

## **Winter Walks 2017 – Somerset Wildlife Trust reserves**

The nights have drawn in and the warmth of Summer is but a faint memory. It's high temptation to just chuck on a few more woolly layers and curl up and hibernate in the warmth, much like the county's sleepy wildlife in the winter months, only braving the outdoors to get through the Christmas shopping list. But Somerset Wildlife Trust has got a better suggestion - ditch the busy high street, unravel yourself from rolls of wrapping paper, and head outside to enjoy the fresh, crisp air of the countryside and explore Somerset Wildlife Trust's Nature Reserves when they're at their most magical to get a festive feel good factor from the wonders of our county's wildlife instead. Here's a few winter walks to take your pick from:

### **Great Breach Wood to Unwrap a Beautiful View**

If you would like to tick off a great view from your walking list then look no further than this 4.3 mile woody walk to put a festive smile on your face. The walk is mainly level but there are still some gentle slopes and steps to put colour in your cheeks with the rewards along the way being worth the extra exertion. To start, take the path to the left of the car park (with your back facing the entrance), following the blue butterfly way-markers of the Polden Way: [www.combehillwood.co.uk/polden-way](http://www.combehillwood.co.uk/polden-way)

After about a four minute stroll you will be met with downward steps, followed by a wooden bridge (watch out if it's frosty as they get a little slippery) and then continue over a gulley and up the steps to reach the path through King's Wood. After about 15 minutes of walking, following the way markers, you will pass through a kissing gate onto our Gilling Down reserve (who needs mistletoe?). You will be met with a stunning and stretching view of Butleigh Moor, Somerton Moor and King's Sedge Moor, framed in the distance by the Blackdown and Mendips Hills, pieced together in a picturesque puzzle. Take a moment to look out for Fieldfare and Redwing feeding on berries on nearby scrub.

Once you have breathed in the view, turn left and follow the fence line along the top of the slope to an information board, taking a left through another kissing gate. Follow the stone path to a fingerpost marking the start of Great Breach Wood's new Discovery Trail, where you will be guided around the circular route by finger posts. Along the way you might catch a glimpse of a Roe Deer launching across the distance, hear the charming chirps of Long-tailed tits, or witness a Sparrowhawk swooping through the trees. To return home, just simply retrace your steps, following the Polden Way through Gilling Down and King's Wood.

### **How to get there:**

Open to the public all year round this reserve is situated about 3 miles south-east of Street, Somerset, between Compton Dundon & Butleigh, along the ridge road known as Reynald's Way which links the B3151 and the B3153. Car parking is at Combe Hill Wood car park.

### **Langford Heathfield for a Winter Flutter**

This reserve that hosts a beautiful array of butterflies throughout spring and summer, transforms in Winter to become a home for an array of birds such as the Tree Creepers, Goldcrests, Blue tits and Long-tailed tits. To witness their busy flight through the woodlands, you have a choice of two trails, both coincidentally festively marked, one in green and one in red. If you don't have to rush off and do the Christmas shopping you may like to take the long trail (marked with red arrows) which is approximately 3km. But if you just want a shorter ramble, you can take the shorter walk of 1 km (marked in green arrows). Whichever path you choose to take, look out for the sloes on Blackthorns, and the bright red berries of Red Guelder Rose.

The trails are on boardwalks, which helpfully guide you through both walks, however please make sure to wear sturdy footwear as it could be muddy, wet or frosty under foot. Along the way you will enter on to the glades - pretty as snow globe scene - followed by scrub that is

crisp with Winter's chill and finally woodland you can see Jays flying overhead, going from tree to tree in search of its much loved meal of acorns.

If taking the long trail there's an opportunity to take a well-earned rest on the butterfly bench, the perfect place to whip out a flask of something warm to rejuvenate you for the rest of the walk. If you wish to take the shorter trail you can just follow the green arrows back, entering the wintery woodland along the way. Look out for the Jubilee seat so you can rest and take in the wonders of the reserve, keeping your eyes peeled and your ears alert for trotting Roe Deer and leaping Hares.

### **How to get there:**

Open to the public all year round, the reserve is west of the village of Langford Budville, 1.9m (3 km) N-W of Wellington, on the road to Wiveliscombe. If you are travelling by bicycle, a National Cycle Network route crosses the southern end of the reserve. Parking can be found in lay-bys on the Wiveliscombe Road, or Poleshill Lane, near the information boards.

### **Westhay for a Spectacular Wildlife Show**

Westhay Moor National Nature Reserve, part of the Avalon Marshes, is set within Somerset's historic Levels and Moors, and is definitely worth a trip to sprinkle some extra magic on your Christmas holiday this year. It is a perfect place to explore and, much like the best advent calendar, there always something different behind each door or corner - with a number of wonderful wildlife pictures and surprises waiting to be discovered.

