

2.5 Habitats and wildlife

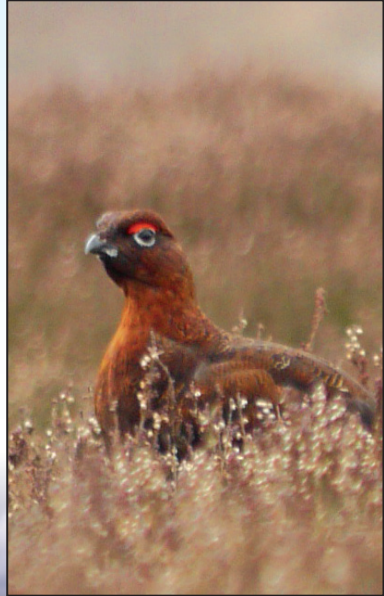
There are five main habitats along the Way:

- upland moor • hay meadow • blanket bog/wet acid grassland
- limestone pavement/grassland • rivers and lakes

Upland moor

Upland moor is found on higher ground, for example the Millstone Grit of Ilkley Moor and the hilltops between Bolton Abbey and Burnsall. Its thin acidic soil mainly supports heather with some bilberry. Purple heather flowers carpet the moorland in late July and August. This habitat is vulnerable to encroaching bracken, especially in areas of over-grazing. On Ilkley Moor, plans have been made to combat bracken and restore the traditional vegetation.

Heather provides shelter and food for the red grouse, a game bird in season from 12 August to 10 December. The red grouse is identified by its low flight and its call of 'go-back-go-back-back-back'. Bird life is sparse, but you are sure to see meadow pipits, small birds with olive-brown upper parts and a paler underside.



Red grouse (male) in heather

Heather moorland, Yorkshire



Hay meadow

Hay meadows are present on the valley floors and lower slopes. They provide crucial feed and are the very essence of the Dales field-and-barn landscape. Nationally, it is reported that more than 90% of traditionally managed hay meadows have been lost since 1945 – a huge loss of havens for wild flowers. At their best in June and July, they are a major feature of summer walking in the Dales.

Farm animals are moved to higher ground in May (see page 20) and grasses and flowers allowed to flourish. The cranesbill meadows are the least 'agriculturally improved' land in this National Park, and their biodiversity is recognised internationally. Wood cranesbill (*Geranium sylvaticum*) is a key indicator of species-rich hay meadow. Like Meadow cranesbill (a different shade of purple, see page 57), it grows wild in meadows and in roadside verges. Wild flowers support many insects, including butterflies, dragonflies and damselflies. Wharfedale has a range of native species and hosts many summer migrants, including the Peacock (as above), Painted Lady and Red Admiral.

Wood cranesbill with meadow buttercup



Peacock butterfly



Blanket bog and wet acid grassland

Blanket bog and wet acid grassland occur on high ground. Blanket bog is found on the Yoredale Series and Millstone Grit, usually on deep peat which is waterlogged. Sphagnum moss and cotton grass are the dominant plants. Wet acid grassland develops on poorly drained soils at high elevation, and sometimes lower down after over-grazing. It is home to a limited variety of plants and is of low grazing value.

The curlew, Britain's largest wader, breeds in damp open country. Distinguished by its call of *coorli* followed by an upward-bubbling stream of notes, it is mottled grey-brown with long legs and a long, downward-curved bill.



Golden plover

The lapwing is a medium-sized black and white bird with rounded wings and a distinctive crest. It breeds here and on moorland, where its distinctive 'pee-wit' call is heard. The golden plover is similar in size, but more likely to be heard than seen as it broadcasts its mournful, single-note call from a distant hummock.

Limestone pavement/grassland

Limestone pavement provides a unique habitat, see page 14: in its grikes, rare plants are sheltered from grazing animals. The thin soils produce a rich sward of lime-loving plants.

In addition to curlew, lapwing and meadow pipit, you may see buzzard circling high above. A large, eagle-like bird, its wingspan is only half that of the eagle, with pale underwing marks. Its wings are broad and rounded in flight.

Above the hay meadows, stone walls enclose limestone grassland where round-horned Swaledale sheep graze. Stoat are agile hunters, and you may spot one scurrying to hide among the stones. (Weasel are smaller, with a shorter tail that lacks the stoat's distinctive black tip.)



Stoat

Rivers and lakes

Rivers and lakes provide various important habitats, and river valleys act as wildlife corridors. River bank erosion and increased use of drainage and chemicals are threats. Fly-fishing for trout is important on the larger rivers.

Many species of bird flourish near and on the water. Wagtails are numerous, especially pied (black-and-white) and grey (yellow underparts, see below). Much rarer is the yellow wagtail, a summer migrant. Mallard, teal and goosander are common between Ilkley and Grassington.



Swaledale sheep (ram)

You may be lucky enough to see the brilliant blue-green flash of a kingfisher in flight. The dipper is more common – a small, dark-brown bird with white breast, named after its characteristic dipping action. It walks underwater in search of insect larvae, using the pressure of the swift current on its back to give it traction on the stream bed.

Lake Windermere formed after glaciers gouged a valley which filled with melt-water. It is 60 metres deep in parts, and it provides a variety of habitats including shallow bays, reed beds, wooded shorelines and lakeshore wetlands. Recreational and agricultural use can easily damage these habitats, reducing them to a pebble beach with hardly any plant or animal life.

The lake is important for resident and over-wintering birds, a wide range of aquatic plants and several species of fish. Strangest among those is the arctic charr, a salmonid fish originally from the seas around Iceland. During the last Ice Age they migrated south, and after the ice melted they populated cold Scottish lochs and a few English lakes.



Grey wagtail