



## 2.5 Habitats and wildlife

The Coast to Coast walk passes through a range of habitats, described below:

- coast
- woodland and hedgerows
- moorland
- grassland and farmland

Birds and mammals are more active at the beginning and end of the day, so you're more likely to see them if you start very early or go for a stroll in the evening.

Midges also follow this pattern, so between May and September cover up and apply repellent. Don't forget binoculars, if you have them.

### Coast

At St Bees Head, a nature reserve hosts the largest seabird colony in north-west England, cared for by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. During the nesting season, every available ledge on the near-vertical cliffs is occupied, the air filled with the cries of seabirds arriving and departing. Sleek dark-headed guillemots perch upright on their rock ledge and keep up a loud growling call. The kittiwake is a small gull-like bird, with black wing tips, black legs and yellow bill. Its call is a trademark *kitti-waake*.

Cormorants frequent South Head, best seen when they're perching on rocks or posts, with their wings spread out to dry. At a distance they appear almost uniformly black. The dense shrubs close to the cliff edge shelter various small birds. The whitethroat lives up to its name with white throat, grey head and red-brown wings, though it's shy and hard to spot. The male stonechat has a dark brown head with white neck patches, and chestnut underparts, and it favours gorse bushes. The linnet has a distinctive red crown patch on its grey head, and a red chest.

Just inland, as well as in upland areas, all-black ravens are a common sight, performing aerial acrobatics, or soaring and gliding at great height. You may spot an occasional peregrine – incredibly fast on the wing in pursuit of prey, it has a blue-grey back, wings and head.

*Seabirds nesting near St Bees Head*





Thrift or sea pink is perhaps the most common wildflower, and one of the hardiest, making splashes of pink or mauve on exposed clifftops and rocky places from spring until midsummer. Sea campion has an odd-looking white flower, its petals sprouting from a bulbous tube, and its leaves are lance-shaped. Dense, spiny bushes of flowering gorse are common along the coast, as well as inland. From early spring, you'll see their yellow flowers and smell their almond perfume: see the photograph on page 37.



*Thrift flourishes in rocky niches*

The east coast cliffs are much less suitable for nesting, though you will see herring gulls, and perhaps some cormorants and fulmars. The rock platforms and sandy shores are ideal for foraging oystercatchers: they are easy to identify by their black head with long red-orange bill, black chest and back with white underparts, and their trademark – a loud, persistent *pik-pik* call.

The curlew is Europe's largest wading bird, often seen on rocks at low tide, and in estuaries. Its long curved bill is distinctive, and its patterned plumage makes for good camouflage. This helps in the breeding season (spring), when they nest on the moors.

*Curlew breed on the moors*





*Bell heather*

## **Moorland**

The moors are carpeted with hardy heather, in flower from midsummer. There are two kinds: bell has larger, deep purple flowers, whereas ling is pinker. Both have tough, twisted stems and tiny needle-shaped leaves. Traditionally, these made excellent roofing material. Flowers were put to good use in dyeing, and in brewing, a tradition maintained to this day.

The golden plover has a plaintive whistle, evoking the remoteness of its native moors. It often stands watch on a low rock, and its flight is low and unswerving. Its mottled golden brown upper parts blend well with its surroundings, making it easier to hear than to see. In summer it favours moorland, whilst in winter it moves to lowland fields, often forming large flocks with lapwings.

In many places, heather moorlands are now managed for game shooting. During April each year, selected strips are burnt to encourage new growth and seed germination, to provide food and a patchwork habitat for game birds, including pheasant and grouse. Shooting butts (shelters) are used during the season, which runs from 12 August to 10 December. Shooting is an important component of the local economy, and you'll see butts on the route, particularly on the descent to Ravenseat: see page 69.

