THE BIRDS OF GWENT

GWENT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

The Birds of Gwent

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The Birds of GWENT

W. A. VENABLES
A. D. BAKER, R. M. CLARKE, C. JONES
J. M. S. LEWIS, S. J. TYLER, I. R. WALKER & R. A. WILLIAMS

On behalf of the
GWENT ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

With additional material by
J. R. BENNETT, C. M. HATCH, S. HOWE, H. P. JONES,
R. MOELLER, M. PLUNKETT, S. J. SMITH

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FOREWORD

by Iolo Williams

Living in Montgomeryshire, I have always been jealous of Gwent's ornithologists. In the last 70 years, you have produced five books on the birds of the county. Over the same period, the good people of Montgomeryshire have produced nothing! We remain the only county in Wales not to have its own avifauna.

I didn't really feel that I knew Gwent until my umpteenth visit in the late 1980s. By then, I had helped to survey woodland birds in the Black Mountains, upland birds on the Blorenge, breeding waders on the Gwent Levels and goosanders on the rivers Wye and Usk. It was not until 1989, however, that I could claim familiarity with the county. In that spring and summer, I was able to accompany Jerry Lewis and Steve Roberts as they monitored breeding Goshawks, Hobbies, Barn Owls, Dippers and Grey Wagtails on what appeared to be every square inch of south-east Wales. It was an excellent introduction to a beautiful and varied county. Since that time, I have had the pleasure of returning time and again to revisit old sites and discover new areas.

This latest account of the Birds of Gwent is a valuable addition to our knowledge of the birds of this corner of Wales. It makes for both an encouraging and a depressing read. Encouraging because of the colonisation of the county by Little Egrets, Avocets and Dartford Warblers, and increases in species such as Goosander and Goshawk. Depressing because of the decline in birds such as the Lapwing, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and Tree Sparrow, a trend reflected throughout Wales.

Heartiest congratulations to everyone who has been involved in the production of this excellent avifauna.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The production of this book would have been impossible without a number of unsung heroes who have given their time and expertise willingly and enthusiastically. We wish to express our gratitude to all these people, and they are acknowledged below in no particular order.

We are indebted to the staff of the BTO who have provided invaluable support, particularly Stuart Newson who produced the breeding population estimates from BBS data, provided tailor-made CBC/BBS trends data for the period between the two Gwent atlases, and on occasions when we have questioned particular trends, has explained patiently and informatively why they are as they are. We are also grateful to Mark Collier who provided WeBS analyses specific to Gwent, and has given other valuable advice on the use of WeBS data, and also to Jacqui Clarke and Sue Adams for providing ringing recovery data relevant to Gwent and responding to subsequent queries.

The species accounts owe much to the merciless and, therefore immensely valuable criticism of the first drafts by Julian Branscombe and Sam Bosanquet. Thanks go to Peter Randerson and Stuart Davies, both of Cardiff University, for their advice and help on statistical analysis of atlas data, and Helen Jones is thanked for assembling the bibliography.

The visual attractiveness of the book owes much to the beautiful cover paintings by John Gale and the charming vignettes drawn by Steve Roberts, Chris Hodgson and Helen Scourse. Steve is particularly thanked for the production of an extra six vignettes in three days when deadlines became very tight! We have also been fortunate in being able to call upon some very talented local photographers, and are grateful to Ray Armstrong, Andrew Baker, Dave Brassey, Richard Clarke, Colin Elliot, Kevin Dupe, Chris Hatch, Garry Howells, Jerry Lewis, Dave Lock, Mike Love, John Marsh, Steve Roberts, R. Smith and Darryl Spittle for the use of their excellent pictures. Thanks also to Mary Field for her excellent maps which are an essential feature of the 'Where to watch birds in Gwent' chapter, and also to Chris Field for much time spent on electronic formatting of maps and figures.

The Countryside Council for Wales and the Welsh Assembly Government are thanked for their generous financial support.

The fieldwork for the 2nd Gwent Atlas was an enormous undertaking. Those who organised it are listed in the separate chapter entitled the Gwent Breeding Atlases, but it is appropriate at this point to thank all those observers who gave so much of their time over a five-year period to produce some 25,000 data items. The names of all contributors are listed in Appendices 3 and 6. Previously unpublished data for tetrads on the Glamorgan/Gwent border (Appendix 4) is published with permission of the Glamorgan Bird Club, and we are grateful to Peter Howlett of the National Museum of Wales for making these data available.

The editors themselves also performed many essential tasks that are not apparent, and which should be acknowledged. In particular we should recognise the role of Alan Williams who, in 1997, proposed the carrying out of a second county breeding atlas to be followed immediately by the production of a new *Birds of Gwent*. Alan set up and chaired the early meetings of the organising committee, and subsequently laboured long in the production of the atlas distribution maps using D-Map. Together with Chris Field, Alan also spent much time on the revisions of map formats required for publication. Alan also assembled the final texts and artwork for dispatch to the publisher. Chris Jones is to be applauded for taking on the mammoth task of organising a review of all past rarity records for which there was any element of doubt, and cajoling the other members of the local records committee (John Bennett, Richard Clarke, Brian Gregory, Chris Hatch, Jerry Lewis, Al Venables) to play their part. Richard Clarke and Andrew Baker organised the procurement and selection of photographs, and Richard played a part in the final review of the species accounts; Richard also unearthed a good deal interesting historical data and wishes to acknowledge the assistance of the staff of Gwent Records Office in this exercise. Andrew Baker negotiated and liaised with our publishers, helped in the review of the first drafts, and assembled and edited the Habitats and Where to watch birds in Gwent chapters. Jerry Lewis devised two of our methods for collection of population size data and analysed the results obtained.

Finally we thank Jim Martin of Christopher Helm for his encouragement to press on with the book, without which we might still have been writing it today, copy editor Ernest Garcia for his many astute and helpful comments on the final manuscript, and Lindsay Tyler for proof-reading the entire book.

Al Venables
Editorial Chairman
October 2007

A BRIEF HISTORY OF GWENT ORNITHOLOGY

The founding of the Gwent Ornithological Society was the result of a meeting of two birdwatchers who at that time did not know each other. Bert Hamar and Betty Morgan met while out birdwatching somewhere between their respective homes, perhaps along the canal between The Jockey Pitch and Goetre. This was in 1961 and they began discussing their new found hobby and how they should promote it. It was decided to form Pontypool Bird Club, not because they were experts who wanted to impart their knowledge but because they were beginners who wanted to find out more. Experts and other enthusiasts were found, amongst them Patrick Humphreys and W G Lewis and this emerging group was the foundation of what was to later become the Gwent Ornithological Society, the compilers of this volume. Patrick Humphreys went on to be the Society's President for 25 years. Other early members included the likes of H J Vernall, Mrs Queenie Saunders, Capt. W K Marshall, Barbara Thorne, Mrs S H Robbins, E T Sarson and Percy Playford. It was Percy who did so much pioneering work on Pied Flycatchers with his nestbox and ringing projects. The eminent ornithologists Dr Bruce Campbell and H. Morrey Salmon were Honorary Members who visited the Society from time to time.

The Pontypool Bird Club grew from the early days of meetings in the front room of Bert Hamar's house to become the Monmouthshire Ornithological Society in 1964 and, following the local government reorganisation of 1974, the Gwent Ornithological Society. With over 400 members, a well-established series of indoor meetings each year, and an active outdoor programme, the Society flourishes. The previously published county avifaunas (Ingram & Salmon, 1937; Humphreys, 1963) were complemented by the publication of *The Birds of Gwent* in 1977 and the *Gwent Atlas of Breeding Birds* in 1985. This volume builds on these two earlier publications and the series of annual reports to set out a current (2007) status of the birds of Gwent.

Sadly Bert Hamar died in 1993 and Betty Morgan passed away in 1999. Patrick Humphreys summed up Bert's contribution to the Society thus: 'More than anyone, Bert was the guiding light in local ornithology over the last thirty years, and without his quiet work and gently persuasive manner I doubt very much if the ornithological and conservation achievements that have come to fruition in that time would have been more than good intentions.' Bert left us a flourishing Society and Betty Morgan left a generous legacy: enabling us to purchase Goytre House Wood, a 12-acre site of mainly semi-natural woodland that is being managed in the interest of birds.

INTRODUCTION

Systematic bird recording did not start in Gwent until the mid-1960s, and it became steadily more extensive as the newly formed Gwent Ornithological Society increased its influence, and formed a focus for recording activities. Thus, in 1977, when the first *Birds of Gwent* was published, there was still a relatively small body of available information for inclusion in the book, limited mainly to thirteen *Gwent Bird Reports* (1964–76). Indeed, one of the reviewers remarked at the time that seventy pages of A5 size was somewhat small for the species section of a county bird book, and expressed some regret that bird-watching didn't seem to have occurred in Gwent before 1960! For the current publication, the authors have been in a much more fortunate position.

In the years since 1977, there has been a great increase in the systematic study of British birds, on both local and national scales. On a local scale our knowledge of the distribution of breeding birds in the county has been informed by two detailed atlas projects carried out during 1981–85 and 1998–03, which have yielded a wealth of data on the distribution of breeding species, and also on the changes in distribution that have occurred in the intervening period.

Data has also been collected in the county for the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) 1988–91 National Atlas and Winter Atlas (1981/82–1983/84), while ringing records from the county have contributed to the *Migration Atlas*, which was published in 2002.

Gwent has also participated fully in the Breeding Birds Survey (BBS), which has taken over from the Common Birds Census (CBC) as the primary means for monitoring population changes, while data is also collected systematically from Gwent for the Wetlands Birds Survey (WeBS) and the Waterways Birds Survey (WBS). Local observers have also contributed to many special BTO surveys.

Apart from nationally organised surveys, since 1976 we have accumulated a wealth of records contributed by bird-watchers to a further 29 editions of the annually published *Gwent Bird Report*.

This book begins with a short introduction to the county, defining its boundaries and outlining its geography. This is followed by a description of the county's geology, including its geological history. The major bird habitats in the county are then described in some detail together with ways in which they are changing and the threats that posed to some of them.

In the Where to Watch Birds in Gwent chapter a selection of ten of the best sites in the county has been selected, with a view to maximising the range of species covered and also achieving a geographical spread over the county. A separate chapter is devoted the Gwent breeding atlases, describing how they were carried out and discussing the broad conclusions from them. Gwent is one of very few counties to have completed two tetrad breeding atlases, and the availabilty of results from these has enabled us to demonstrate with great clarity the changes in distribution that have occurred locally over the last two decades. This, we feel, is one of the main strengths of the book.

The main body of the book comprises accounts of the birds themselves, summarising their history in the county, recent trends and current status.

Thirty years after the publication of the 1977 *Birds of Gwent*, and twenty-two years after the completion of the first *Gwent Atlas of Breeding Birds*, the time is now ripe for an update on the ornithology of Gwent. In this book we have attempted to pull together all current knowledge of the county's birds, and produce a book that will not only be a useful source of reference for the serious bird-watcher, but also make an informative and, hopefully, stimulating read for those with a more light-hearted interest in the birds of the county. We hope that it will also help beginners and birdwatchers who are new to the county to develop an interest in our local avifauna.

THE COUNTY OF GWENT

Although this book is about the birds of Gwent, and this section is headed The County of Gwent, such a place no longer exists as a local government entity. County avifaunas usually refer to the relevant Watsonian vice-county as most biological recording systems use these boundaries. Unfortunately the latest Welsh local government reorganisation used the title Monmouthshire County Council to refer to only a part of the original Monmouthshire vice-county. To avoid confusion, therefore, the title Gwent has been retained, and the recording area is the County of Gwent as it was in the 1974 Local Government reorganisation with one exception. As current maps have lost the old Gwent county boundary following the merger of Islwyn Borough Council into Caerphilly County Council, the western boundary of the recording area is now the River Rhymney, a physical feature no bureaucrat can alter with the stroke of a pen.

Gwent is a county of great contrasts. Unfortunately most non-residents usually drive through the county *en route* to Gower or Pembrokeshire or other tourist spots in Wales. They do not linger to explore the wealth of habitats and scenery that the county has to offer. It stretches from the mudflats and saltmarsh of the Severn Estuary in the south to the heather moorlands of the Black Mountains in the Brecon Beacons National Park in the northwest. In the east is the River Wye, the wonderful Wye Valley woodlands and mixed forests on the plateau, and in the west the series of former industrial valleys, now greening over with new woodland and pastures, with the moorland ridges between the valleys. It is this diversity of habitats that accounts for the high total of bird species for a relatively small county, an area of about 138,000 hectares.

Good heather moorland with Red Grouse clothes the tops of the Black Mountains and The Blorenge near Abergavenny. Other heather moorland, peat bogs, cotton grass *Eriophorum* and Purple Moor Grass *Molinia caerulea* moor cover Coity Mountain, Mynydd Maen and other hills in the west. There Skylarks and Meadow Pipits abound.

Much of the centre of Gwent comprises low-lying farmland with a mosaic of pastures and arable land in the Rivers Usk and Trothy valleys as well as in the Monnow Valley in the northeast and on the Gwent Levels. Hedgerows and woodland divide up the generally small to medium-sized fields. Although much of the farmland is intensively managed there are pockets of species-rich grassland and wetland. The mixed farmland maintains good populations of Yellowhammers and some Yellow Wagtails although Tree Sparrows are struggling. As elsewhere in England and Wales silage and early cutting of this fodder crop has largely ousted ground-nesting waders.

Bird populations on the low-lying Gwent Levels with their network of drainage ditches or reens have also suffered from agricultural intensification. The development of the Newport Wetland Reserve, partly on former Uskmouth Power Station pulverised ash dumps, but also on farmland, has boosted the populations of waders, notably Lapwings and Redshanks. The brackish lagoons at Goldcliff have attracted breeding Avocets, while other waders have bred on the island, and a large number of passage and wintering waders and wildfowl make use of the site. The lagoons have become very popular with home-grown bird-watchers, and increasingly with those from outside the county also, and have relegated the Peterstone area into second place as a destination for wader enthusiasts.

There are important and diverse rivers and streams. In the east the River Wye forms the boundary between Wales and England, running from near Symonds Yat down to Chepstow. Below Bigsweir the Wye is tidal. The northeast boundary is largely formed by the River Monnow, a tributary of the Wye joining that river at Monmouth. The meandering Monnow with its sandbanks and shoals between Pandy and Monmouth is second only to the River Usk for its important but small breeding populations of Goosanders, Common Sandpipers, Kingfishers and Sand Martins. Dippers and Grey Wagtails on the upper fast-flowing rocky reaches of the Monnow and its tributaries, notably the Afon Honddu running down the Llanthony Valley, and on the Grwyne Fawr, an Usk tributary in the Black Mountains, have been well-studied for the last 30 years. The Usk enters the county northwest of Abergavenny and meanders down to Newport through farmland and thence into the Severn Estuary. Further west, the valleys' rivers, the Rhymney and Ebbw and their tributaries, support increasingly important bird populations as their quality improves.

