

2•3 Habitats and wildlife

The Way passes through five main habitats, described below roughly north to south, albeit river banks and farmland intermingle over much of the Way:

- hillside and moorland
- woodland
- farmland and hedgerow
- river and lochs
- estuary.

If you are keen to spot wildlife, carry binoculars and walk alone or with walkers who share your interest and will keep quiet. Try to set off soon after sunrise, or go for a stroll in the evening, when animals are more active than in the daytime. Midges also prefer these times, so protect your skin, especially between May and September and in still weather.



Common spotted orchid

Hillside and moorland

The hills are mainly clad in rough grass, in places with clumps of pink-purple heather, bilberry (blaeberry), and yellow-flowering gorse (whin). Common spotted orchids thrive in boggy ground, with clusters of pale lilac flowers with darker pink spots. The soil is generally poor, the nutrients easily washed away, and overgrazing by sheep has taken its toll. Former woodland covered with wild birch and oak has been cleared, over the centuries, by people and by sheep.

Grouse flourish in heather moorland, and Annandale has both red and (much rarer) some black grouse. Grouse are plump, ground-nesting game birds. When startled, like pheasants they take off abruptly in a flurry of wingbeats and a harsh, guttural call.

Red grouse





Heather (ling)

Grouse need heather of various sizes and ages, feeding on tender young shoots, but sheltering and nesting in taller plants. Rural estates manage moorland for grouse and pheasant by burning selected sections of heather to promote new growth. Game shooting can be an important source of income to rural estates.

You will see buzzards soaring in the updraughts above the steep slopes of the Devil's Beef Tub, mewing like cats, especially in spring. They prey on small mammals, birds and reptiles. You may also see golden plover on the wing (their speckled camouflage makes them invisible on the ground) and the long-billed curlew: see page 25.



Skylark

Moorland supports many smaller birds, notably the skylark and wheatear. The skylark is perhaps the most musical of birds, its song melodious as it soars high over moor and field. Its flight involves an extreme swooping movement, with flashes of white from its wings. On the ground it looks streaky brown, with chest and underparts shading to pale cream, and a small crest. The wheatear is a mainly ground-dwelling summer visitor, which dark wings and blue-grey plumage, but you are more likely to spot its white rump in flight.

Wheatear (female)





Red squirrel

Woodland

You will walk beside and through many patches of forest, a mixture of broadleaved native woodland and productive conifer forest, in places with recently felled clearings. Woodland is home to the charming but endangered red squirrel: if you spot chewed-up cones on the ground, that's a sign that red squirrels may be feeding in the trees.

Red squirrels in Britain are threatened by disease and competition from its cousin, the American grey squirrel. Greys carry the squirrelpox virus that is deadly to reds, and as a result, red squirrels have vanished from large areas of England. Scotland now has 75% of Britain's population of reds, and Annandale is one of their strongholds. An especially promising place to spot them is Eskrigg Nature Reserve: see page 60.

Only one predator is agile enough to catch a squirrel – the splendid pine marten. Happily pine martens prey on grey squirrels, rather than the smaller reds: reds are light enough to escape to the ends of branches, whereas the heavier greys move more slowly. The recent rise in pine marten numbers may be important to the recovery of red squirrels. View and report squirrel sightings (red and grey) at www.scottishsquirrels.org.uk.

Walking through Corncockle Wood, you may wonder about its name. Corncockle is a five-petalled flower, resident in Britain at least since the Iron Age. Originally it was a weed in cereal crops, especially rye. Sadly, it is now virtually extinct in the wild, including in its namesake wood. It looks a bit like meadow cranesbill, but much pinker, with a pale centre.



Meadow cranesbill

Larger woodland mammals include roe deer and foxes, but you are unlikely to see them unless very lucky and persistent. You may hear the drumming of the splendid black-and-white great spotted woodpecker. Males and females look generally similar, with a red patch under the tail and distinctively bouncy flight.

The nuthatch looks a little like a small, plump cousin of a woodpecker, but with very different colouring, blue-grey above and chestnut below. Its favourite nesting site is a former woodpecker's nest hole, and in early spring its piercing whistle makes it one of the noisiest of woodland birds.