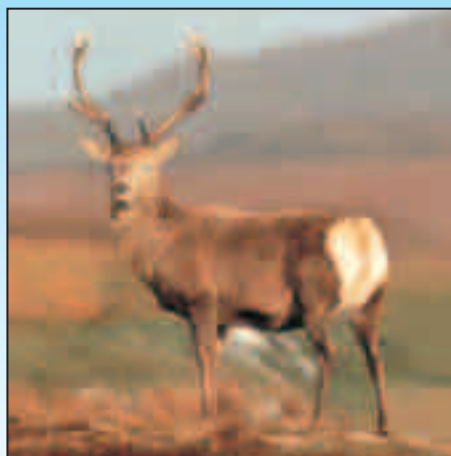
Pheasant are larger than grouse, and the male's long tail and dark green head with red wattles is distinctive. Like grouse, they erupt in a whirr of rapid wing beats and raucous cackling when startled. Red grouse have a plump body and short tail, and are highly prized as game birds. The male is dark brown with distinctive red eye patches, whereas the female is mottled and well camouflaged.

*Red grouse (male) in heather*



During early summer the lapwing performs aerial acrobatics – dipping, twisting and rolling. On the ground it's easily identified by the wispy crest on its black head, and very dark back. It frequents the moorland mainly during summer, and may also be seen in farmland and along the coast.

A bird of almost iconic status for this route is the skylark. It pours out its wistful song as it ascends ever higher, out of sight, seeming to herald better weather. It's a small streaky brown bird with a crest, easier to spot in display flight than when at rest. It forages for seeds and insects: see also page 37.



*Red deer stag*

Mammals are comparatively scarce, but you may be lucky enough to see red deer: keep a lookout on the climb out of Patterdale. The stag presents a fine silhouette with its branching, pointed antlers and bright red-brown summer coat. The hind is much smaller and lacks antlers.

Sheep are everywhere. They are valuable in helping to maintain the open, low vegetation that many other species need to survive. Two local breeds are worth singling out: Swaledales in the Dales and Herdwicks in the Lake District. Swaledales have a black face, white muzzle and white wool. Herdwicks are particularly hardy, and have white head and legs. In the ewes, their blackish wool tends to turn grey-blue with age.

*Hardy Herdwick sheep*



## Woodland and hedgerows

Woodlands are scattered widely throughout the walk and provide welcome shelter from open moorland. There's a wide range of tree species along the route. Sessile and English oaks are among the largest and oldest. Although their leaves are similar – with characteristic deep lobes – they can be distinguished by their acorns. Those on the sessile oak almost 'sit' on the leaves, whereas on the English oak they hang from obvious stalks (or *peduncles*).



*Wood anemone*

Stately, spreading beech trees flourish best on limestone. They have smooth bark and dark green and glossy leaves that turn a magnificent russet during autumn. The hardy birch is usually found on moorland edges, and has smooth, silvery bark, which becomes furrowed and rough in mature trees. Its pointed leaves turn yellow-brown in autumn.

Autumn is the time when trees become a food source. Clusters of nuts appear on the hazel – a smallish, rather untidy tree with rounded, serrated leaves. Hazelnuts are a favourite of the red squirrel. The spiny-leaved holly produces its trademark red berries long before Christmas. The grey-barked rowan has leaves growing in pairs along the stem. From late summer, its thick clusters of red berries offer a fine food source: see below.

Among the many wildflowers that you may see in woodland, three stand out. Bluebells have delicate bell-shaped flowers on a slender stem. Wild primrose has crinkly, rounded leaves and yellow flowers in spring. The wood anemone grows prolifically during spring, its white flowers easily shaken by the wind. Hence it is named after *anemos*, the Greek wind god: see photograph above.

*Rowan tree with autumn berries*





Woodlands provide food, shelter and nesting sites for a variety of smaller birds including treecreepers and blue tits. The tree creeper has variegated brown and gold plumage, providing good camouflage. Its slender curved bill digs into tree bark while its stiff pointed tail provides support against the trunk. The blue tit has a prominent yellow chest, black eye strip, with blue only on its head, outer wings and tail

The buzzard, probably the most common bird of prey along the route, frequents woodlands and is often also seen perched on a fence post, or wheeling and gliding while hunting for prey. Its back and wings

are mottled and patterned brown, with some white beneath. Then there's the unforgettable springtime visitor, the cuckoo. Despite the persistence of its call, it's very difficult to catch sight of this undistinguished greyish bird.