Add to the estuarine and river habitats, the Monmouth & Brecon Canal and a wide range of lakes, reservoirs and ponds. Llandegfedd Reservoir is the largest water body and hosts important concentrations of wintering waterfowl. Other reservoirs range from Garnlydan and Carno in the northwest to Penyfan Pond near Blackwood,


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THE BLACK MOUNTAINS
HEREFORDSHIRE
POWYS
GLAMORGAN
GLOUCESTERSHIRE
Afon Lynfi
Capel-y-ffin
Grwyne Fawr Resr
Afon Honddu
Llanthony
Llangorse Lake
Grwyne Fachan
Offa's Dyke Path
River Monnow
River Wye
Talybont-on-Usk
Mon-Brecon Canal
Skenfrith
11
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Crickhowell
Sugar Loaf
Skirrid Fawr
Welsh Newton
Symonds Yat
R. Usk
ABERGAVENNY
Llantilio Crossenny
Mynydd Llangynidr
Mynydd Llangatwg
Gilwern
Govilon
Skirrid Fach
Highmeadow Woods
Garnlydan Resr
Blackrock
BRYNMAWR
MONMOUTH
Blorenge
Dingestow
Redbrook
TREDEGAR
Garn Lakes
Mitchel Troy
Penallt
Bryn Bach Park Lake
EBBW VALE
Mynydd Carn-y-cefn
Coity Mountain
BLAENAVON
Raglan
RHYMNEY
Clytha Hill
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Whitebrook
Beacon Hill
Cwm
Llanfair Kilgeddin
Trellech
Llandogo
ABERSYCHAN
ABERTILLERY
Aberbeeg
Afon Lwyd
Tintern
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USK
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PONTYPOOL
Llandegfedd Resr
Llanllowell
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Chepstow Park Wood
BLACKWOOD
NEWBRIDGE
Mynydd Maen
Llangybi
PONTLLANFRAITH
ABERCARN
CWMBRAN
Wentwood
YSTRAD MYNACH
Mynydd Henllys
River Usk
CHEPSTOW
Wentwood Resr
Pant-yr-eos Resr
Mathern
Mon-Brecon Canal
Severn Road Bridge
Sirhowy River
CAERLEON
RISCA
Ynysyfro Resr
Rhymney Valley
18
Ifton Great Wood
Caldicot
River Rhymney
CAERPHILLY
Rogerstone
NEWPORT
Second Severn Crossing
Magor
Rogiet
Undy
Greenmoor Pool
Taff Vale
Taff's Well
Newport Wetlands
Porton Grounds
Denny Island
RIVER SEVERN
Peterstone Pill
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27
37
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CARDIFF
River Taff
PORTISHEAD
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400
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and Wentwood and Ynysyfro near Newport. There are old former industrial pools as at Llanwern steelworks, Alpha Steel, Uskmouth and Dunlop Semtex pond; these are all important waterbird habitats. There is also an increasing number of new ponds on farms, golf courses and on reclaimed opencast sites, such as the Bryn Bach lake near Ebbw Vale.

The spectacular Wye Valley woodlands, stretching from Chepstow to beyond Monmouth, are of international repute. These woodlands on the steep sides of the Wye Valley are predominantly mixed broadleaves with Ash, Wild Cherry, Small-leaved Lime and Oak all present. Conifers planted during the 1950s and 1960s are gradually being cleared from the valley sides so that ancient semi-natural woodland with native broadleaves predominates. These woodlands support healthy populations of woodland birds from tits and woodpeckers to Buzzards and Goshawks, as well as the elusive Hawfinches and scattered Wood Warblers. Small broadleaved woodlands are scattered throughout the county and those more open Oak, Ash, Alder and Birch woodlands in the north and west that are grazed by sheep, host good numbers of Pied Flycatchers and Redstarts.

Wentwood, a large mixed forest block in southern Gwent, and conifer forests on the Trellech Plateau, on the watershed between the Wye and Usk catchments, and in the former industrial valleys, are important habitats too. Clearfell areas and young restocked plantations support Nightjars and Woodcock whilst mature plantations encourage Redpolls, Siskins and Crossbills. Two areas of conifers on the Trellech Plateau are now being restored to heathland and already support Stonechats.

Gwent has a population of just over 450,000 with the majority of people concentrated in the south and west. Newport is the largest urban conurbation and now has city status. The main towns are Cwmbran, Pontypool, Ebbw Vale, Tredegar and Abertillery. The smaller market towns are Abergavenny, Chepstow, Monmouth and Usk. In Newport, and in towns and villages throughout Gwent, parks, churchyards and gardens provide more 'woodland' habitat for birds whilst factory roofs in Newport and the north-west of the county are favoured by nesting gulls.

THE GEOLOGY OF GWENT

RECENT — Alluvium

JURASSIC / TRIASSIC

CARBONIFEROUS — Coal Measures; Millstone Grit; Carboniferous Limestone

DEVONIAN — Old Red Sandstone

SILURIAN — Ludlow

Apart from a tiny outcrop of igneous rock at the northern end of Wentwood, all of the rocks that underlie Gwent are of sedimentary origin and range in age from 425 million years old to the present day. A variety of rock types were deposited under a diverse range of environmental conditions as Wales drifted northwards across the face of the globe from a location south of the equator to its current latitude. Subsequent to their deposition these rocks were folded and faulted during periods of Earth movements and have suffered extensive periods of erosion. Geologically the county can be split into five areas: the eastern part of the South Wales coalfield, the Black Mountains, the Usk Anticline, the rolling country on the west bank of the Wye valley and the lowlands bordering the Severn Estuary.

The oldest rocks crop out in the core of the Usk Anticline, an elliptical up-folded dome that extends from Llanfrechfa in the south to Llanvihangel Gobion in the north. Of marine origin, they consist of richly fossiliferous limestones, shales and mudstones of Silurian age (425–418 million years ago) that were deposited in a subtropical, shallow sea at a time when Wales lay about 20° south of the equator.

Late in the Silurian Period plate movements resulted in the uplift of the seabed to form a mountain range over north and central Wales; its erosion produced the sediments that form the succeeding rocks of the Old Red Sandstone, which range in age from 418–360 million years ago. They consist of conglomerates, sandstones, siltstones, mudstones and thin limestones that were laid down on a large alluvial plain to the south of the mountains. Their outcrop covers about 50% of the county and produces distinctive red soils. The older beds contain a high proportion of soft siltstones and mudstones, and form a landscape of generally low relief, while the younger, harder and mainly coarser beds rim the coalfield, and form the prominent highlands of the Black Mountains.

The overlying Carboniferous rocks are divisible into three units: the Carboniferous Limestone, Millstone Grit and Coal Measures. The Carboniferous Limestone crops out in a narrow band around the edge of the coalfield, and in a broader one from Magor eastwards to the Wye Valley. It was deposited in a shallow sea that flooded the Old Red Sandstone landscape. The basal beds are made up of shales and thin limestones but most of the sequence comprises generally grey, sometimes massive limestones and dolomite. In the Magor-Wye Valley outcrop sandstones occur at some levels. The Carboniferous limestones are of high economic importance and have been extensively quarried. Many of these quarries form distinctive features within the landscape, and provide inland sites for cliff-nesting bird species. Where they outcrop at the surface they form calcareous soils which support a distinctive lime-loving flora.

During mid-Carboniferous times the land was uplifted and eroded and the shallow seas retreated, to be replaced by coastal swamps and river deltas in which the rocks of the Millstone Grit were deposited. These crop out in a narrow band around the edge of the coalfield. In the southern half of the county the rocks consist predominantly of shales with a few thin sandstones, while along the north crop of the coalfield hard, coarse conglomerates, grits and sandstones dominate, especially in the thick Basal Grits. Above these, freshwater shales with thin marine intercalations and a few thin coals occur. Along their outcrop the Basal Grits give rise to extensive areas of rough, acidic, heathery grasslands and bare rocky slopes. The Millstone Grit outcrop is commonly pockmarked with circular depressions, sometimes water-filled. These mark locations where layers of grit have collapsed into swallow holes, sink holes and dolines eroded into the surface of the underlying Carboniferous limestones.

The rocks of the succeeding Coal Measures were laid down in low-lying coastal swamps and river plains that lay close to the equator. Three units are recognised in the South Wales Coalfield. Of these, the upper or Pennant Measures are the most resistant to erosion and form the high ground between the valleys, with prominent rocky scarps. They comprise brown-grey sandstones and grits of deltaic origin which have been quarried extensively for building stone. The Lower and Middle Coal Measures are thinner and have a greater proportion of shale with some ironstones; they generally crop out in the valley bottoms. During the deposition of the Coal Measures minor tectonic movements led to rapid fluctuations in sea level, which produced a pattern of cyclic sedimentation. Periodically, at times of raised sea level, the low-lying land was flooded and the vegetation killed and buried under layers of mud and sand, where it was compacted and eventually turned into coal. The economically productive coal seams occur mainly in the lower two divisions.

Major earth movements at the end of the Carboniferous, during the succeeding Permian and Triassic periods, led to a lengthy period of uplift, folding and erosion, which lasted for about 80 million years. During this period the Carboniferous and older rocks were folded into the basin-like structure of the South Wales Coalfield. Due to this long period of folding and erosion the succeeding late Triassic age rocks (about 220 million years old)

rest uncomformably upon the older sediments. The Triassic rocks were deposited in an arid, desert-like climate at a time when the area of the present day Severn Estuary was a low, undulating desert plain bounded to the northwest by rugged uplands.

The Triassic rocks occupy a narrow belt bordering the banks of the River Severn, where much of their outcrop is covered by recent alluvial deposits, although they are well-seen at Sudbrook. They comprise a variety of sediments deposited in and around a freshwater lagoon that was gradually inundated by the sea. Two major divisions are recognised. The older Mercia Mudstone Group comprises generally red siltstones and mudstones, capped by slightly harder pale green or beige mudstones, while the younger Penarth Group is made up of black shales, thin limestones and yellow calcareous mudstones. The latter were deposited in shallow, brackish water as the sea began to inundate the desert floor. Patches of fossil screes occur on the slopes and around the bases of former high ground. Known as 'Dolomitic Conglomerate', this consists of a coarse deposit of sub-angular pebbles (usually of Carboniferous Limestone) set in a pale-coloured matrix.

Minor earth movements led to uplift and some erosion at the very end of the Triassic Period, before the desert landscape was completely drowned under a shallow sea. At this time, and at the beginning of the succeeding Jurassic Period 200 million years ago, the marine grey, muddy limestones with shale partings belonging to the succeeding Blue Lias were deposited. These have a very limited outcrop around Newport.

These early Jurassic rocks are the youngest bedrock to be found in the county, leaving a gap of about 198 million years in the geological record before the sediments of the Pleistocene were deposited. During this interval the rocks were gently folded and faulted, probably during the Miocene between 23 and five million years ago. The whole area was uplifted, eroded and tilted gently to the southeast, and it was on this surface that the present day drainage pattern was initiated. It is thought three major platforms were developed during the Pliocene epoch (5 million to 1.8 million years ago): the High Plateau at 510–570m, the Middle Peneplain at 360–480m and the Low Peneplain at 210–330m. These represent former planation surfaces that became isolated as the river systems cut down into the landscape during regional uplift. Within Gwent the High Plateau is well seen in the Black Mountains and on the northern edge of the coalfield while the Middle Peneplain forms the high ground between the coalfield valleys.

Coastal erosion was probably responsible for the development of four other platform surfaces at heights of 60, 90, 120 and 180m. Although well seen farther to the west in South Wales, these are not particularly distinct within Gwent, although remnants of some of them can be detected. Their dating is problematic, and some may be products of the Pleistocene glaciations rather than being of earlier origin.

During the Pleistocene epoch (1.8 million to 10,000 years ago) there were periods of intense cold (glacials), when ice sheets developed on the higher ground and spread across much of the county. These alternated with much warmer conditions (interglacials) when the ice melted and sea level rose, sometimes to levels higher than today. There were a number of glacial advances, but it is mainly the effects of the last two that are visible in the landforms seen today. During the older of these, ice sheets derived from the Brecon Beacons and Black Mountains covered almost the whole county. Glacial deposits resulting from these are known as the 'Older Drift'. During the following Ipswichian Interglacial (275,000–120,000 years ago) the climate warmed sufficiently for animals such as hippopotamus to thrive, and sea level rose to a level 6–9m higher than it is today.

The final (Devensian) glacial period (120,000–10,000 years ago) reached its peak 18,000 years ago. At this time ice sheets and valley glaciers that originated in the Brecon Beacons, Black Mountains and Coalfield, extended as far as the southern edge of the coalfield, and eastwards to Usk and Raglan. The ice rounded the landscape and valley glaciers straightened and over-deepened the river valleys. Glaciers deposited moraines at their farthest extent, while meltwaters flowing from beneath the ice deposited patches of glacial sand and gravel. As the ice retreated a thick layer of glacial drift was left behind, covering the bedrock and forming generally hummocky, poorly-drained ground. Because the ice retreat occurred in pulses, it led to the formation of a series of moraines across the valley floors. Some of these blocked river courses and diverted the rivers along new channels, such as at Llanfihangel Crucorney, where a large moraine prevented the Honddu and Monnow rivers from flowing along their original pre-glacial route into the Usk.

Towards the end of the Devensian period periglacial conditions prevailed and heavy snowfall on the uplands eroded steep-sided cwms on the north and north-east facing sides of the coalfield valleys, the Blorenge escarpment and the Vale of Ewyas. Gravelly, sandy clay with coarse, angular rock fragments (head), which occurs along the steep valley sides, also originates from this time. Over-steepening of the valley sides caused instability and

land sliding is common, such as is seen at Cwm Yoy and along the sides of the Skirrid. This probably started under the late Pleistocene periglacial climate but continues today.

The major rivers of the area, especially the Wye and Severn, show evidence of having flowed at much higher levels than today during the Pliocene epoch (5 million to 1.8 million years ago). The spectacular incised gorge of the river Wye between Monmouth and Chepstow shows that at one point the river was flowing across a flood plain some 200m higher than it is at the present day. Likewise, the Severn has also been subjected to a fall in level as evidence indicates that by the beginning of the Pleiostocene (1.8 million years ago) its drainage system probably lay about 60m higher than it does today. During the Pleistocene both rivers have responded to an overall fall in sea level as a result of the advance and retreat of ice sheets. However, the fall was not continuous. During glacial periods, sea level fell as water became trapped in the vast ice sheets whilst, in the warm interglacial periods, the ice sheets melted and water was released back to the sea, so leading to a rise in sea level. There were also periods of stability when the rivers flowed at the same level for long periods of time. After such periods, as sea level fell again and the river level dropped, remnants of the sediments deposited at the higher levels were left as flat-topped terraces along the sides of the valley. The terraces are typically composed of gravels, sand and sandy loam. Within the Severn valley five terraces have been identified, the highest being about 60m above current sea level.

During the Ipswichian Interglacial (130,000–115,000 years ago), sea level rose to more than 6m above present levels, which submerged many of the low-lying areas, such as the Caldicot Levels, which border the Severn Estuary. At this time the coast line would have lain at the foot of the rising ground to the north and some of the isolated low hills that now rise from the flat levels would have been small islands then.

At the height of the last, Devensian, glaciation (about 18,000 years ago), sea level fell to almost 100m below its current level, which led to rivers such as the Wye and Severn cutting down into their valley floors to a level well below those seen today. Today these over-deepened valleys appear as buried channels, now filled with more recent gravels and alluvium associated with the post-glacial Flandrian sea level rise.

Following the end of the Devensian Glaciation 10,000 years ago, the warming climate led to the development of widespread deciduous forests across the landscape. However, as the sea level rose it gradually inundated the lowlands around the Severn, killing the coastal forests and burying them under layers of fresh sediment. Their remains can be seen today as layers of peat within the clays that can be found along the shores of the estuary. Sea levels have continued to rise through historic times as evidenced by the abandoned Roman and later field systems that can be picked out in the muddy banks and mudflats of the estuary at low tide. Sea walls built to prevent flooding of the lowlands have had to be abandoned and moved further inland as sea levels continued to rise. At the present day sea level is still rising and, with global temperatures predicted to increase even further, the current sea protection barriers will either have to be raised even higher or abandoned altogether, and new ones built farther inland if the levels are to be protected. There has been much climatic variation over the last 10,000 years: for example, during periods of increased storminess coastal erosion was more rapid, and drifting sand was blown inland, covering some of the coastal areas. At the present day the estuary is suffering another episode of active erosion which is leading to the destruction of many of the coastal saltmarshes. As well as being an extremely valuable habitat for birds, saltmarshes also protect the shore from excessive wave action. In some places they have already been totally removed, so exposing the sea defences to the full force of the sea.

The climate and landscape of Gwent have changed considerably through the millennia and continue to do so today. What the future holds is hard to predict, but the landscape and environment will change through continuing geological processes, and thus so will the avifauna.

BIRD HABITATS IN GWENT

WOODLAND

Gwent has always been relatively well wooded and at one time had a higher percentage of its area covered by trees than any other county in Wales. The extent of woodland area has grown from around 9% in 1895, to 11% in 1947 and to 13.8% by 1997. However, the rate of afforestation has been even greater in some other counties in south and mid Wales, with the effect that Gwent has now fallen behind Glamorgan and Powys in extent of forest cover. The more modest afforestation seen in Gwent has been limited to the former heathland areas of the Trelleck ridge and in the western valleys on industrial reclamation sites.

