



Welcome to Westhay Moor

Westhay Moor is part of the mystical Avalon Marshes within Somerset's historic Levels and Moors. It provides a home for rare wildlife and a unique insight into thousands of years of shifting landscape. Visitors can experience the local landscape as it was when the first settlers, Neolithic farmers, made the marshes home, and can explore the reserve's diverse habitats that are bursting with incredible wildlife throughout the seasons.

Why is Westhay Moor special?

Designated as a National Nature Reserve, Westhay Moor was a pioneering conservation project by Somerset Wildlife Trust that started in the late 1970s. It is also a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), SRA site and RAMSAR site.

The area of Westhay Moor used to be an industrial site of peat workings, but thanks to the conservation work of Somerset Wildlife Trust, channels, islands, and reedbeds have been restored over the 100 hectares of peat moors to create habitats where wildlife can thrive. For example, the restored peat diggings have been transformed into a network of open water reedbeds that provide habitats for wetland birds such as Bittern, a heron-like bird, which has been thriving there in recent years.

The reserve has the largest surviving fragment of lowland acid mire in the South West, where you will find seven species of Sphagnum Moss growing. The Mire is also good for the Microplume Moth, which was extinct in 1956 but has made a comeback to Westhay – as it was recorded there in 2008/09. In its caterpillar form the Microplume Moth feeds on Sundews, an exotic-looking insectivorous plant – look out for it when visiting in the summer.



Explore stunning habitats and captivating species all year round

Nature Reserves Catcott & Westhay Moor

Somerset Wildlife Trust's Catcott & Westhay Moor Nature Reserves



Somerset Wildlife Trust helps protect the species you love in the county where you live. We've been doing this for over 50 years and are the biggest conservation charity in Somerset. We manage nature reserves across the county, work with communities to raise awareness and educate, campaign on issues that affect wildlife and provide wildlife-friendly land management advice. We can only do this with your help and support.

Our nature reserves are free for you to visit, but they cost us nearly £2,000 a day to manage.

Become a member

A monthly donation of just £5 a month can make a huge difference in helping us protect wildlife in Somerset and safeguarding it for future generations.

@ Join by email - please contact us on membership@somersetwildlife.org

Join online - visit www.somersetwildlife.org

Join by phone - Call our team on 01823 652400

Get in touch

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www.somersetwildlife.org
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Bittern © Jamie Hall

Try a trail

Starting at the car park you will be met with the first signpost that will give you the choice of taking the 3km long Otter trail, marked by Otter footprints on way-markers, or the 1.6km Coot trail, marked by Coot footprints. Whichever trail you choose they both lead to the first hide of the reserve, the Viridor Hide, and following the Otter trail you will also be led to the Tower Hide, a great place to take in the view of reedbeds and wet woodlands of Alder and Willow.



While you are here, why not visit Catcott too? Flip over to find out more

Dogs are welcome on leads to part of our reserve, however we ask that you adhere to our Canine Code as signposted throughout the reserve. For more information please visit: www.somersetwildlife.org/visitor_information

What to do at Westhay Moor

- See how long it will take to grow your height in peat.** Peat started forming approximately 6,000 to 7,000 years BC and until 400 AD. The top of the totem pole found on the reserve shows the land when it was at its highest point, before the peat started to shrink.
- Get a bird's eye view.** There are several hides to choose from, one of which is the new two-storey North Hide, opened by Simon King in 2017 and has beautiful carvings on the outside thanks to Priddy Primary School. The hide takes in the peaceful scene of water and reedbeds, so you may see lots of heron species poised over the water, and if you're really lucky, an Otter!
- Pedal power!** If you are keen to cycle, there is a national cycle route that runs through the Westhay village - a great way of seeing the local area before exploring the reserve. There is a bike rack to leave your bike before you head into the reserve.
- Find the Starlings.** Not just the Starlings that can be seen flying overhead at winter, but the beautifully wooden carved Starling sculpture which can be found past the Viridor Hide and just before you reach the Mire (bog).
- Smile.** Take a photo under the archway that you see just as you enter the reserve.
- Find hidden presents.** You can find items hidden in boxes throughout the reserve by navigating yourself with GPS - known as geocaching. Find out more at: www.somersetwildlife.org/Geocaching.
- Wander in wellies.** In wet weather please wear sturdy footwear or wellies, which will help you get through the muddy places - and are a good excuse to have a splash in a puddle. Please stick to the way marked trails - particularly near the Mire.

What to take...

- Bring binoculars and a bird guide to make sure you don't miss a moment when you are in a hide.
- Take sturdy boots, and if it's been raining recently, take wellies to walk on the uneven terrain.
- In cooler temperatures pack your winter woollies in case the temperature drops.
- Don't be caught out by the heat. In the summer bring a sun hat, sun cream, plenty of water and keep in the shade where you can.
- Take a raincoat no matter what the time of year - you never know!
- Pack a drink and snacks to keep you going, but please take away all your rubbish.
- Bring along your wildlife identification books to discover species.



