Welcome to Upper Teesdale in the North Pennines AONB and Global Geopark

At the heart of this wide valley, the River Tees snakes through a series of rounded hummocks or ‘drums’ that were deposited and smoothed by glaciers more than 12,000 years ago. Now an area dominated by grassland, livestock grazing is central to the local economy and attractive white-washed farm buildings scatter the landscape. This circular walk from the parking area at Hanging Shaw will introduce you to some of the special plants of the North Pennines and the creatures that depend on them. Along the way you’ll discover plants that dance and others that keep insects captive. You might even see rare bees and long-distance visitors from Africa.

Walk length: 3.5 miles (5.7km)
Start/finish: Hanging Shaw parking area NY877 297

Spring and summer months are the time to enjoy this walk at its best. May and June will be a joy for wildflowers.

Terrain: Public rights of way with gates and stiles and short stretches of minor road. This walk is mainly on paths and tracks through fields and beside the River Tees & Harwood Beck. The route is gently undulating with a few short, steeper ascents and descents. Walking boots or strong shoes are recommended. Please keep to paths, take your litter home and leave gates as you find them.

Ground-nesting birds are common here. Please keep dogs under close control.

Public transport: For timetable information call Traveline on 0871 200 2233 (www.traveline.info).

Useful maps: Ordnance Survey 1:25,000 Explorer – OL31 North Pennines

High value for nature

On this walk you may be lucky enough to see wildlife that is so rare as to have almost disappeared from other parts of the country. You will pass through grassland vivid with the colours of flowering plants as the haunting song of a curlew floats on the breeze. A loud ‘stop’ from a small stream will tell of the presence of a water voles.

Traditional farming

Why is there so much wildlife here when so much has been lost elsewhere? An important reason is the type of farming practiced in Upper Teesdale and other parts of the North Pennines – low intensity, traditional livestock farming. Through ‘high nature value farmers’ do much more than this though; by farming extensively and using few chemicals they help to protect soils, store carbon, supply clean water and maintain a breath-taking landscape for us all to enjoy.

Viviparous

Upper Teesdale is renowned for a number of plants that are characteristic of arctic and alpine regions of Europe. One such plant is alpine bistort and it grows along the banks of the river here. The short flower spikes are topped by small white flowers with yellow centres. The flowers are followed by long, fleshy cones containing downy seeds. The plants can spread rapidly and once established can dominate large areas of ground. The seeds can spread by wind as well as to other areas dominated by grassland. The seeds can also spread by wind as well as to other areas dominated by grassland. 

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Nectar-feeders have access to a source of nectar along the flowering season. One such source is the common seal (in Somerset or Sussex) and ‘foggie-toddlers’ (in Scotland).

Knapweed and devil’s-bit scabious. In times past, bumblebees would feed on a succession of plants from wood crane’s-bill and water avens to meadowsweet, willows and as their colonies develop the workers that have newly emerged from hibernation will feed on riverside plants. The range and diversity of flowering plants along the river will introduce you to some of the special plants of the North Pennines and the creatures that depend on them. Along the way you’ll discover plants that dance and others that keep insects captive. You might even see rare bees and long-distance visitors from Africa.

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Rainbow hues

The banks of the River Tees and Harwood Beck abound with a wonderful range of flowering plants in a host of colours. The flowers of some are tiny but exquisite. Here you may find mountain pansy, milkwort, wild thyme, tormentil, pignut, butterwort, bird’s-foot-trefoil, orchids and hawkbits.

Quaking grass

...diddledocks, totter grass, ladies’ hands... these and many other names have been used to describe the grass, *Briza media*. If you find this delicate plant dancing amongst the other grasses you will see why it has inspired such imaginative descriptions. The purple, flattened seed heads are suspended on fine, stiff branchlets which shiver and quake in the breeze. Especially associated with the most flower-rich upland hay meadows, quaking grass is one of the first plants to disappear if too much fertilizer is added.

Golden globes

For a short time in early summer a dramatic plant flowers in Upper Teesdale. Known locally as ‘double dumplings’, globeflowers can be seen along the bank of the Harwood Beck and in swatches on steep slopes within hay meadows. A delicate pale yellow, the petals of these large flowers overlap to form soft spheres. If you gently part the petals you might find small flies trapped inside. In return for pollinating the flower these special flies lay their eggs here and the larvae feed on some of the developing seeds.

Steep refuges

Slopes and banks are good places to look for interesting and unusual wildlife. The inaccessibility of these places means that they tend to escape the impact of farm machinery, grazing livestock and fertilizers. The footpath passes close to several banks; here you might see the scalloped leaf of Lady’s mantle with a bead of dew at its heart. Upper Teesdale is one of the most important places in the country for Lady’s mantles, with nine different species found here. Banks are good places for carder bees which make their nests in the base of tussocks of grass. In open meadows these nests are vulnerable to farm machinery but on steep banks they are safe and undisturbed.

Good for birds too!

As you walk up the road towards the Langdon Beck Hotel, look to your right across the stream and you will see another bank. This one is soft and eroding but nonetheless wonderful for wildlife because in summer it is home to a colony of sand martins. These birds nest in burrows excavated in the silt and then hunt for insects on the wing as they swoop up and down the river. Long-distance migrants, sand martins spend the winter in southern Africa. House martins, a close relative of the sand martin, can be seen nesting on the nearby Langdon Beck Hotel.

Feasting bees

In late June, at the edge of a flower-rich hay meadow you will walk through a mass of melancholy thistles. Lower your eyes from the fantastic view across Teesdale and watch the bumblebees wading through the dense flower heads as they drink the plants’ nectar.