There have been two recent national surveys of woodland area, which coincidentally (and fortuitously) correspond broadly with the two Gwent Breeding Bird Atlas periods. These are the Forestry Commission Census of Woodlands 1979–82, and the National Inventory of Woodland and Trees – Wales 2002, also published by the Forestry Commission.

Wales had some 11.6% woodland cover in 1980, which had increased to 14% by 1997. Most of this woodland (56%) is in private ownership and, coincidentally, the same proportion is also coniferous. The main increase between the two censuses has been in the larger woodlands (over 2ha) where the increase has been 19%, and the smaller copses (between 0.25–2ha) where the increase has been 15%. Small groups and lines of trees in contrast have declined extensively (down by 32%). The greatest loss between the censuses has been in the density of individual trees, from 100/km^2 in 1980 to just 33/km^2 in 1997.

The changes in Gwent have broadly followed those seen in Wales as a whole, although at the county level, direct comparisons are hampered by the use of slightly different methodologies in the two censuses. In 1980, there were 16,900ha of woodland over 2ha in Gwent and a further 3,800ha of smaller woods. Approximately half of this total was broadleaved, and this was well above the Welsh average. In 1997, there were 18,054ha of woodland over 2ha and a further 968ha of small woods (0.1–2ha). These totals indicate a slight reduction over the 1980 amount, which may be a reflection of areas smaller than 0.1ha being excluded from the later census. However, there may actually have been a small reduction in total woodland area due to the loss of small copses and groups of trees: these would not have been subject to felling control under the various Forestry Acts, and would not have had replanting conditions. Any changes, however, are too small at the tetrad scale to be picked up as differences in the woodland maps between the two Atlases. The current Gwent figure is some 13.8% woodland cover (19,000ha). Of this, 9,552ha (50%) is broadleaved, 5,425ha (29%) is coniferous and 2,926ha (15%) is mixed, with lesser amounts of coppice (229ha), felled (184ha) and open ground (704ha) (FC 2002). The current heathland restoration programmes on the Trellech plateau would have occurred mainly after the census.

Although a high proportion of Gwent woodlands are broadleaved, and some 2,249ha are classed as ancient semi-natural woodland, the county has suffered one of the greatest losses of such ancient woodland in the UK. Some 67% has been lost in Gwent in the last 40–50 years, mainly as a result of replacement by conifers, mostly in parts of the Wye Valley and in Wentwood. Despite these losses, there are still substantial areas of ancient semi-natural woodland left, a reflection of the considerable amount that was once present in some parts of the county.

In the east of the county, the Wye Valley woodlands extend in an almost unbroken chain for some 30km on both the Gwent and Gloucestershire sides of the River Wye, and then north-eastwards from Monmouth into Herefordshire. They are internationally important and contain some of the best areas in the UK for three different woodland types: Yew dominated woods with ash and whitebeam on limestone; lime/maple woods on base rich soils associated with rocky slopes, and beech woods on neutral/rich soils of lowland limestone. Although conversion to conifers has taken place in some parts in the past, the main broadleaved woodlands are designated as the Wye Valley Woodlands Special Area of Conservation (SAC). In Gwent, from Monmouth to Chepstow, these comprise nine individual woodland blocks: the Upper Wye Gorge, Fiddler's Elbow, Livox Wood, Harper's Grove/Lord's Grove, Graig Wood, Lower Hael Wood, Cleddon Shoots, Blackcliff-Wyndcliff and Pierce and Alcove & Piercefield Woods.

The Forestry Commission policy is now to encourage the replacement of conifers by broadleaves on the remaining ancient woodland sites, both here in the Wye Valley and elsewhere in the UK. One of the main features of the Wye Valley woodlands, and of the majority of the county's other broadleaved and mixed woodlands,

is the variety of tree species. As well as those mentioned above, oak, birch, cherry, wych elm and holly are all relatively common, and small pockets of hornbeam can also be found. There is now a move to reintroduce coppicing into some of the Wye Valley woodlands, which is the method by which they would have been managed over a century ago.

There are two other SAC woodlands in Gwent, both in the north near Abergavenny. On the southern slopes of the Sugar Loaf, is the Abergavenny Woodlands SAC, one of the best areas in the UK for western acidic (sessile) oak wood and with a significant component of beech on neutral/rich soils of lowland limestone. A little to the west is the Cwm Clydach SAC, one of the best areas in the UK for beech on neutral/rich soils. An uncommon type of beech woodland (Atlantic beech with holly on acid soils) is also found in Cwm Clydach.

In addition to these internationally important woodlands there are a further 17 woodland Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). They are mainly in the east and north of the county and, because of the county's rich geology, comprise varied woodland types. There are only two woodland SSSIs in the western valleys (Silent Valley and Plas Machen), a reflection of the degraded nature of the natural sessile oak woods there by past industrial activities and recent overgrazing, and the extent of replacement by conifer forests.

Sessile oak woods are found at Park House Wood (on the Trellech plateau), Strawberry Cottage Wood (north of Abergavenny) and Parc Seymour, which represents the last remnant of the former extensive Wentwood oakwoods. Pedunculate oak woods are at Bushy Close (south-west of Chepstow) and Gaer Lan (south-west of Monmouth), while Penhow Woodlands have a mixture of pedunculate oak and ash woodland types. One of the most extensive areas of coppice beech is found at Coed y Person, southwest of Abergavenny. Atlantic beech woodland is found at Silent Valley, near Ebbw Vale. Alder-dominated woods are at Coed y Cerrig and Gaer House Woods, north and northeast of Abergavenny, whilst mixed alder/oak woodland is at Plas Machen near Risca.

The Coombe Valley Woods between Chepstow and Wentwood are on rich calcareous soils. Mixed woods on flushed acid soils are found at Gaer Wood east of Raglan, at Maes yr Uchaf, Penarth Brook Woodland and Croes Robert: all on the Trellech plateau. Priory Wood, near Usk, is noted for having a wide variety of woodland types in a relatively small area.

The conifer plantations of the Wye Valley and Wentwood have extensive areas of larch and Douglas fir on the richer soils, with Scots pine on the poorer soils, especially on the millstone grit areas of the Trellech plateau, while Norway spruce is found on the wetter ground. Mynydd ddu forest in the north of the county, and Ebbw Forest: including the woodlands around Tredegar, Ebbw Vale, Abertillery and Abercarn in the western valleys, also have some larch and Douglas fir, but there are extensive areas of both Norway and sitka spruce, reflecting both the poorer nature of the soils and the higher altitude of these forests. A wide variety of other conifers have also been planted in small pockets, presumably to assess their growth potential. The main ones are western hemlock, Corsican pine, redwood and various species of fir and cypress.

The broad valley of the River Usk and the rolling countryside of central and northeastern Gwent are the main farmland areas of the county. There are few large woodland areas here other than where they are associated with the larger estates, such as near Llangibby, Llanover, Llanarth, Talycoed and the Hendre. These farmed areas are however rich in small, mainly broadleaved, woodlands, although there have been a few losses in the last 20 years since the earlier Gwent Atlas. Larger woodlands, mainly mixed, are also associated with the smaller hills of the north and north-east, such as on the Graig and Ysgyryd Fawr.

There are few parts of the county with no woodland; the lack of trees on the coastal belt and on the upland plateau in the northwest is understandable. Not so explicable is the broad treeless swathe of countryside running north-westwards from near Raglan. The absence of large estates in this area, whose owners generally emphasise landscape and shooting, is presumably the reason. These areas can be easily picked out on the woodland map and on some of the species maps.

The diversity of Gwent's woodlands has an important influence on the variety of birds present. There are however two recent national management policies that are likely to have a more fundamental effect on future bird populations. Firstly the reversion (over the long term) of conifer plantations on ancient woodland sites (PAWS) to native broadleaved high forest, and secondly the adoption of continuous cover forestry, which involves a reduction in the amount of clear felling.

PAWS is likely to benefit a whole range of typical woodland birds such as Woodcocks, Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers, Song Thrushes, Blackcaps, Garden Warblers, Spotted and Pied Flycatchers, Marsh and Willow Tits,

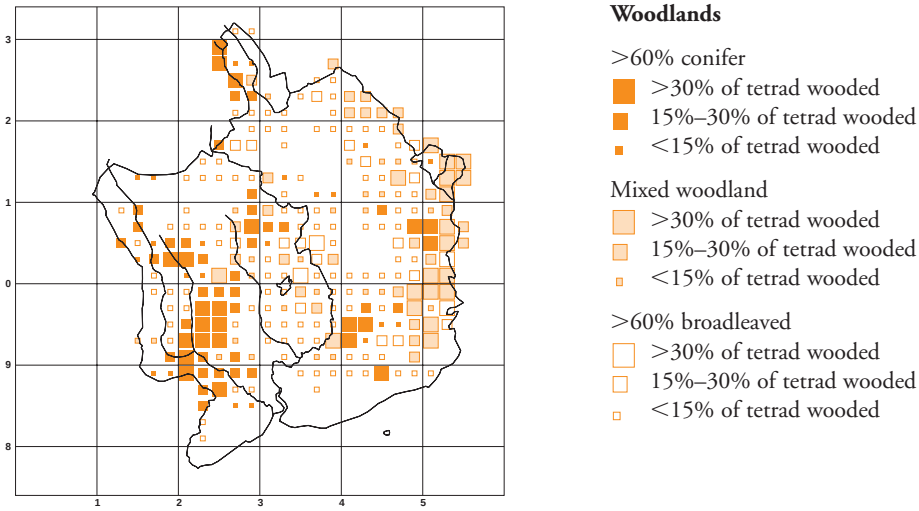


Figure 1. Distribution of woodland in Gwent

Nuthatches, Treecreepers and Hawfinches. Some others appear to do better in coniferous (or mixed) woodlands however, and benefits from this policy for Goshawks, Sparrowhawks, Great Spotted Woodpeckers, Goldcrests and Firecrests may not materialise.

With respect to those coniferous woodlands destined to remain as such, there are proposals for continuous cover and reductions in clear felling. The majority of woodland birds, especially the conifer specialists such as Goldcrests, Crossbills and Siskins, are likely to benefit from the more varied and natural age structure and a more consistent/predictable seed source. The Wood Warbler is not usually thought of as a species of coniferous woodland but it is found in high densities in larch plantations in Wentwood and other areas, where this deciduous conifer allows some ground vegetation to develop but where plantation management and summer shade suppress the heavy growth of shrubs and ground flora. Continuous cover management and the development of a denser understorey is unlikely to benefit this declining species. A number of species have also become specialists of the early growth stages following clear felling, the Nightjar being an obvious example where the county population is now at its highest level and virtually dependent on forest clearfells. These young scrubby plantations, in their first ten years of growth, also provide an important habitat for a range of other species, such as Tree Pipit, Stonechat, Lesser Redpoll, Linnets and perhaps Turtle Dove (whose last Welsh refuge is in the forest re-stocks of the Trelleck plateau), which are unlikely to benefit from continuous cover forestry. It is hoped that the two broad policies (PAWS and continuous cover), which in general terms are to be welcomed, do not have detrimental effects on a few bird species that are already in decline.

Most woodland birds appear to be influenced as much by the woodland structure as by the canopy species, and this is easily illustrated by the warblers: Willow Warblers, Chiffchaffs, Blackcaps and Garden Warblers all require dense ground cover, whereas Wood Warblers do not. Changes in woodland structure have been associated with the current declines of many woodland birds. In some cases these changes result from over- browsing by Fallow Deer. The deer have become a problem in the Wye Valley and Wentwood in recent years by preventing tree and herb regeneration, and there are proposals to reduce their numbers. Another factor not generally considered as affecting woodland birds is the increased mechanisation of forest operations. Long gone are the days of the woodman with his hook or chainsaw, now replaced by a machine which harvests the whole tree. Forest operations are now year-round activities with no respite during the breeding season and, at the local level, considerable numbers of bird nests must be destroyed. This mechanisation is akin to the agricultural intensification of the last century,which is now recognised as having such an adverse effect on farmland birds, and it can only be a matter of time before it becomes implicated in the decline of woodland birds.

MOORLAND

The moorlands of Gwent have variations in floral composition which influence the range of bird species present. The main plant species present are rush, moss and grass species typical of higher altitudes in Gwent. These ubiquitous species are however enriched in many areas by Bracken, Bilberry, Heather, Cowberry, Cross-leaved Heath and Gorse. It is those moorlands with a higher percentage of these latter species, which usually support a wider range of birds. Rough grassland present on all of the county's uplands support Skylarks and Meadow Pipits, but more specific habitat is required for other species. For example tall heather supports Red Grouse; heather, bracken and gorse provide habitat for Stonechats and Whinchats, whilst stony outcrops are necessary for Wheatears.

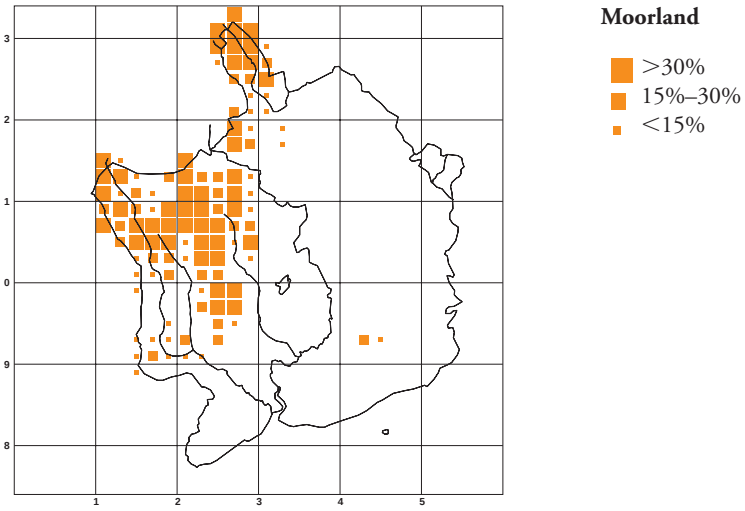


Figure 2. Distribution of moorland in Gwent

The main blocks of moorland are to be found in the north-west of the county on a series of parallel ridges and the occasional plateau running in a roughly north/south direction. The most easterly of the ridges starts just north of Pontypool with Mynydd Garn-wen which, moving in a northerly direction, merges into Mynydd Garnclochdy, Mynydd y Garn-fawr and The Blorenge. The moorland block becomes more diverse in flora and fauna as we move northwards. Mynydd Garnclochdy does have some patchy heather in addition to the rough grassland which predominates on Mynydd Garn-wen. Mynydd y Garn-fawr, which had previously been managed by controlled fires, was extensively burned in 2004 but has made a good recovery with a widespread growth of good quality dwarf shrub heath. The flanks of the Blorenge are covered in Bracken, and this has infiltrated onto some parts of the plateau with a resultant reduction in heather quality. The Blorenge has approximately 32ha of good quality dwarf shrub heath, with a further 150ha of poorer patchy growth. The three more northerly mountains support a great profusion of Skylarks and Meadow Pipits, and good densities of breeding Stonechats , Whinchats, Red Grouse and Wheatears . The northern flank of the Blorenge has a growth of small hawthorn trees and has a good population of Tree Pipits: at least three male Cuckoos are usually present in this area. Grouse shooting still takes place on the Blorenge and Mynydd y Garn-fawr during late summer.

The second ridge arises to the north of Risca at Twmbarlwm and Mynydd Henllys, before merging in a northerly direction with the Mynydd Maen/ Mynydd Llwyd/Mynydd Twyn-glas complex, which is covered by approximately 7km^2 of moorland. Bracken and rough grass are the main habitat, but there is a 15ha patch of good quality dwarf shrub heath on Mynydd Maen which can support Red Grouse. There is a further patch of this habitat on the northern edge of Mynydd Llwyd but this is of poor quality as it has been degraded by trail-bikers.