Great spotted woodpecker



Nuthatch

Farmland and hedgerow

Farmland crops offer easy pickings to many small birds and mammals, so they attract also their predators, including buzzards, sparrowhawks and owls, and also larger mammals such as hares and foxes.

Mature hedgerows are a wonderful feature along the Way, rich in wild flowers, supporting a diversity of insects. In summer you are likely to see patches of deep purple meadow cranesbill, yellow ragwort and red campion. Butterflies include the peacock, painted lady, small tortoiseshell and ringlet.

Dense, mature hedgerow is also a good source of the insects and seeds that support the endangered yellowhammer. Its streaky brown back and yellow head are distinctive and its song has a characteristic falling note as its coda.

Another good sighting is the goldfinch, with its red face and bright yellow wing patch. It is widespread in Annandale, and easy to spot rising in small flocks from hedgerows or roadside verges when you approach. Its beak is superbly adapted to extract seeds from thistles and teasels.



Goldfinch



Otter

River and lochs

The River Annan and its tributaries are your close companions for much of the Way, and you will see its transition from a fast-flowing stream to a broad stately river running into the sea at Barnkirk Point. Its middle section is slower flowing and deeper than the upper and lower, as it meanders across its flood plain. The river is actively managed to protect its pristine condition, and you will see requests to report invasive species such as mink, Japanese knotweed and Signal crayfish.

The river is popular and accessible for sport fishing, and 25 species of fish have been recorded, including chub, bream and brown and sea trout. Probably the angler's greatest prize is the salmon, whose life cycle is explained on information boards. For more about the river and its fishing, visit www.riverannan.org.

The banks of the Annan make especially good habitat for otters, but you are unlikely to see any of these charming animals unless you are out very early or late, have enormous patience and know where to look. Once persecuted by gamekeepers, otter numbers declined sharply and now they are protected by law.

The river is also home to many birds, including cormorants, which dive for fish. The many ducks range from common (mallards and tufted ducks) to unusual: saw-billed ducks such as goosander are unpopular with anglers because they eat young salmon. Their distinctive colouring and long bills makes them easy to recognise.

Goosander female (foreground), with male



Grey heron sometimes stand stock still in the shallows, waiting for a sudden strike on fish or frogs; at other times they stalk their prey smoothly. In flight they trail their legs, and their large grey wings beat very slowly.

Dippers are athletic, fearless birds that wade in fast-flowing rivers to feed on tiny fish, molluscs and tadpoles. Its white throat and chest contrasts with its brown-black head and body, and in flight it darts about over the river. The Annan is also home to the tiny kingfisher, and you may be lucky enough to see a brilliant flash of turquoise.

There are three freshwater lochs near Lochmaben, and the Way goes around part of Castle Loch. In early spring, the Lochmaben lochs are great places to spot sand martins returning from migration to nest, and later arrivals including swallows and swift. The lochs not only support mallard ducks and mute swans, but also less common birds such as great crested grebes. The extensive reedbeds are home to sedge warblers and reed buntings.



Grey Heron



Mute swans



Dipper

Estuary

The Way ends at the Solway Firth, where high water may be as high as 8.7 m/29 feet and the tide comes in faster than a horse can gallop.

The intertidal mudflats, saltmarshes and sands make a rich habitat for insects, plants and wading birds, but in places its quicksands are dangerous to humans. It is also known for marine mammals, especially the harbour porpoise, and the occasional basking shark. Although the designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty is on the south side of the estuary, its marine and bird life knows no boundaries.

Geese fly south for food and warmth in winter. Barnacle geese fly 2000 miles to Svalbard every summer to breed, and between October and April you may see huge flocks on the Solway, and hear their dog-like barking and yapping cries. Pink-footed geese also over-winter around Annandale, both on the Solway and inland over the lochs.

The Solway attracts a huge range of other birds, including oystercatchers, smart black-and-white birds with a strong, straight orange bill and a loud, piercing call. And at low tide you will see many waders of various sizes: curlew with their long curving beaks favour moorland in summer but move down to the Solway in winter. You may also see godwits, sandpipers, greenshanks, redshanks and sanderlings. .



Oystercatcher



Curlew

Redshank