The route passes though a few conifer plantations, notably in Ennerdale. Dominated by Sitka spruce and lodgepole pine, they are comparatively poor in wildlife, with a few exceptions, notably the red squirrel. Very much at home in conifer forests, its coat is more chestnut brown than red, and the long bushy tail a much lighter shade. It is smaller than its grey American cousin, and its survival is threatened by the squirrelpox disease carried by the grey. Squirrels strip the scales from ripe pine cones to uncover the seeds, then discard the chewed cone, a sure sign of their presence.

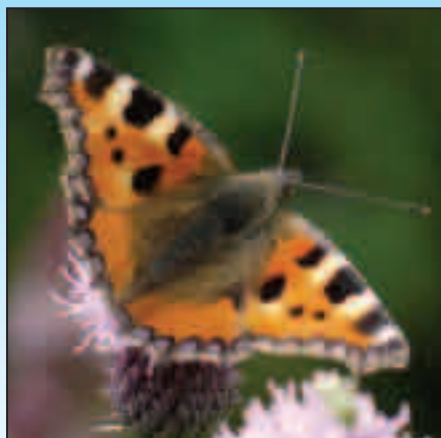


*Red squirrel with nesting material in her mouth*

*Buzzard feeding on rabbit*



Hedgerows, often regarded as an endangered feature of the English countryside, are alive and thriving along the route, particularly between Bolton-on-Swale and Ingleby Cross. These dense rows of bushes between fields may include hawthorn, with pinkish white flowers and masses of thorns; blackthorn, with blue-black fruit, narrow leaves and abundant white flowers in early spring; pink and white-flowering dog rose; and bramble, a wonderful source of free food during late summer and autumn.



*Small Tortoiseshell*

### **Grassland and farmland**

Butterflies are common in grassland wherever their favourite foods – including thistles and nettles – are found. The Small Tortoiseshell has orange wings with dark bands and markings, and a white spot on each wingtip. The colourful Painted Lady is a long-distance migrant from North Africa and beyond. It also has orange wings, but with dark wingtips with white spots and more dark markings near its tail.

In damp areas of unimproved grassland, look out for two insect-eating plants: butterwort and sundew. The butterwort carries small purple flowers on slender long stems. Its pale green leaves are covered with sticky glands which trap and digest small insects. The sundew has small rounded leaves edged with fine hairs which exude a sweet juice that attracts small insects. The hairs then curl over the hapless insect, which is soon digested by the plant.

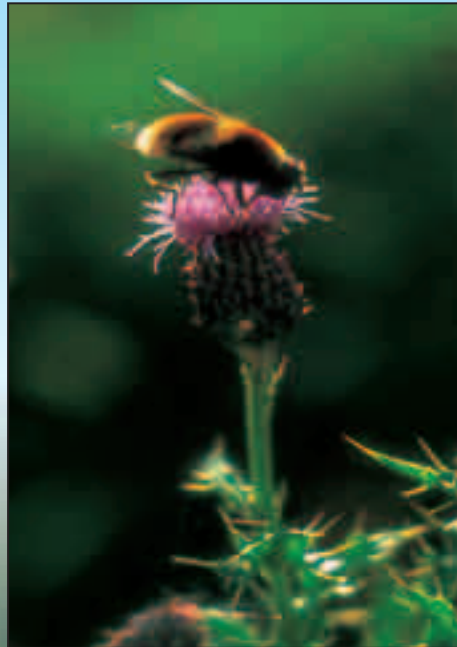
*Sundew*





In farmland areas such as Swaledale, there are fine examples of hay meadow. Selected fields are cleared of stock during spring and cut for hay in July or August. Meantime, an abundance of species creates a patchwork of colours, with yellow-flowering birdsfoot trefoil, speedwell, thistles, common ragwort, yarrow, clover, sorrel and meadow buttercup.

The skylark's preferred habitat is farmland, but intensive farming practices have led to a 75% decline in their numbers between 1972 and 1996. They are ground-nesting, and need to produce several broods a year to sustain their population. Once widespread throughout Britain, you are now more likely to see them higher up on the moors.



*Bee feeding on a thistle*



*Skylark perching on gorse*