This ridge is bisected by a deep east/west valley before continuing as Mynydd Llanhilleth which then adjoins the largest moorland plateau in Gwent, consisting of Mynydd Farteg Fawr/Coety Mountain/Mynydd James,

(and the more minor peaks of Brygwm, Waun Wen, Gwastad, Twyn Du, Mynydd Farteg Fach, Cefn Coch, Twyn Carncanddo and Mulfran) extending over at least 20 km^2. The dwarf shrub heath on the Coety Mountain/Mynydd Farteg Fawr area has been managed by mowing and until recently was of a very high quality (waist-deep in parts), very extensive (c.172ha), and had good densities of Red Grouse and a few pairs of Whinchats. Unfortunately the laying of a gas pipeline across the mountain created a track which has given access to large numbers of four-wheel drive vehicles and motorcycles. Consequently this excellent habitat has been illegally damaged and is likely to have a lowered bird population. Mynydd James also has about 14ha of good quality heather and has breeding Red Grouse. Where the bracken in the hill pasture or 'ffridd' areas on the slope meets the plateau, there are Whinchats and Stonechats and also Reed Buntings in the wetter areas. Wheatears breed in the rocky areas on the plateau fringes and Redstarts nest in some of the old stone walls on the top. Many birds of prey use this plateau to forage. They include Merlins (summer), Short-eared Owls (mainly winter), Long-eared Owls, Sparrowhawks, Peregrines, Hen Harriers (March–April and September), Hobbies (late summer) and occasional Red Kites.

To the north of the plateau but at a lower level is Waun Afon, a boggy area covered with rushes, which attracts Snipe, and in the winter Short-eared Owls and Hen Harriers. The ground rises again to the north of Blaenavon, with Tir Abraham-Harry and Cefn Garn-yr-erw: areas still covered by large mounds of mining waste, before the two ridges merge at Llanelly Hill and Gilwern Hill. There is a strong growth of about 2ha of gorse on the north side of Gilwern Hill which supports breeding Stonechats.

The remaining three ridges have smaller areas of moorland as they are narrower and isolated from each other by deep valleys. The third ridge begins to the north of Abertillery with Cefn yr Arail which runs into Mynydd Carn-y-Cefn, and largely consists of unvarying rough grassland. There are however two patches of dwarf shrub heath: 10ha of medium quality at the southern end of Mynydd Carn-y-cefn and 35ha of poor quality on Cefn yr Arail.

The fourth ridge arises at Mynydd Pen-y-fan near Aberbeeg and extends north through Cruglwyn and onto Cefn Manmoel. There are 15ha of medium quality dwarf shrub heath on Cefn Manmoel but this area is subject to a good deal of disturbance from four-wheel drive vehicles and motorcycles.

The final ridge begins with Mynydd Bedwellte running north to Tredegar and its habitat is rough grassland. These three ridges are generally less florally diverse and this comparative homogeneity of plant species supports fewer birds with Stonechats and Whinchats, for example, only found locally and Red Grouse not at all.

To the north of Tredegar in the far northwest of Gwent are Trefil Ddu, Trefil Las and Twyn Bryn-march, a broad area of moorland covering over 10km^2. Trefil Ddu has around 100ha of patchy dwarf shrub heath, and has breeding populations of Red Grouse, Stonechats, Whinchats and Wheatears. The latter species is particularly prevalent in the quarry area, as are Ravens. There is a damp rushy area just to the north of the quarry which often contains Snipe. Trefil Ddu also contains the last remaining haunt of the Ring Ouzel in Gwent.

The moorland continues eastwards, although it is somewhat fragmented to the north of Ebbw Vale by the reservoirs of Carno and Garnlydan, and the associated forest plantation. This upland block forms the southern edge of the more extensive Mynydd Llangynidr/Mynydd Llangatwg complex in the adjoining county of Powys. The more easterly part of this block consists of short rough grassland and dwarf shrub heath. The dwarf shrub heath is kept very short by overgrazing of sheep, and could improve if this was reduced.

To the north of Abergavenny, moorland is found on Skirrid Fawr, Sugar Loaf and Bryn Arw. Skirrid Fawr has some bracken on its flanks, with short grassland on its ridge. The small trees on its flanks are a good place to observe Yellowhammers. The south side of the Sugar Loaf is covered by dense bracken which gives way to rough grassland towards the summit. In contrast the north side of the Sugar Loaf has a particularly dense growth of dwarf shrub heath, covering about 60ha, and hosts Red Grouse, about five pairs each of Stonechats and Whinchats, and a couple of pairs of Linnets. Bryn Arw has a thick growth of gorse of approximately 4ha, which is excellent habitat for breeding Stonechats.

The Black Mountains range begins to the north of the Sugar Loaf, with a ridge to each side of the Vale of Ewyas. The more westerly ridge consists, from south to north, of Garn-wen, Bal-mawr, Bwlch bach and Chwarel y Fan and has an area of about 9km^2 of moorland. These mountains are covered by a vast area of heather, totalling around 350ha, although much of it is patchy. The easterly ridge, which has the county boundary running along it, begins as Hatterrall Hill to the north of Cwmyoy and runs north for about 8km before reaching the county border. There are also two small areas of moorland in the south-east of the county on Gray Hill and the neighbouring Mynydd Altir-fach.

WETLANDS

The county has abundant and varied watercourses ranging from large rivers, as the Wye and Usk, to a plethora of small streams in both the uplands and the lowlands. The Monmouth & Brecon Canal runs south to Newport from Abergavenny and the Brecon border whilst many kilometres of standing or slow-flowing water occur in the network of drainage channels, locally known as reens, on the Gwent Levels. In addition there are reservoirs, lakes and numerous ponds.

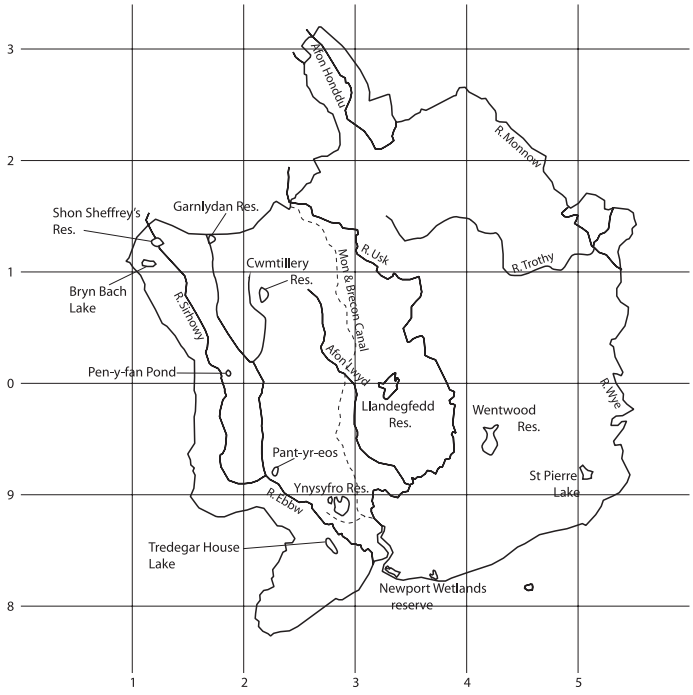


Figure 3. Water bodies in Gwent

In the west the Rhymney, the Ebbw and Sirhowy Rivers flow down to the Severn Estuary. The River Usk flows through the centre of Gwent from the Brecon border down to the Severn Estuary near Newport. The Afon Llwyd is a major tributary of the River Usk and there are a host of minor tributaries including the Gwernesney and Olway Brooks near Usk and the Grwyne Fawr in the Black Mountains. In the east the River Wye forms the Wales/England border from north of Monmouth down to Chepstow. A main tributary of the Wye, the River Monnow and its important tributary the Afon Honddu, arises in the Black Mountains. The River Monnow forms the country border with Herefordshire from near Pandy down to Skenfrith. Other Wye tributaries include the Mally Brook above Monmouth, the Trothy Brook which runs from near Abergavenny through Llantilio Crossenny and Dingestow to the Wye below Monmouth and a series of short tributaries such as the Black Brook, White Brook, Cat Brook and Angidy Brook that arise on the Trellech Plateau and drop steeply down to the Wye.

These watercourses provide diverse habitats for birds. There are excellent clean fast-flowing and rocky reaches on the Black Mountain's upland Grwyne Fawr, the Afon Honddu and River Monnow as well as on the short Lower Wye tributaries such as the Angiddy Brook. As so much of Gwent lies on Old Red Sandstone, some of which is lime-rich, and on limestone, the rivers do not suffer from acidification. They have good tree cover along much of their lengths and a diverse invertebrate fauna of mayflies, stone-flies and caddis flies and support good populations of Dippers and Grey Wagtails. The rivers of the Western Valleys, now that they are no longer grossly polluted, support Dippers and Kingfishers too. The River Monnow below Pandy and the River Usk meander

across floodplains and there are many vertical sand cliffs and extensive areas of shoals. These stretches of river are favoured by Goosanders, Common Sandpipers, a small population of Little Ringed Plovers, Kingfishers and numerous Sand Martins as well as more Dippers and both Grey and Pied Wagtails. On the lower reaches of the Rivers Usk, Monnow and Wye, Mute Swans and Mallard prevail, and bankside vegetation may support Reed Buntings. In the winter months Goosanders and sometimes Teal occur on these lower stretches along with Cormorants. The division is not exact and many species such as Kingfisher and Grey Wagtail occur throughout the county on all rivers, even on tiny tributaries.

Sad to say the area of flood meadows is now much reduced because of flood prevention schemes along so many of the streams and rivers. However, fields along parts of the lower Usk and the fields alongside the Olway Brook still become inundated when rivers overtop their banks. In the south the Nedern Brook below Caerwent also has extensive flood meadows which support breeding Coots and Moorhens, feeding Little Egrets and wintering wildfowl.

The slow-flowing canal and numerous reens in the south of the county are favoured by Coots, Moorhens and Kingfishers with Grey and Pied Wagtails breeding at some of the canal locks and Reed Buntings frequent along the reens. In the autumn and winter months Stonechats are among the birds using the bushes and willows along the reens. Areas of reedbed occur mainly on the Levels although small areas exist at Llanover and on the lower estuarine reaches of the Rivers Usk and Wye. New large reedbeds have been created at the Newport Wetland Reserve augmenting the existing old reedbed in the old ash lagoon. Smaller reedbeds, sedgebeds and willow thickets occur at the Gwent Wildlife Trust Reserve at Magor Marsh, at Llanwern Steelworks and scattered through the reen network. These wetland habitats are busy in the summer months with Reed and Sedge Warblers and Reed Buntings whilst Cetti's Warblers have a healthy resident population. Less common visitors such as Bitterns, Marsh Harriers, Short-eared Owls and Bearded Tits have been recorded in recent years, mainly at the Newport Wetlands Reserve.

The largest open waterbody in the county is Llandegfedd Reservoir. This has been well watched over the years. It supports breeding Coots as well as Great Crested Grebes, large numbers of wintering wildfowl and a host of migrants on passage. Other important reservoirs for breeding birds or wintering wildfowl include Wentwood, Ynsyfro, Pant-yr-eos, Pen-y-fan Pond, Garnlydan and Carno. At the larger upland reservoirs Common Sandpipers sometimes breed. There are a host of small reservoirs and man-made ponds, many of those in the western valleys, such as the Dunlop-Semtex Pond, created during the industrial past. The series of ponds in the Whitebrook and Angiddy Valleys in the east of the county also owe their origins to the wireworks and paper mills which began to flourish in these valleys as long ago as the 16th and 17th centuries, respectively. These ponds support a few Little Grebes, Moorhens and Coots and their outflows are often used by Dippers and wagtails. Newer lakes created for recreation, fishing or conservation interests, include Brynbach near Ebbw Vale, Dingestow Court Lake renovated in the 1980s and The Hoop ponds near Penallt. Brynbach has become a regular site for flocks of Goosanders in the winter whilst Dingestow Lake and The Hoop ponds support a few wintering Tufted Ducks and Pochards and breeding Little Grebes, Canada Geese, Coots, Moorhens and Tufted Ducks. There are also new ponds on recently constructed golf courses. For example, ponds at Raglan Golf Course support breeding Coots and Moorhens and Canada Geese are regular. These ponds did not exist during the 1981–85 Gwent Atlas. Likewise wetland creation – scrapes and pools – on the Newport Wetland Reserve has provided more wildfowl and wader habitat.

Data from Blaenau Gwent and Newport Borough show that in these relatively small areas there are 225 and 200 ponds respectively. Numbers in Torfaen and Monmouthshire are unknown but must number well in excess of 500. The marked increase in Canada Geese and Coots since the 1st Gwent Atlas may be partly due to the creation of many new wetlands.

URBAN AND INDUSTRIAL

The extent of the built-up and industrial areas, as indicated on the map, differs surprisingly little from that shown in the 1st Gwent Atlas. Of the 393 tetrads common to both Atlas surveys, more than half (211) remain in the 'less than 3 %' category, and only 49 show a change of category. New industrial estates and housing developments account in almost equal numbers for the 36 tetrads showing a change to a higher category. This probably understates the growth of these areas, since in several instances a new development crossed tetrad boundaries, and failed to show a significant increase in either tetrad. Thirteen tetrads show a decrease sufficient to show as a change of

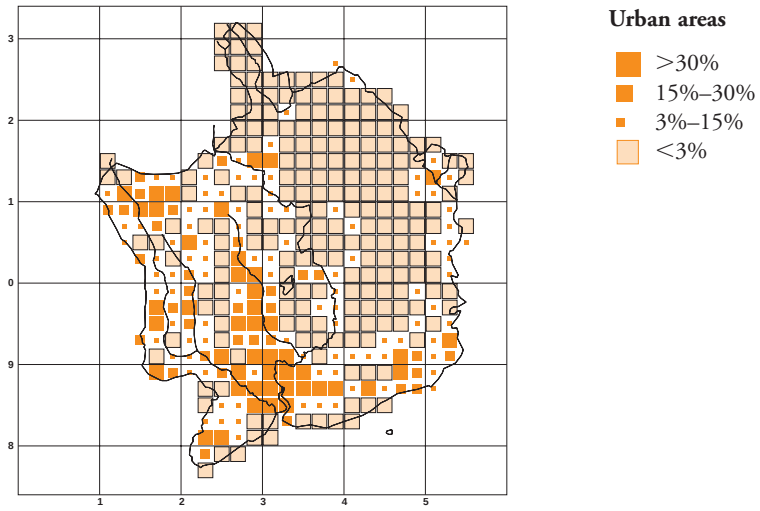


Figure 4. Distribution of urban areas in Gwent

category: most of these are in the western valleys and relate to the reclamation and landscaping of the sites of coal mines and their associated spoil tips. As yet the grass and scrub on these sites remain young but could grow into habitat suitable for pipits, chats and warblers.

FARMLAND

Gwent is a predominantly pastoral county. Grazing by stock, mainly sheep and cattle, of pastures, rough hillsides and moorland is the main land use. Arable farming is largely confined to the Usk, Monnow and Trothy Valleys where cereals, oilseed rape and maize are the commonest crops.

In 1984, at the time of the 1st Gwent Atlas, there were about 82,000ha of farmland and 9,500ha of rough grazing on common land in the west and north-west. This comprised about 67% of the county's land area, the rest being woodland, urban, moorland and water. Much of the farmland was grade 3 or 4. The same situation prevails today but there have been marked changes in agriculture, as in the rest of Britain. Much old permanent pasture has been ploughed, sown with rye-grass and treated with artificial fertilisers, so that a thick growth of grass develops early in the season. The grass is now mostly cut for silage with two to three cuts in the season and little is left for a hay crop. The early cutting of rye grass leys has had detrimental effects on ground-nesting birds such as Curlews. The tall dense growth early in the season also adversely impacts on nesting Lapwings and on birds, such as Starlings, that prefer to feed in short swards. By contrast, corvids such as Jackdaws have fared well and their numbers have increased. Very little unimproved species-rich pasture remains, but in the Wye Valley and on the Trellech Plateau especially, there are a series of small steep pastures and hay meadows which have retained a diverse flora and a good insect fauna. A feature is the numerous Meadow Ant mounds that attract Green Woodpeckers. Since the first Atlas the numbers of dairy and beef cattle in Gwent have declined and those of sheep have correspondingly increased. Goats, red deer, llamas and alpacas occur in small numbers.