Peat facts

Peat is the partially decayed remains of organic matter such as reeds, sedges, mosses and even trees, and it forms in wet environments where acidity and low levels of oxygen halts decay. Peat has formed in the Avalon Marshes over thousands of years starting around 6,000 to 7,000 years BC and continuing to about 400 AD. Westhay Moor used to be an industrial site of peat diggings, however thanks to the work of the Somerset Wildlife Trust the area has been transformed to become a wildlife haven. Here is how the peat industry has changed over the years and how areas of the landscape were restored.

History of Westhay Moor

Prior to 1945

Peat was dug by hand with non-mechanical tools, and then burnt as a crucial heat source.



After 1945

Commercial supply and industrialisation of peat started. A lot of the peat was mechanically sprayed with herbicide to keep the weed infestation down, and as a result it destroyed vegetation.

1960s

Peat was used less as a fuel, and was used more and more for horticulture, having an increasing impact on the landscape.

1980s

The intensity of peat diggings grew to meet demand, and this led to campaigning about the environmental impact it was having.

In 1994

Fisons, a horticultural chemicals company working in the area, handed over land to conservation organisations, including Somerset Wildlife Trust, allowing us to work on restoring the area of Westhay Moor that you see today.

Today

After years of conservation work, including reedbed restoration, creating areas of shallow water and careful water management, Westhay Moor has returned to how it was before it was intensively dug for peat, and now provides a mosaic of habitat for a wide range of incredible wildlife.

How Westhay Moor looks today



Restored from deep drained peat extraction, Somerset Wildlife Trust have created islands that are home to a variety of plants such as Amphibious Bistort. Otters can be seen crossing from open water to reedbeds; there are also a variety of fish swimming in the water, and Great White Egrets and Grey Herons hunting along the edges.



Reedbeds were created from deep drain peat extraction and have continually improved throughout the decades to become the ideal nesting habitat for Great White Egrets, Marsh Harriers, Bittern and Bearded Reedlings. Bladderwort - a native carnivorous plant - can also be found along the fringes of the reeds.



Willow, Alder and Birch trees thrive in poorly drained or seasonally flooded areas, growing together to make the woods we call 'wet woodland'. They are an extremely important part of Westhay's mosaic of habitat. They provide vital cover and breeding areas for mammals and are extremely rich in insects which supports the reserve's ecosystem. You may see a Roe Deer wandering between the trees and a Barn Owl perched on a branch.



Westhay Moor has the largest fragment of lowland raised acid mire (or bog) in the South West of England, which supports a variety of species from native insectivorous Sundew plants pictured here, to Sphagnum Mosses that help create the peat. Adders and Cotton Grass can also be found here.

What to look out for

Adders

Vipera berus
Summer
Can be seen on the Purple Moor grass in summer on the acid mire.



Cotton Grasses

Eriophorum angustifolium
Summer
It will look like cotton wool has been thrown across the landscape.



Bittern

Botaurus stellaris
All year round
Listen out for the booming sound of male Bittern in spring and summer.



Reed Warblers

Acrocephalus scirpaceus
Summer
Reedbeds come alive with their 'churring' song.



Emperor Dragonflies

Anax imperator
Summer
See these species among many other dragonflies, clashing in mid-air.



Sundew

Drosera tokaiensis
Summer
These insectivorous plants spread across the lush wetlands, nestled amongst soggy Sphagnum Moss.



Teal

Anas crecca
Winter
Often spotted in amongst Wigeon and seen in large numbers.



Starlings

Sturnus vulgaris
Winter
Witness them flying overhead in their dazzling murmurations.



Otters

Lutra lutra
All year round
Dawn and dusk are the best times to see them.



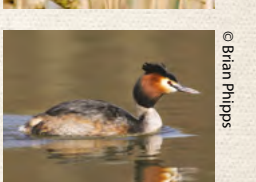
Cetti's Warblers

Cettia cetti
All year round
Listen out for an explosive bubbling song.



Great Crested Grebes

Podiceps cristatus
All year round
Look out for the impressive plume on their head and ruff around their necks during the breeding season.



Great White Egrets

Egretta alba
All year round
They are similar to the size of a Grey Heron with black feet and a long sharp yellow beak.



Cattle Egrets

Bubulcus ibis
All year round
They have yellow or greyish legs and a yellow beak.



Grey Herons

Ardea cinerea
All year round
Often seen standing stock-still in the shallow waters.



Kingfishers

Alcedo atthis
All year round
Look out for them sitting quietly on low-hanging branches over the water.



Marsh Harriers

Circus aeruginosus
All year round
During the breeding season, look out for males performing amazing courtship displays.



Bearded Reedlings

Panurus biarmicus
All year round
You are more likely to see them in winter. Listen out for their distinctive 'ping' noise.



Background image Westhay Moor © Guy Edwards 2020/2021