Starting at the car park you will be met with the first sign post that will give you the choice of taking the 3km long Otter trail, helpfully identified by Otter footprints on way-markers, or you the 1.6km Coot trail, identified by, you guessed it, Coot footprints. This shorter trail takes you to the Island Hide and back, which is snuggled amongst the reedbeds, and is a perfect spot to escape the Christmas chaos and take in the peaceful view of over-wintering birds. Whichever trail you choose they both lead to the first hide of the reserve, the Viridor Hide, and following the Otter trail you will be led to the Tower Hide, a great place to take in the view of reedbeds, wet woodlands of Alder and Willow, and the reserve's wintering and passage birds such as Teal and Wigeon. By going in either direction from the Tower Hide you can get back to the main path and you will see signs for the Mire, (or bog), if venturing this way, to see the largest surviving fragment of lowland acid mire in South-West England, don't forget your wellies. Here you can find an array of interesting plants and mosses, and possibly spot barn owls quartering and feeding on this unique part of the reserve. When visiting don't miss the chance to investigate Westhay Moor's newest Hide, the North Hide. The perfect place to rest, relax and warm up. Although when looking out at the scenic view it might seem peaceful, a burst of activity could happen at any time – patience, like that of Christmas Eve will reward you! Keep your eyes peeled for an elusive Otter, vibrant Kingfishers and the regal Great Crested Grebe. Also Westhay can't be talked about without a mention of wildlife's present to us all, the Starling murmurations! Why not visit at dawn or dusk during the winter holidays to see the birds' incredible aerial show fill the sky.

### **How to get there:**

Open to the public all year round, the reserve is north of the village of Westhay, and turn off onto Westhay Moor Drove. There is a car park at the entrance and a disabled car parking 350m into the reserve. A national cycle network route runs along a disused railway line, just south of Westhay village. Dogs are welcome on leads in some areas, and please see reserve signage for more information.

### **Hark and Herald History at Black Rock**

This reserve is a Winter wonderland full of historical surprises to unwrap, amongst its woodland, rocky outcrops and limestone grassland. Once again, festively marked, the

reserve has a green trail of 1.6km and a longer red trail of 2.4km. Along the way, much like Ebenezer Scrooge on Christmas Eve you will be taken on a trip through time, and uncover the reserve's industrial heritage. Firstly on your journey you will walk past the Limekiln which was built in 1929 when Black Rock was still a working site, and opposite you will spot a typical sight along the Mendip Landscape - a traditional and characteristic dry stone wall. Further along the trail you will come across the former quarry, and beyond it you will reach a stone stile - a great place to stop, rest and look out for flocks of Fieldfares and Redwings feeding on the berries of the Hawthorn trees. Once you have made it up the slope, take a moment to listen out for the distinctive calls of Buzzards, Kestrels and Ravens and then continue to follow the path to one of the highest points of Black Rock and be rewarded with far-reaching views, stretching from Somerset to the North Devon's coast. If home is calling you, you can pick up the shorter trail, taking you back through the native broadleaf woodland.

If instead you fancy a longer stroll, once you are at the high point of the reserve, continue along the wall, through the gate and follow the enclosed track-way through beautiful woodland dominated by Ash trees, and dotted with Scots Pine and Yew trees. Quietly trudge past the Hazel and Honeysuckle that is likely to be home to snoozing Dormice, and continue to the woodland edge, through the Kissing gate and on to the woodland boundary to finish your walk. However, if you want to delay wrapping those presents, a great excuse is to explore Velvet Bottom by taking a right.

### **Velvet Bottom for a Winter Woodland Adventure**

Velvet Bottom nature reserve lies on the floor of a dry river valley and is long and narrow filled with rough grassland and pockets of woodland and scrub. You can take a linear walk through this reserve which is 1.7km one way, and leads you to Charterhouse and another Somerset Wildlife Trust reserve, Ubley Warren.

The marked trail follows the bottom of the valley which has had a connection with lead mining since pre-Roman times, and along the way look out for the two small caves that can be found along the way. Unfortunately you can't go in the caves, named the Timber Hole and Hangover Hole, - perhaps the latter was named after the people who overindulged in Eggnog during the festive season. As you walk through the reserve you will see a series of dams and levels, a reminder of the lead mining that used to take place.

As winter encroaches on the small woodland at the northern edge of the reserve, the old work house and remaining lead slag will be coated in frost or dusted in snow, to add even more charm to the remnants of a past industry. Once the path meets the minor road which passes through Charterhouse, you will know it's time to turn around and go back the way you came and enjoy everything all over again.

### **How to get to Blackrock and Velvet Bottom:**

Open to the public all year round, these reserves are accessible via Black Rock off the B3135 (1.2miles NE of Cheddar) or via Velvet Bottom off the B3134 to Charterhouse. There is parking at Black Rock and Velvet Bottom, but it is limited, and Coaches and minibuses should drop off at Black Rock entrance. Please take note that animals may be grazing at any time of year so please keep dogs under control.

For more information about accessibility, taking dogs and where to find these reserves please visit their website: [www.somersetwildlife.org/reserves.html](http://www.somersetwildlife.org/reserves.html)