Although no statistics were available from the Welsh Office Agriculture Department for the amount of arable land in Gwent during the 2nd Gwent Atlas period, the area is probably rather similar to that in the 1980s (less than 10,000ha). It is the type of crop that has changed. Autumn-sown cereal crops (barley and wheat) have replaced spring-sown crops, to the detriment of finches and buntings that formerly fed on spilt grain and weed seeds in stubble fields during the winter months. On arable land there is also now much more oilseed rape as well as maize and other fodder crops such as mangolds and turnips. A range of additional arable crops occupy only small areas: these include flax, peas, beans, onions, potatoes and lupins as well as soft fruit. Lapwings favour nesting in maize, which is sown late in the spring, whilst Yellow Wagtails may nest in any arable crop.

Generally arable land is usually treated with a cocktail of pesticides and this in turn has led to a reduction in weed seed and in invertebrates, both of which are needed for food by many farmland birds. However, an increas-

ing number of farms are going 'organic' and are not using pesticides and/or are entering into agricultural schemes, notably the Tir Gofal scheme, to safeguard and enhance wildlife habitats. In some cases this means leaving buffer strips around arable fields to provide cover for nesting birds or food in the form of weed seeds and invertebrates.

In the uplands of the north and west, the valley sides or ffridd habitats have in the past been enclosed by walls and fences and are now sheep-grazed but often dominated by bracken. Scattered hawthorns, rowans and birches occur in the fridd, especially in the steep-sided tributary valleys. Good examples are to be found in the Llanthony valley. There, Willow Warblers, Tree Pipits and Redstarts abound in the scrub and in the bracken on the ffridd, birds such as Whinchats occur. In the west, some former upland opencast sites, as along the Heads of the Valleys road, have been converted to rye-grass pasture that now supports sheep.

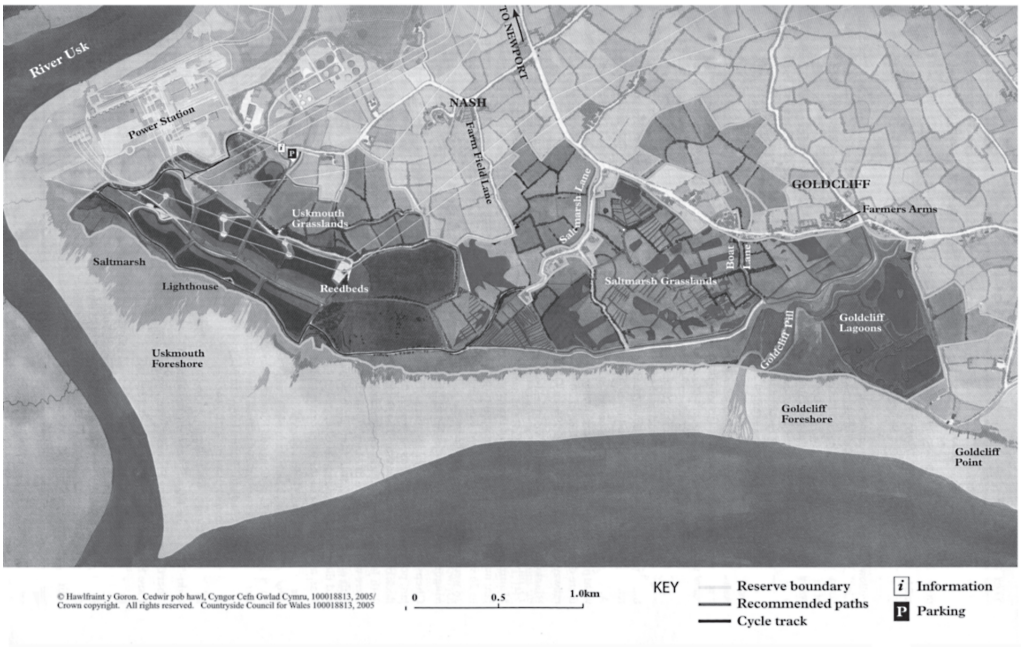
WHERE TO WATCH BIRDS IN GWENT

For a small county, Gwent is blessed with a wide variety of habitats. In this guide we have selected nine of the best birding sites in the county. In doing so we have attempted to detail areas which encompass the maximum diversity both of habitat and bird species, whilst ensuring a wide geographic spread that covers most areas of the county. We recommend that the relevant Ordinance Survey Explorer Map is used, with a compass and the site map included in this guide, at all sites other than the Newport Wetlands Reserve, Llandegfedd Reservoir, Castle Meadows and Llanfihangel Gobion.

1 NEWPORT WETLANDS RESERVE (NWR)

O.S Map Explorer 152 Newport and Pontypool
Grid reference: ST 334834

Please note that this new reserve is evolving. The information given was current in July 2006 and is subject to change.



Habitat

Opened in 2000, the reserve is a narrow strip approximately 5km long lying along the north shore of the Severn Estuary, from the mouth of the River Usk eastwards to the village of Goldcliff. The reserve has three distinct habitat areas interspersed with trees and hedgerows. At the western end (Uskmouth) there is a large area of new reedbeds with open water pools. At the eastern end (Goldcliff), three saline lagoons have been created to encourage winter, breeding and passage waders. The central section is lowland wet grassland, managed to encourage breeding waders and over-wintering wildfowl.

The wetlands are maintained by pumping water from nearby sewage works through a special treatment reedbed from which clean water can be circulated through the reserve via the network of reens. Water levels are controlled throughout the reserve to provide suitable habitats. Volunteer wardens patrol the site.

Timing

At the Goldcliff lagoons the best time to visit is when the tide is in, particularly if it is high. Other than this, early morning is best as usual for birding.

Access

Facilities include a car park and single toilet, with disabled access, on West Nash Road between Nash Village and Uskmouth Power Station. From the east at M4 Junction 24 take the A48 to Newport Retail Park, then turn off towards the western entrance to Llanwern Steelworks and follow the 'brown duck' signs to the reserve car park which is open from 09.00–17.00 hrs (or dusk if earlier). From the west, at junction 28, take the A48 towards the docks. Then follow signs for Nash Village and you will pick up the 'brown duck' signs.

Several public footpaths pass through the reserve, as does a spur of the Sustrans Celtic Trail cycle route. At the time of writing, it is not possible to walk through the reserve from the car park at Uskmouth to the lagoons at Goldcliff using footpaths. Care must be taken if the stretch of road which runs through Nash village is used instead as there are no pavements.

At Uskmouth, several paths run between the reedbeds, including four way-marked routes. The Orchid Walk is suitable for pushchairs and wheelchair users. Other paths have rough surfaces. Dogs are allowed on clearly identified paths and must be kept on leads. Stout footwear and suitable clothing are recommended, bearing in mind that it is often windier and cooler on the reserve than further inland, with no shelter available. An interpretation board at the car park shows the routes, and leaflets are generally available. Leaflets can also be obtained by contacting the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW) at www.ccw.gov.uk.

Viewing platforms have been built overlooking the lagoons at Goldcliff. Handrails are provided for limited mobility visitors, but paths are unsurfaced and access was not suitable for wheelchair users in 2006.

A Visitor/Environmental Education Centre at Uskmouth was completed in 2007 and includes information, refreshment and toilet facilities. It is operated by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB). Other refreshments are available at The Waterloo Inn at Nash Village, The Farmers Arms at Goldcliff, and at Newport Retail Park. Details of walks and activities taking place at the Reserve can be found at www.ccw.gov.uk, www.gwentbirds.org.uk or www.rspb.org.uk/wales.

At the time of writing, bus 5B from Newport goes near to the Reserve. Contact Traveline Cymru at 0870 608 2608 for up-to-date information.

Species

The reserve was created as an amelioration measure to compensate for the habitat loss which resulted from the Cardiff Bay barrage. It has proved to be an exciting development for birdwatching in Gwent with over 170 bird species recorded. This includes new breeding species for the county such as Avocet and Bearded Tit. It provides interest all year around, though sometimes a visit can produce nothing of note. In winter there are wildfowl, waders, a spectacular starling roost just before dusk, the hope of hearing a Bittern (and better still of seeing one), and the possibility of watching Short-eared Owl hunting over the reedbeds accompanied by the explosive song of a Cetti's Warbler. In spring there is the anticipation of passage waders and the arrival of summer visitors. The summer brings the buzz of breeding Reed and Sedge Warblers, the diminutive song of the Reed Bunting, perhaps the distinctive sound of Bearded Tits, possibly the sight of a Hobby after dragonflies or, the confirmation of another new breeding species for Gwent. Then, what might turn up in the autumn?

Calendar

Resident Typical water/reedbed species may be seen in most months including: Little Egret, Grey Heron, Little Grebe, Shelduck, Gadwall, Tufted Duck, Oystercatcher, Lapwing, Dunlin, Curlew, Redshank, Water Rail (normally heard), Cetti's Warbler (normally heard), Reed Bunting along with Buzzard, Kestrel, Peregrine and many hedgerow species.

Winter Numbers of waders increase, particularly Dunlin, Curlew and Redshank, and large numbers of ducks such as Shelduck, Mallard, Wigeon, Teal, Pintail and Shoveler can be seen. Other possible species include Bittern, Hen Harrier, Merlin, Black-tailed Godwit, Short-eared Owl, Golden Plover, Grey Plover, Knot,

Stonechat, Fieldfare and Redwing. There is also an impressive Starling roost at Uskmouth reedbeds. Black Redstart is also a possibility.

Spring This is the time of regular spring wader passage, arrival of passage and breeding migrants, establishment of territories by resident and migrant breeding birds, and the arrival of some more unusual species. More regular species to look out for, although not always common, include: Oystercatcher, Avocet, Little Ringed Plover, Ringed Plover, Sanderling, Curlew Sandpiper, Ruff, Bar-tailed Godwit, Whimbrel. The scarcer waders recorded include Kentish Plover, Temminck's Stint and Purple Sandpiper as well as a series of rarities (see below). Passerines include Water Pipit, Yellow Wagtail, White Wagtail, Redstart, Whinchat and Wheatear. Regular/diligent observation at this time may produce many other species/rarities.

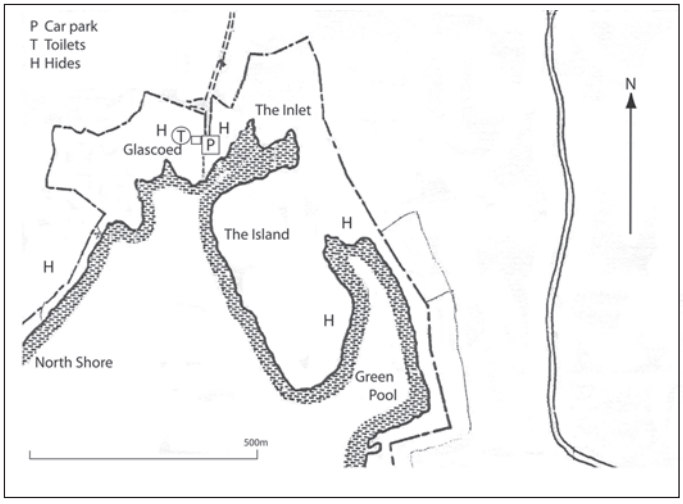
Summer The reserve holds many breeding/probable breeding species such as Little Grebe, Mute Swan, Canada Goose, Shelduck, Moorhen, Coot, Tufted Duck, Ruddy Duck, Oystercatcher, Avocet, Little Ringed Plover, Ringed Plover, Lapwing, Redshank, Cuckoo, Skylark, Cetti's Warbler (not often seen but characterised by its explosive song), Sedge Warbler, Reed Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat, Whitethroat, Chiffchaff, Willow Warbler, Bearded Tit, Linnet and Reed Bunting. Other birds that might be seen or heard between April and September include Spoonbill, Garganey, Marsh Harrier, Hobby and Grasshopper Warbler. Orchids, dragonflies, damselflies, butterflies and moths add additional interest to visits during summer.

Autumn This is the time of departure of migrant breeders, movement of passage waders, and the arrival of the more unusual. Species include some of those recorded as spring passage waders along with the possibility of: Red-necked Phalarope, Wood Sandpiper, Green Sandpiper, and flocks of Redwing and Fieldfare. Regular/diligent observation at this time may produce many other species, including rarities.

Rarities Notable species which have been recorded on the reserve are Squacco Heron, White-rumped Sandpiper, Baird's Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, Hudsonian Whimbrel, Richard's Pipit, Dartford Warbler, Aquatic Warbler (by ringers), Yellow-browed Warbler, Woodchat Shrike and Lapland Bunting.

2 LLANDEGFEDD RESERVOIR

O.S Map Explorer 152 Newport & Pontypool
Grid references: Dam ST 325985, North End SO 333008 (Car park on map)



Habitat

A 174ha reservoir mainly consisting of open water but with some reedbeds and willow carr. Adjacent habitat includes marsh, small ponds, broadleaved woodland, hedgerows and hay meadows.

Conservation work has included the planting of reedbeds, construction of ponds and ditches, creation of wild flower meadows, tree planting, woodland management, planting of crops to encourage finches and buntings, provision of nest boxes and nesting islands, construction of Osprey nesting platforms, construction of a Sand Martin nesting bank, creation of breeding habitat for Lapwings and operation of a bird feeding station.

Species

The site is designated as an SSSI for wintering wildfowl. Large numbers of Wigeon, Mallard and Teal overwinter, together with smaller numbers of Pochard and Tufted Duck. Other winter visitors include Bewick's Swans, Goldeneye, Shoveler and Pintail.

Passage migrants regularly include Ospreys in spring and autumn, together with tern and wader species. Winter visitors regularly include diver species and rarer grebes. Breeding birds include Water Rails, Great Crested and Little Grebes, Tree Sparrows in small numbers and both Reed and Sedge Warblers.

The northerly (shallower) end is the best area for wintering wildfowl but species preferring deeper water are best observed from the dam. The western bank is good for observing gulls coming in to roost.

Timing

Early morning is best for birding, as usual. Winter is good for wildfowl, grebes and divers, spring and autumn for passage waders, terns and Osprey, and summer for breeding birds.

Access

The site is owned by Dwr Cymru-Welsh Water and managed by United Utilities Operational Services. Access is by permit only, obtainable either by joining the Gwent Ornithological Society or by purchase on site. Access to the northern end is for key holders only during the period 1 November–28 February: keys available from G.O.S. Some access restrictions apply during the winter months to protect grazing wildfowl.

There are six hides on site: five at the northern end, including one overlooking the bird feeding station, and one on the western bank. Other useful observation points are from the dam wall and from the education lodge at the north end.

Car parking is available at the north end, on the west bank, just below the treatment works and in the eastern picnic area. It is also possible to park near the dam. Permit holders are entitled to walk around the reservoir but access to the eastern bank is prohibited in winter. Disabled access is available at the northern end to the feeding station and inlet hides. No dogs or bicycles are allowed. The nearest points served by public transport, the railway station at Pontypool/New Inn and the village of New Inn, which is served by frequent buses, are both two miles distant.

Calendar

Resident Great Crested Grebe, Little Grebe, Coot, Moorhen, Water Rail, Mallard, Grey Heron, Lapwing; Green, Great Spotted and Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers, Buzzard, Sparrowhawk, Kestrel, Tree Sparrow, Yellowhammer, Reed Bunting, Willow Tit, Marsh Tit and many common species.

December to February Wigeon, Teal, Tufted Duck, Pochard, Pintail, Shoveler, Goosander, Bewick's Swan, occasional Black-throated and Great Northern Divers; Slavonian, Black-necked and Red-necked Grebes, Golden Plover, Snipe, Green Sandpiper, and large numbers of gulls, including occasional rarities.

March to May Osprey, Hobby, passage terns including Black Tern, passage waders, Little Ringed Plover, Common Sandpiper, Yellow Wagtail, Wheatear, Redstart, Tree Pipit, Reed Warbler, Sedge Warbler, Garden Warbler, occasional Cetti's Warbler.

June to July The breeding species are present plus a small flock of Common Scoter (in some years), Little Egret, terns, waders, Hobby.

