up a steep hill.**

## 9 Trees of the chalk downland

This dense piece of woodland is home to birds such as nuthatches, blue tits, great tits and longtailed tits. You might even spot the shy treecreeper, creeping around the trees searching for insects.

The chalk soils here are ideal for trees such as the yew, ash, hazel and whitebeam. Yew is easy to identify – it is an evergreen with green needles. The ash has a pale bark, dark almost black buds and leaves made of many leaflets. The whitebeam is a beautiful tree – its leaves are dark on top and almost white underneath and in a breeze the tree can flash from dark to light as the leaves catch the wind. Hazel has many stems, it naturally grows as a coppice like this and there are some very large hazel stools here in this wood. Flowers like the tiny wood anemone thrive in this shady place.



As you climb the slope you will see some large trees that have blown over in the wind. This happened in the great storm of 1987. The chalk soils are shallow here and trees find it difficult to root well. Some trees, like the beech, have shallow roots anyway. The trees have all fallen in the same direction with the way the wind was blowing in the storm.

**At the waymarker turn left, walk a short way then turn right and go through the kissing gate. On your left you will see a very large fallen beech tree. This also fell in the great storm but is still alive. Look at the chalk soils in the root plate and at how small this root system is compared to the huge size of the trunk of the tree.**

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## Wildlife eats wildlife



Kissing gate to the ash woodland at Wye NNR

As you walk through the woods, you will notice that the trees are different. Here the trees are mostly ash, with their grey drooping branches ending in big brown buds in winter and large hands of between five and eleven oval green leaves during summer.

Look out for logs and stumps too. These are home to many creatures and insects, such as beetles and they are an important part of a woodland ecology. Notice the trees with twisted trunks near the roadside edge amongst the ash. These are old hawthorn trees and have striking colours at different times of Wye Downs wildlife walk

the year. They bloom with thousands of small white flowers in May or June then are covered in small shiny dark green leaves during summer. Small red berries grow in the autumn. The flowers and berries, as well as the insects, which live on the trees themselves, feed many of the birds such as the song thrush. The hawthorns are a perfect example of how all wildlife is connected and why it is important to manage the reserve for diverse habitats of flowers and trees so that bugs, birds and other animals can thrive.

**Before the roadside kissing gate take the path to the right along the top of the wood. As you emerge from the woodland onto the grassland at the top of the hill you will see a cattle pen on your left by the coach car park. This pen allows our grazier to treat his cattle safely and keep them in good condition for grazing the reserve.**



Cattle in pen at Wye NNR

**You are now back to where you started, we hope you enjoyed your walk. Please tell your friends.**

**To find out more about the Kent countryside and other walks you can do, please visit: [www.naturalengland.org.uk](http://www.naturalengland.org.uk)**



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