August to November Osprey, waders, terns, returning wildfowl, migrant passerines.

3 THE WENTLOOGE COAST

O.S Map Explorer 152 Newport and Pontypool: all sites accessible from the B4239 coast road
Grid references: St Brides coast ST 300816, Peterstone Pill ST 278807, Sluice Farm ST 255790

Habitat

The Wentlooge Level is a large low-lying coastal area between Cardiff and Newport, protected from the sea by an earth sea wall. It was traditionally pastureland drained by ditches (known locally as reens) but some areas are now pipe-drained and arable, and there is also some land-fill, a golf course and a golf driving range. A path (not designated on the Explorer map) runs along the entire length of the sea wall, and gives excellent views of the tidal mudflats and saltmarshes that characterise this stretch of the Severn coast.

Timing

The waders and wildfowl of the Severn are the major interest and best views are obtained either on the rising or high tide, depending on the site.

General access

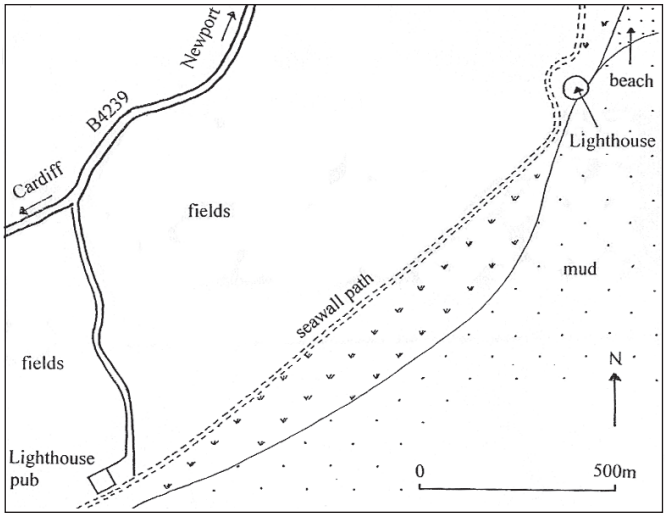
All sites are accessible from the B4239, the Cardiff to Newport coast road, but see under individual sites for details. St Brides and Peterstone are served by bus services 31A and 31C from Newport Bus Station (6–8 buses daily, but no Sunday service). Wheelchair access to the sea wall is really possible only at Peterstone Pill, and progress from there is soon blocked in both directions by stiles.

Species

A wide selection of winter wildfowl includes good numbers of Shelduck, Mallard, Teal, Pintail, Shoveler and Wigeon, and smaller numbers of less regular species. The most abundant winter wader species are Dunlin, Knot, Curlew, Black-tailed Godwit, Redshank and Oystercatcher, but many other species are regularly recorded. Passage periods produce species such as Garganey, Whimbrel, Curlew Sandpiper, Sanderling, Ringed Plover, Little Stint, Greenshank and Bar-tailed Godwit. Shelduck breed, as do several summer visitors including Reed and Sedge Warblers, and Yellow Wagtails (now very scarce).

ST BRIDES COAST

Grid reference: ST 300816



Access

Visit at high tide. Park in the large car park adjacent to the Lighthouse Inn at the above grid reference. Go through gate and walk east, either along seawall or along the seaward edge of the saltmarsh, which remains dry on all but the highest spring tides. According to season, the saltmarsh and inland meadows may have breeding Lapwings and Redshanks, feeding Curlews and Whimbrels, or (only on the saltmarsh) high tide roosts of Dunlin and Ringed Plover. Continue to just beyond the West Usk Lighthouse where a small beach has a regular high tide wader roost with a good range of species.

Calendar

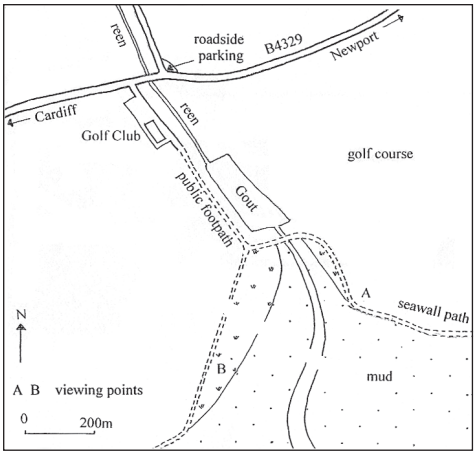
Autumn-Winter Oystercatcher, Grey Plover, Ringed Plover, Knot, Dunlin, Curlew, Black-tailed Godwit, and occasionally Bar-tailed Godwit. Up to about 600 Shelduck offshore. Stonechats are regular on fences and reeds. Little Stint, Curlew Sandpiper during autumn passage.

Spring All the above wader species at the beach roost, but also including passage Whimbrel and Sanderling, though the latter has been only occasional in recent years. Breeding Oystercatcher, Lapwing, Ringed Plover, and Redshank. Cetti's, Reed and Sedge Warblers plus Reed Bunting in vegetated reens. Passage Wheatears and sometimes Whinchats on saltmarsh. Ravens breed in the large pylon.

Summer Breeding waders and passerines as listed for spring.

PETERSTONE PILL AND GOUT

Grid reference: ST278807



Broadway reen, which runs across the levels from Marshfield, drains into a large basin known as Peterstone Gout. This in turn drains, via sluices in the sea wall, into the estuary where it meanders over the mudflats as Peterstone Pill. The mud surrounding the Pill is a favoured feeding area for wildfowl and waders and, as it the last area to be covered by the rising tide, there is often a large concentration of birds just prior to full mud cover. The winter Shoveler flock is a particular attraction of the site. The Gout is also of interest, as some wildfowl and waders, particularly Redshanks, use it as a high tide roost, and when water levels are high it is used by Little Grebes and duck species for feeding.

Access

Arrive 2–3 hours before high tide. There is very limited parking on the roadside verge at the junction (see map). In the past, birdwatchers were permitted to park in the golf course overflow car park, but permission was withdrawn some years ago (it might just be worth asking?). Follow the public footpath through the golf club

car park to the corner of the Gout: resist the temptation to cross the stile to look into the Gout (the light and the view are better from the far end) and proceed on the track down the west side of the gout to the sea wall. From here, look back into the Gout. You now need to find a vantage point from which you can observe birds feeding on the rising tide. The position of the sun is a major consideration: in the morning it is best to turn left along the seawall, cross the sluices and settle at viewing point A; in the afternoon, turn right along the seawall, cross the narrow saltmarsh and settle at viewing point B.

An alternative approach involves roadside parking 1km to the west at Peterstone village (ST268802). Take the public footpath alongside the church to the sea wall, and walk east to reach viewing point B.

Calendar

Winter Large numbers of wildfowl, including Shelduck, Mallard, Teal, Pintail, Wigeon and an impressive Shoveler flock; waders including Oystercatcher, Grey Plover, Ringed Plover, Knot, Dunlin, Curlew, Redshank. Also look out for Merlin and Short-eared Owl.

Spring All the above species, but in smaller numbers; additional passage species include Garganey (in some years), Whimbrel, Spotted Redshank, Greenshank, Common Sandpiper; breeding Cetti's, Reed and Sedge Warblers and Reed Buntings in vegetated reens; Yellow Wagtail in meadows; Common and Lesser Whitethroat in hedgerows; breeding Great Crested Grebe, Little Grebe and Tufted Duck in the gout.

S*ummer* Shelduck broods feeding on mud-flats; a sprinkling of waders; occasional movements of Manx Shearwater offshore.

Autumn The same wildfowl and waders as in winter, but in smaller numbers, plus passage Curlew Sandpiper, both godwits, Whimbrel, Common Sandpiper, Wood Sandpiper, Ruff.

SLUICE FARM

Grid reference: ST255790

Saltmarsh with high tide wader roost. The turfed areas are favourite spots for Water Pipits, especially in early spring (March/April), when birds have often acquired their breeding plumage. The area is best covered on the hour either side of the higher tides when the wader roost: principally of Curlew, Oystercatcher and Redshank, has been pushed onto the higher areas of the saltmarsh by the rising tide and is more likely to be visible. The roost can be on either side of the large concrete building on the seaward side of the sea wall.

Access

Visit at high tide. There is roadside parking for several cars on the south side of the road opposite the farm: from there take the track to the sea wall. Alternatively, park at Peterstone village (ST268802), take the public footpath alongside the church to seawall, and walk west along the seawall towards Cardiff for about 1km.

Calendar

Summer/Autumn/Winter Similar selection of species to Peterstone Pill.

Spring Water Pipit. Otherwise again similar to Peterstone Pill.

4 THE RIVER USK

The River Usk is already a mature river when it enters the county at a point near Glangrwyney, on Gwent's north-west boundary. It runs in an easterly direction to Abergavenny, where it turns south-east until it reaches Llanfihangel Gobion, then due south to Newbridge-on-Usk (the tidal limit) and south-west to Newport, where it enters the Severn Estuary. In total it flows some 55km from the county boundary to the Severn. The river is designated as a Special Area of Conservation because of its high diversity of habitats and species of European importance.

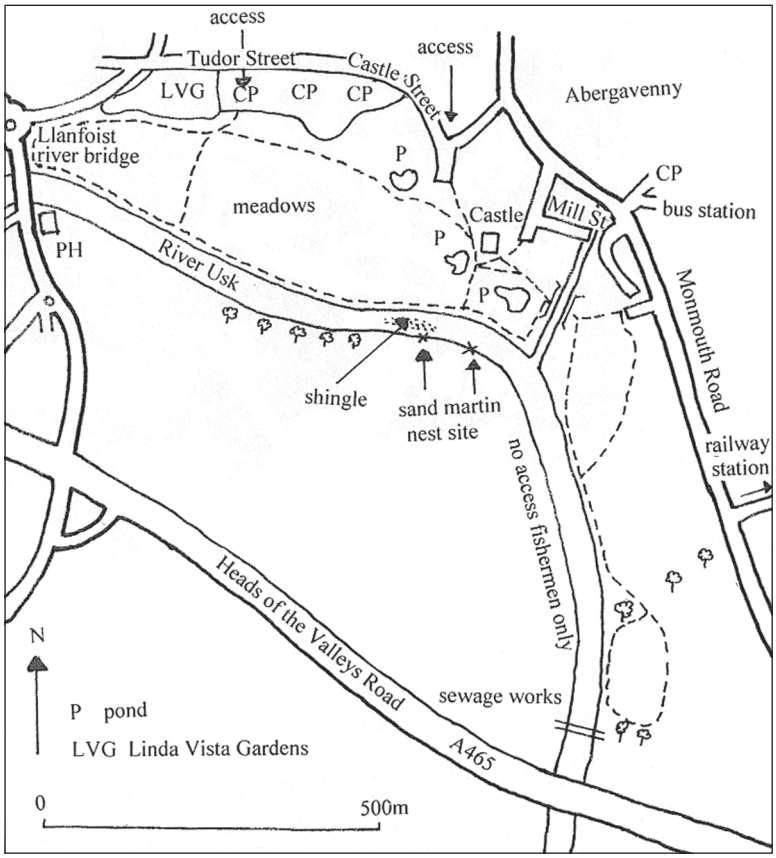
For most of its length it is a slow moving river with extensive meanders and a wide flood plain. Flooding is now less extensive and shorter lived than in historical times. It is most likely to occur above the town of Usk, where the flood plain is interrupted by rising ground that restricts the river's flow, and around the Llangybi bottoms, when high tides coincide with high river flows.

The river Usk provides an excellent riverine habitat along much of its length, but there are hotspots with a greater range of bird species, particularly if additional habitats such as shingle banks, cut-off meanders or riverine woodland are in evidence. The sections that provide the best birding are at Llanwenarth, Castle Meadows (Abergavenny), Llanfihangel Gobion, Llanllowell and Llangybi. The latter two sites are privately owned and not accessible to the public, but large parts of the river can be explored via the various footpaths making up the long distance Usk Valley Walk. The river bank at Llanwenarth has been eroded and the footpath that followed it has unfortunately been lost in the course of the river. Until recently the route was still passable because the landowner allowed a stile to be moved inland as the river width expanded, but now the route has been blocked and so is not recommended.

CASTLE MEADOWS, ABERGAVENNY

O.S Map Explorer OL13 Brecon Beacons National Park (Eastern Area)

Grid references: Llanfoist River Bridge SO 292139: recommended start of the walk. Abergavenny sewage works bridge SO 302133: end of walk, return to the starting point following alternative footpath.



Habitat

Hay meadow, river, shingle bank, hedgerow, man-made ponds and small areas of woodland.

Species

An excellent range of birds characteristic of riverine habitat including Dippers, Grey Wagtails, Common Sandpipers, Kingfishers, Moorhens, Coots, Mute Swans, Pied Wagtails, Sand Martins, Reed Buntings, Grey Herons, Goosanders and the secretive Water Rails in winter.

The hedgerows provide excellent views of Greenfinches, Goldfinches, Blackcaps and Bullfinches, while the woodland areas provide the perfect habitat for Spotted Flycatchers, Nuthatches, Treecreepers, Willow Warblers, Chiffchaffs and Long-tailed Tits. All three British woodpeckers have been seen, though the Lesser Spotted is becoming more elusive. Swifts and hirundines are abundant in spring and summer.

Timing

Early morning is the best time for bird activity whatever the season, and will avoid disturbance from dog walkers. You can find something of interest at any time of year, although the summer months have to be a favourite, watching the Sand Martins darting with precision into the nest to feed their young.

Access

By car take the A40 into Abergavenny and make your way to Castle Street or Tudor Street car parks, signposted when entering Abergavenny in either direction. These car parks are ideal for the walk as both border the meadows. By public transport, the bus and railway station will take you onto the Monmouth road: take a first left into Mill Street just before you enter the town; you can enter the meadows near Abergavenny castle.

Most of the walk can be covered by disabled or wheelchair users as the paths are of good foundation and well maintained.

On entering the meadows turn right to head west towards Llanfoist River Bridge. This is a good starting point for the walk and also gives you an opportunity to check the hedgerow of Linda Vista Gardens for finch and thrush species.

Follow the path downriver until you come to a shingle bank, which is worth scanning during the breeding season for Common Sandpipers with young. The river bank opposite contains one of the largest Sand Martin colonies in Gwent, where the main colony can range from 150 to 300 nests. Continue to follow the path until you meet the River Gavenny where it is worth taking a break to view the river from the bridge for Dippers, Kingfishers and Pied and Grey Wagtails. The walk continues for another 500m to a small woodland area (unsuitable for wheelchair users) where you can see Nuthatches, Treecreepers and woodpeckers.

Return to the Llanfoist Bridge using the circular footpath ensuring you cover the whole of the meadows. At a leisurely stroll the walk should take 90 minutes.

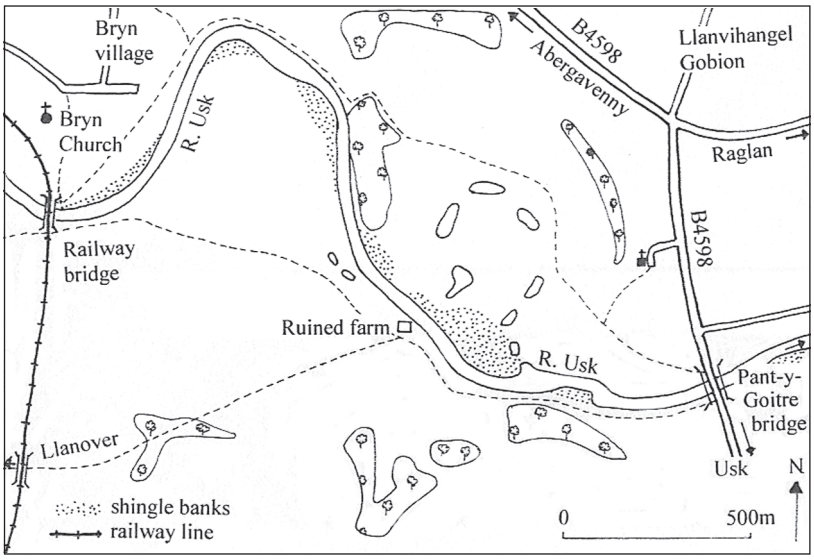
LLANFIHANGEL GOBION (GOBION) NR ABERGAVENNY

O.S Map Explorer OL13 Brecon Beacons National Park (Eastern Area)

Grid references: Bryn village SO 331097; limited parking near church.Pant-y-Goitre Bridge SO 347089; very limited parking on road verges and farm gateway.

Habitats

Riverine habitats including shingle, earth banks, oxbows (recent and old), river meadows, woodland and scrub, bordered by farmed pasture and arable areas



Species

Similar to Castle Meadows but because the area has less public use, disturbance is not such a problem. Breeding species along the river and ox-bows include Mute Swans, Goosanders, Moorhens, Coots, Common Sandpipers, Kingfishers, Sand Martins, Yellow Wagtails, Dippers and Reed Buntings, while one of the counties largest heronries is nearby. The woodlands contain the usual range of common birds and Hobbies nest in the area, frequently hunting the river area for martins and dragonflies.

There is a regular passage of wading birds (in small numbers but good variety) with Little Egrets, Greenshanks, Redshanks, Green Sandpipers and Little Ringed Plovers all regularly recorded, as well as Garganey, Mandarin and Blue-headed Wagtails in some springs.

During the winter, mixed flocks of Redpolls and Siskins can be found in the riverside alders and Fieldfares and Redwings are on the fields. These flocks sometimes attract hunting Merlins or Peregrines. Small numbers of ducks, mainly Teal and Tufted Ducks, can be found on the ox-bows. Rarer species such as the Long-eared Owl and Water Pipit are found occasionally. A wintering flock of approx 80 Lapwings sometimes ventures this far down the Usk valley.

Timing

Any time of year can be productive, although the spring and autumn passage periods are likely to produce the greatest variety of species.

Access

There are way-marked public footpaths on both the north and south sides of the river, but unfortunately it is not possible to do a circular route as the railway bridge at the upstream (Bryn) end has no footway. From the Bryn village there is a public footpath running all the way to Pant-y-Goitre bridge, some 2km away. The south ride of the river can only be accessed from a different public footpath from Pant-y-Goitre bridge. If crossing this bridge great care needs to be taken as there is no dedicated footway. Both of these footpaths deviate from the river bank in places so please respect the rights of the farmers and do not trespass off route. To do so during the breeding season could cause you to disturb nesting birds inadvertently. These walks are unsuitable for wheelchair users.

Calendar for both sites

Resident Mallard, Sparrowhawk, Buzzard, Moorhen, Coot, Kingfisher, woodpeckers, Meadow Pipit, Grey and Pied Wagtails, Dipper, Goldcrest, Long-tailed Tit, Coal Tit, Nuthatch, Treecreeper, Greenfinch, Goldfinch, Bullfinch, and Reed Bunting. Also Lesser Spotted Woodpecker at Gobion.

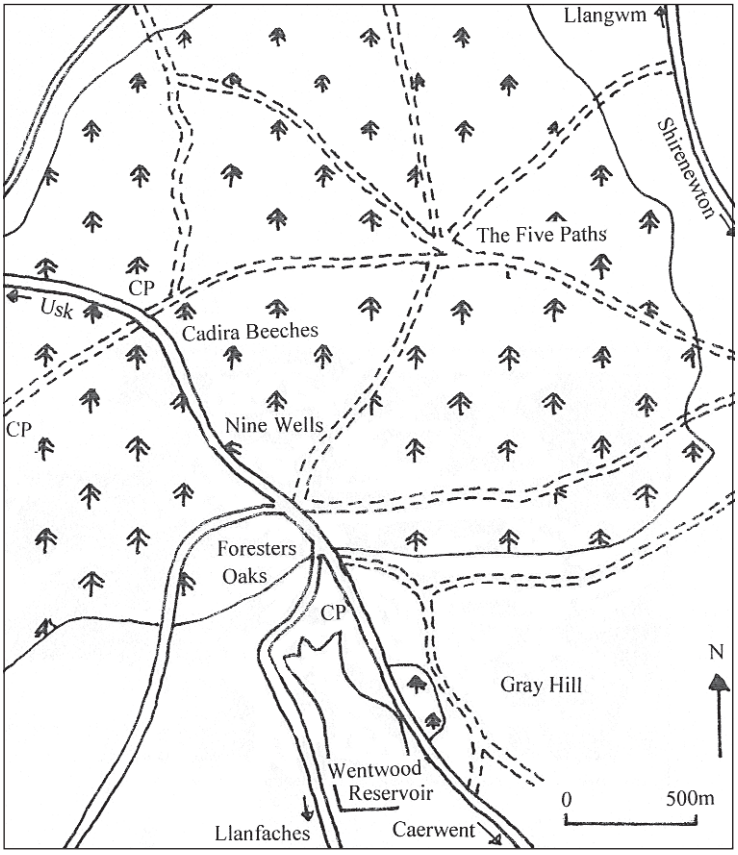
Spring-Summer Goosander, Hobby, Common Sandpiper, Swift, Sand Martin, Swallow, House Martin, Willow Warbler, Chiffchaff, Blackcap, Spotted Flycatcher,.

Spring and Autumn Mandarin, Little Egret, Little Ringed Plover, Green Sandpiper. Also Garganey, Greenshank, Redshank and Blue-headed Wagtail at Gobion.

Winter Water Rail, Fieldfare, Redwing, Siskin, Redpoll.

5 WENTWOOD FOREST

O.S Map Explorer OL 14 Wye Valley & Forest of Dean
Grid references: Cadira Beeches ST 424947, Foresters Oaks ST 428940



Habitat

The forest of Wentwood was originally a huge area mainly of beech and oak but is now much reduced in size. There are large areas that have been planted with conifers, mainly larch and Douglas Fir, which are periodically harvested forming different habitats. These range from bare clear-felled areas, through young plantations

surrounded by scrub, to mature forest. Gray Hill, which requires a short but strenuous climb, has a small area of grassland at the summit with birch scrub, Gorse and Heather on its southern flank.

Species

Wentwood provides habitat for a wide variety of woodland species and a majority of those found in the county list have been recorded here. The forest is however especially noted for certain species. Firecrests were formerly present as a breeding species with upwards of ten pairs in some years, and can still be observed occasionally. Goldcrests are common. As a result of the periodic cropping of the conifer plantations, large clearings result which become colonised with a number of species during the new period of growth. The most significant is the Nightjar and several pairs are present in the larger clearings. These can be observed at dawn and dusk from mid-May to July together with roding Woodcock. Cuckoos are present in reasonable numbers from late April. Whitethroats, Garden Warblers and Tree Pipits are widespread and Stonechats breed occasionally. Willow and Marsh Tits both breed, as do the more common Coal, Blue and Great Tits.

Great Grey Shrikes regularly stop off on autumnal migration or even overwinter at this site, usually in the clearings. Crossbills are almost always present in winter, sometimes in large numbers, and often stay to breed. Bramblings may join the Chaffinch flocks and the numbers of Siskins and Redpolls increase especially in late winter. Gray Hill is a good vantage point to see raptors such as Goshawks, Sparrowhawks, Kestrels and Buzzards.

The reservoir holds a few Mallard and grebes throughout the year with a small number of Pochard and Tufted Ducks in winter. It has attracted a few rarities over the years such as Smew, Ring-necked Duck and Leach's Petrel. The road above the reservoir is a good vantage point but beware of the traffic.

Hawfinches and Pied Flycatchers can be observed but only infrequently because of the relative scarcity of native broadleaved trees.

The Common Spotted and Bee Orchids and the Broad-leaved Helleborine are among several types of orchid seen in spring and summer. The small meadow adjacent to the Foresters' Oaks car park contains some notable butterfly species, including Grizzled Skipper and Marbled White.

Timing

A good range of birds can be observed at any time of the year and early morning is generally the best for bird-watching. However, to see or hear Nightjars and Woodcock the site must be visited in the late evening, perhaps as late as 22.00 hrs in June or at around 04.00 hrs for the dawn.

Access

A good map is recommended if venturing far into the Forest which is criss-crossed with many wide tracks (for forestry vehicles) and smaller paths.

Cadira Beeches car park and picnic area are as good a place as any to start for observing woodland birds, and there are a number of wide tracks leading into the Forest here. A recommended option is to head towards The Five Paths. Part of the route is accessible to wheelchairs as it is broad and flat, but it does tend to deteriorate further into the forest, particularly in winter. Foresters' Oaks car park also gives access to this area but you need to cross the road. Gray Hill can be also be reached from here via a narrow steep track, and the road south from here overlooks Wentwood Reservoir.

Calendar

Resident Tawny Owl, Green and Great Spotted Woodpecker, Goldcrest, Willow and Marsh Tit, Nuthatch.

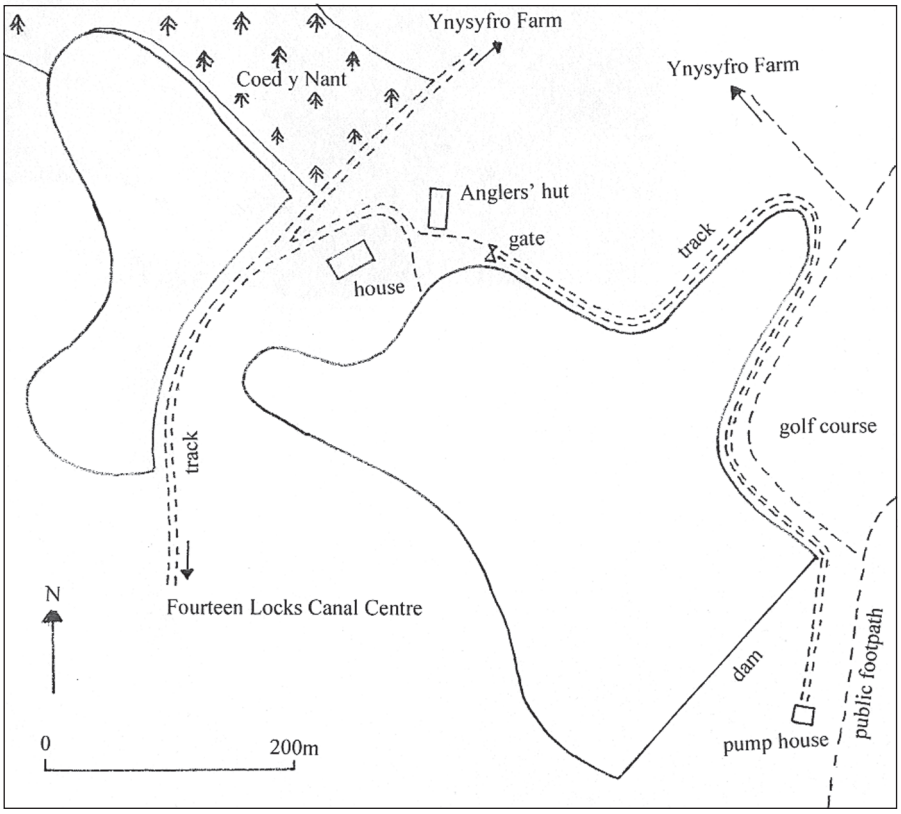
December to March Brambling, Siskin, Redpoll, Crossbill and winter thrushes.

April to July Woodcock, Cuckoo, Nightjar, Tree Pipit, Whitethroat, Garden Warbler, Wood Warbler, Firecrest.

August to November Passage migrants and Great Grey Shrike if you are lucky.

6 YNYSYFRO RESERVOIRS

O.S Map Explorer 152 Newport and Pontypool
Grid reference: ST 283890, about 1km. north of M4 junction 27, off the B4591 Newport/Risca road.



Habitat

Two reservoirs owned by Welsh Water, separated by a causeway, bounded by hedgerows and surrounded by fields, part of a golf course and a small conifer plantation. There is only one short stretch of riparian vegetation on the far side of the upper reservoir. Extensively used by fishermen from late March to autumn.

Species

Winter wildfowl are regular in small to moderate numbers. They are mainly Coot, Mallard, Tufted Ducks, Pochard, Little and Great Crested Grebes and Mute Swans. Canada Geese, in parties varying from ones and twos to 50 or more, visit intermittently. Other wildfowl visit occasionally during the winter months, especially when low water levels expose mud and weed along the water's edge. Kingfishers, Grey Wagtails and some of the smaller waders also visit occasionally. Records in recent years have included Black-necked Grebe, Ruddy and Ring-necked Ducks, and Scaup; also Water Pipits in some winters.

Access

By car leave the M4 Motorway at junction 27 and head north on the B4591. After approximately 800m turn right off the B4591 into Cefn Walk, signposted '14 Locks Canal Centre'. After about 400m, cross a narrow

canal bridge (care needed here!) and turn right into the Canal Centre car park, which is open daily from 09.00 hrs to dusk. The track to the reservoirs, signposted 'Ynysyfro Reservoir', leaves the road immediately beyond the car park. It is a ten-minute walk walk to the causeway between the reservoirs.

By public transport, there are regular bus services along the B4591 to and from Newport, except on Sundays when services are minimal. Services R1/R3/R6 to/from Risca every 15 minutes and service 56 to/from Blackwood or Tredegar every 30 minutes, pass the end of Cefn Walk.

The track along the causeway is a public right of way and affords ample views of the upper reservoir and part of the lower. A public footpath runs along the edge of the golf course, close to the eastern bank of the lower reservoir. To reach this, continue along the track, past the houses, turn right towards the clubhouse, and right again, downhill along the hedgerow past the No. 1 tee. Access to the reservoir banks, and use of the parking at the reservoir, is by permit (GOS membership card).

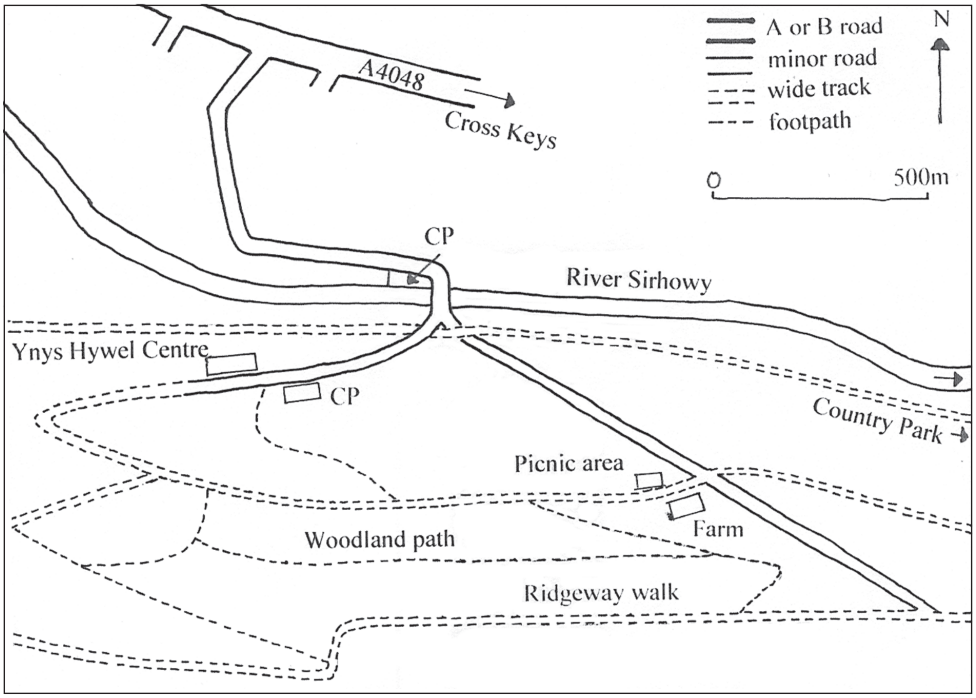
Calendar

Resident Mute Swan (these usually breed), Mallard, Buzzard, Moorhen, Coot, Little Owl, Skylark.

Winter Tufted Duck, Pochard, Little and Great Crested Grebe regularly; other wildfowl occasionally. Also Canada Goose, Kingfisher, Grey Wagtail.

7 GRAIG GOCH WOODS

O.S Map Explorer 166 Rhondda & Merthyr Tydfil
Grid reference ST190908 alongside A4048, three miles west of Risca.



Habitat

Steep hillside with broadleaved woodland, mainly of sessile oak and birch with some ancient beeches, and also conifer plantations, mainly of western hemlock and Scots pine, leading up to high pasture with beech copses. On parts of the lower slopes there is a traditionally managed farm with cattle grazing and pig enclosures. A large number of tracks and footpaths enable the planning of short, medium and longer walks, on steep or flat terrain. The woodland path gives the best views of the more interesting species. Oddly there is no vehicle access to the picnic site. The lowest track (the former railway line) is fine for wheelchairs.

Species

The site offers an excellent selection of birds characteristic of upland woods in Wales, including Tree Pipits, Redstarts, Wood Warblers and Pied Flycatchers, together with Siskins and Crossbills in the conifer plantations, and a wide variety of the more general woodland/woodland edge species. At the foot of the hillside, the river Sirhowy holds Kingfishers, Grey Wagtails and Dippers, all of which can be seen from the bridge near the car park (though not necessarily all three on every visit!). The higher-level tracks either east or west from Graig Goch lead to more open habitats where Stonechats, Whinchats and Wheatears can be found. Ravens and Buzzards breed locally, and Peregrines and Merlins are sometimes sighted.

Access

By car, take the A4048 to the small town of Cwmfelinfach. Toward the east side of town turn south down Islwyn Street, signposted Ynys Hywel Centre. Follow this road to the bridge over the river and park just before the bridge in the Pont Lawrence car park. Alternatively, drive across the bridge, follow the road to the right and park at the Ynys Hywel Activity Centre. By public transport, take the No. 56 bus that runs a frequent service between Newport and Blackwood/Tredegar via Cwmfelinfach (alternate buses go through to Tredegar and display this route sign).

Calendar

Resident Buzzard, woodpeckers, Kingfisher, Coot, Grey Wagtail, Meadow Pipit, Dipper, Treecreeper, Nuthatch, Raven, Siskin.

Spring-Summer Tree Pipit, Meadow Pipit, Redstart, Garden Warbler, Blackcap, Chiffchaff, Willow Warbler, Wood Warbler, Pied Flycatcher, Crossbill. Also Stonechat, Whinchat and Wheatear at adjacent sites along the Ridgeway path.

8 THE BLORENGE

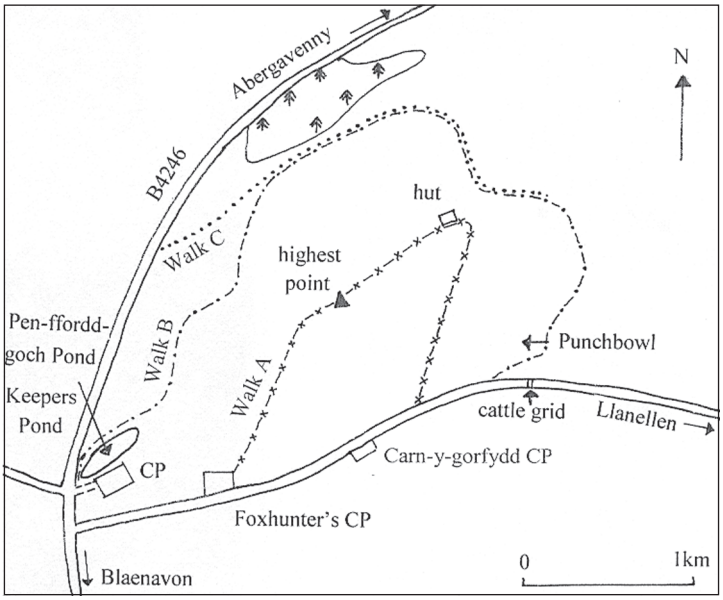
O.S Map OL13 Brecon Beacons National Park (Eastern Area)
Grid reference: Highest Point SO 270118

Habitat

This is a plateau of upland heath, with the main flora being Heather, Bilberry and Bracken, with steep sides covered mostly with Bracken, small trees and some rocky screes, and covers an area of about 5km^2.

Species

The mountain is inhabited by many bird species that are characteristic of upland Wales. The predominant species, Meadow Pipits and Skylarks, are present throughout the year, as are Red Grouse, Ravens and Buzzards. They are joined during the breeding season by Stonechats, Whinchats, Wheatears, Cuckoos, Tree Pipits, Willow Warblers, Redstarts and Linnets.



Access

Travelling from the north of the site: exit the A465 and turn on to the B4246 at either Gilwern or Llanfoist. Then take the B4246 for Blaenavon, which proceeds directly to the Blorenge. Travelling from the south of the site, from Blaenavon, join the B4246 for Abergavenny, which proceeds directly to the Blorenge. There is no access to the site via public transport. The nearest bus stops are at Blaenavon and Llanfoist. The site can be accessed from several starting points, with walks of varying length and gradient:

WALK A

Starting point: Foxhunter's car park, which is directly opposite the TV Masts.
Grid reference SO 264107.

Circular walk. Distance: 5km. Time: 2 hours. Difficulty: contains several slopes with a medium gradient. Access by wheelchair is not possible.

Scan from the car park for Wheatears, then take the path to the highest point. This is the best route to see or hear Red Grouse, particularly in spring or summer, and ideally in the early morning. Walk to the right of the brick hut, and carefully approach the edge of the plateau (there is a plunging drop) at SO 277123, before following the edge to the right, checking the stony banks immediately below you for Wheatears. Follow the track through the bracken and take the right track where it forks. This is a very good section to observe Whinchats and Tree Pipits. Turn right at the road and return to the starting point, pausing at Carn-y-gorfydd car park, to scan over the wall for Stonechats and Whinchats.

WALK B

Starting point: Park on the grassy verge just above the cattle grid.
Grid reference SO 278113

Circular walk. Distance 9km, or 6km if two cars are used and one is left at the Pen-fford-goch (Keepers) Pond SO 255107. Time: 4–5 hours. Difficulty: one climb of medium gradient and c.1km in length. Access by wheelchair is not possible.

Take the footpath to the left (north) of the cattle grid. Check the conifers close to the road for Siskins. Descend to the punchbowl listening for Blackcaps, Chiffchaffs and Garden Warblers. The path turns west above Pen-y-graig Farm, and this can be a pleasant place to rest on the grassy verge, whilst looking out for Redstarts in the dry stone wall area. The 1km stretch between here and the conifer woodland is excellent for Tree Pipits, Redstarts and Cuckoos, particularly to the right of the path. When the conifer wood approaches the path listen for Goldcrests and Coal Tits. At the point where the conifer wood butts against the path, take the bridleway which is signposted, up and to the left of the path. This walk through bracken is very good for Stonechats, Whinchats and Wheatears: this track can however become rather overgrown with bracken in late summer. When you reach the main path, turn right and continue to the paths end at Pen-fford-goch (Keepers) Pond car park. From here turn left on to the road, and then left again onto the next road, and back to the starting point.

WALK C

Starting point: Park on roadside verge at footpath sign marked 'Llanfoist 3.5 km' Grid reference SO 260122. There is only sufficient space for two to three cars.

Non-Circular walk. Distance: 4km. Time: 2–3 hours. Difficulty: level track with only slight gradients. The majority of this track (until it begins to descend) could be negotiated by wheelchair as it is flat, but with small undulations.

Begin along the footpath and immediately check the Gorse to the right for Whinchats, Stonechats, Linnets and Willow Warblers. The trees adjacent to the path are often used by Cuckoos as a vantage point. A few hundred metres along the track is a further patch of Gorse which should be checked for similar species. Scan and listen for Whinchats, Stonechats and Wheatears to either side of the path as you progress. Listen at the conifer forest for Goldcrests and Coal Tits. The next 1km stretch is very good for Tree Pipits, Redstarts and Cuckoos particularly to the left of the path. The path descends more steeply alongside a drystone wall, and looking over it, close to its end, can give excellent views of Redstarts. Finish the walk at the wall's end, above Pen-y-graig Farm, and return to the starting point. An alternative route back can be taken via the bridleway which begins at the conifer wood in Walk B. If this route is taken, turn right at Pen-fford-goch (Keepers) pond car park, and walk down the road to the starting point.

Calendar

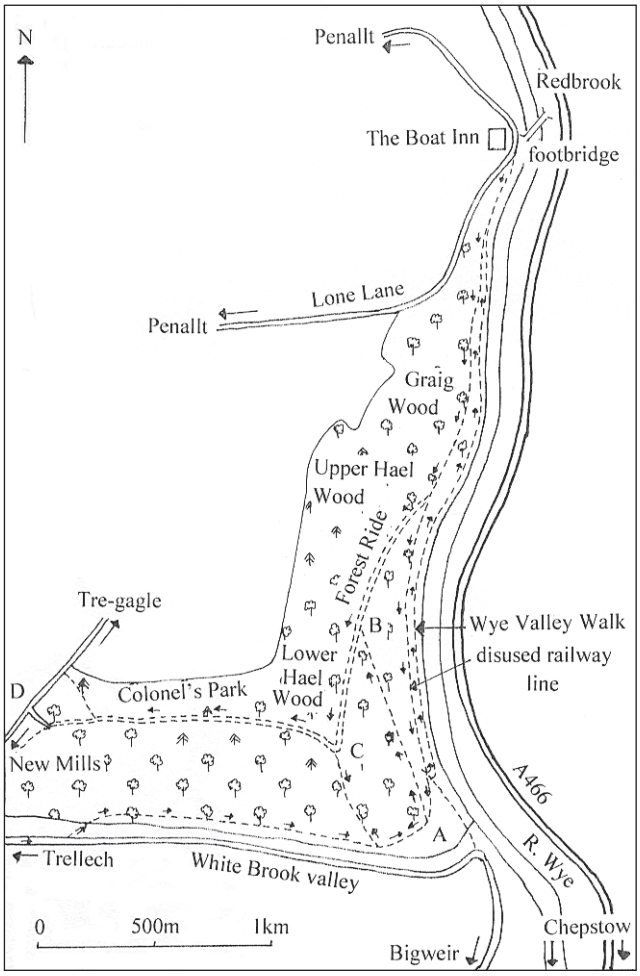
Autumn-Winter Skylark, Meadow Pipit. Red Grouse on Walk A. .

Spring-Summer The above species plus Cuckoo, Tree Pipit, Redstart, Whinchat, Stonechat, Wheatear, Goldcrest, Coal Tit, Linnet. Also Blackcap, Garden Warbler, Chiffchaff, Siskin on Walk B.

9 WYE VALLEY WOODLANDS

The Wye Valley woodlands comprise the largest block of woodland in the county. These woods lie alongside the River Wye from the border with Herefordshire north of Monmouth, down to Chepstow. The steep sides of the Wye Valley are clothed mainly with broadleaved woodland, much of it classed as ancient and semi-natural. Although many conifers were planted on clear-felled areas on the valley sides in the 1960s and 1970s, the policy is fortunately now to remove the alien conifers and restore with native broadleaves. Gradually this is coming about. There are still some areas of conifers in the valley and more extensive blocks of conifers on the Trellech Plateau on former heathland, on the watershed between the Wye and Usk catchments. These are usually interspersed with broadleaved trees and there are two schemes to restore small areas of heathland.

Typically the Wye Valley woodlands include much Small-leaved Lime as well as the rarer Large-leaved Lime, Wild Cherry or Gean and Ash. On the plateau on drier soils there are woods of oak and birch. Tributaries of the Wye: the Black Brook, White Brook, Cat Brook and Angidy, drop down steeply through the woodlands on the Welsh side. The valley sides and plateau characteristically also have small fields edged with stone walls or well-developed hedges. Many have escaped modern intensive agriculture and still support a wealth of wildflowers and insects.



GRAIG WOOD, LOWER HAEL WOOD, UPPER HAEL WOOD, COLONEL'S PARK AND PWLLPLYTHIN WOOD AND THE RIVER WYE

This walk runs from Redbrook to Whitebrook with detours into Colonel's Park.

O.S Map Explorer OL14 Wye Valley & Forest of Dean
Grid reference: Redbrook car park SO 536098. Recommended start of walk.

Habitat

Broadleaved and coniferous woodland and the River Wye.

Species

Typical broadleaved woodland birds such as Great Spotted Woodpeckers, Nuthatches and Treecreepers abound in the woodlands. Green Woodpeckers favour the small steep-sided pastures adjacent to the woodland. Of particular note is the population of Hawfinches breeding in the Wye Valley. Whilst Song Thrushes and Bullfinches may have declined in England they are still numerous in these woodlands, especially in conifer thickets. Willow and Marsh Tits are not uncommon, the former favouring mixed conifer and broadleaves.

Access

Park at Redbrook just west of the A466. Walk over the railway bridge crossing the River Wye to the Boat Inn and turn left. After a few metres turn left again onto the disused railway line. You can follow this all the way to Whitebrook and then walk back along the River Wye footpath. Look out for Goosanders on the river during the winter and at other times there will be a range of waterbirds including Mute Swans, Little Grebes, Grey Wagtails and Kingfishers. This walk is flat and the railtrack is suitable for wheelchairs but the River Wye footpath is undulating and boggy in winter.

For the more energetic there are various tracks that take you into the woods. Just before Whitebrook you can take a small track up through lime, beech and ash woods and this eventually comes out on another forest track (A). You can go left to Whitebrook and walk back down the minor road in the valley to rejoin the railway line or you can turn sharp right here and walk up to a broad forest ride (B). If you turn right, downhill, you will soon rejoin the railway line. Alternatively you can walk uphill. There are several options if you do this. One is to walk up to a right-hand bend and there turn left (C) and drop down a sunken track to Whitebrook, where you turn left into the wood rather than walking out onto the minor road. The woodland track will bring you back where you started (A). If you continue on the broad track up to the New Mills to Tre-gagle road (D) you can either bear right at the road and then follow a track at the edge of the wood that loops back to the main track, or turn left along the road to New Mills and then follow the Whitebrook valley down, along the road and along a track following the stream. This is a recommended route, but it is fairly strenuous and up to 12km in length, and therefore can require six hours or more and a good level of fitness.

OTHER LARGE BLOCKS OF PREDOMINANTLY BROADLEAVED WOODLAND IN THE VICINITY INCLUDE:

1. Cuckoo Wood and Cleddon Shoots: access from parking area by bus shelter on Whitebrook road south of Bigsweir Bridge at Grid reference SO 537052
2. Lower Hale, Buckle and Glyn Woods and further west Ravensnest and Great Wenallt Wood. Access from Tintern. Take the minor road just south of Abbey Mill and after the hotel on the right (west side) towards The Cot. There is a parking area after a few hundred metres at SO 524002. Footpaths go up the Angidy Valley and into the woodlands. Alternatively follow the minor road towards The Cot past Ravensnest fishing ponds and park on the left above the ponds at the wide entrance to the forest at ST 503997.
3. Blackcliff and Wyndcliff Woods. Parking areas along main road at ST 526973 and ST 524974
4. Chepstow Park Wood. Accessible from several points along the road between Devauden and Chepstow (B4293), or between Devauden and Itton.

Calendar

Resident Sparrowhawk, Goshawk, Buzzard, Woodcock, all three woodpecker species, Goldcrest, tits, Nuthatch, Treecreeper, Raven, Bullfinch, Hawfinch.

Spring and Summer Hobby, Redstart, Wood Warbler, Pied Flycatcher.

Winter Mixed flocks of tits, woodpeckers, and finches such as Crossbill, Redpoll or Siskin. The latter two species are especially found in Alder trees along the river or in conifers.

TRELLECH PLATEAU

On the Trellech plateau to the west of the Wye Valley there are large areas of conifer plantations. These range from mature plantations to thickets, and there are scattered restocked and clear-felled areas which provide more interest. Cleddon and Beacon Hill, two areas recently cleared of conifers near Trellech, are being encouraged to revert to heathland and these are now fenced and grazed by Exmoor ponies.

For CLEDDON take the B4293 from Trellech and turn left as you drive south through the village of Cleddon. There is parking at Grid reference SO515038. From here walk around Cleddon Bog, Ninewells Wood and Broad Meend.