

2:3 Habitats and wildlife



Small tortoiseshell

If you are keen to spot wildlife, carry binoculars and walk alone or with walkers who share your interest and will move quietly. 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.

The Borders Abbeys Way runs through four main habitat types:

- lowland farm and meadows
- rivers and riverbanks
- woodland and forestry
- upland farm and hillside.

Lowland farm and meadows

Low-lying farmland is rich in wildlife, as well as its more obvious livestock. Brown hares are shy mammals that you may spot, if you're lucky, chasing each other across the fields or even 'boxing'. Although swift on the run, hares rely mainly on their ability to stay completely still, concealed by camouflage, to escape detection by predators.



Brown hare

Mature hedgerows are a feature of farmland, rich in wild flowers and supporting a diversity of insects. In summer, the colour range is amazing – deep purple meadow cranesbill, yellow ragwort and red campion.



Yellowhammer, female. Inset: wren

They produce seeds and sustain insects that in turn nourish many lovely small birds, including wrens, dunnocks, linnets and the endangered yellowhammer. The male is brownish with a contrasting yellow head and distinctive pleading song, whereas females are more stripey yellow all over.



Skylark

Farmland is also home to the enchanting skylark, albeit you will see them also on higher moorland. Its colouring is streaky brownish, with cream underparts, and on the ground it can be difficult to spot. However, its soaring, near-vertical display flight is breathtaking and unmistakable. Above all,

its melodious trilling song evokes the essence of spring.

In summer months, many species of butterfly flutter around the meadows and farms. Two of the more colourful are the Small tortoiseshell, with its warm orange wings patterned with black and white, and the Peacock with decorations that mimic the 'eyes' of a peacock wing. The Common blue also thrives on unimproved grassland.



Common blue





Otter

Rivers and riverbanks

The Rivers Tweed and Teviot and their banks are a strong feature of the Way. After centuries of damage by humans, some strong ecology projects have been rewarded by good results. Invasive species such as giant hogweed, Japanese knotweed and Himalayan balsam are being controlled. Pollution has been tackled and artificial barriers to spawning fish removed. Both are now healthy rivers with good stocks of salmon, brown trout and grayling. The Tweed has the highest annual total of rod-caught salmon in Scotland, and is very attractive to anglers from afar.

The same bounty of fish attracts the charming otter to these rivers. You might catch a glimpse of this shy mammal if you are out very early or late, move silently and know where to look. More likely you will see otter traces, perhaps footprints or spraint on the river bank. Otters are land animals, but their webbed feet, powerful tail and ability to close off their ears and nose are all adaptations that work well in the water. Otters are agile and effective aquatic hunters, preying on fish, water birds and amphibians.



Dipper

Goosanders are diving ducks that also feed on fish, using their long, serrated bills. The male goosander has a glossy dark green head, like a mallard drake, over a bright white body, whereas females have a red-brown head and a greyish body. Their bodies are streamlined to help when diving and catching fish. Goosanders like to live in large flocks, sometimes of up to several thousand. They make a low, harsh croak, but in the breeding season they make a soft whistling noise.

You may well see grey herons from the riverbanks. These dignified birds have a grey body supported by stilt-like legs.



Grey heron

A heron will often stand motionless in the water, patiently waiting for its next meal, before its long beak makes a lightning strike to capture an unlucky fish.

Other birds you may see around rivers include oystercatchers, grey wagtails and dippers. Oystercatchers are large black and white birds with a long orange beak. They are common near the coast where they feed on cockles and mussels; when inland they feed mainly on worms. Grey wagtails have very long tails and grey upper bodies with bright yellow underparts. Dippers are small white-throated birds, with plump brown bodies. Typically they perch on rocks in fast-flowing water, dipping their heads up and down. They feed on insect larvae and shrimps, and are skilful at hunting underwater.

Marsh marigolds are similar to buttercups, with more striking yellow flowers and larger, frilled green leaves. They flourish in wet areas and flower from March until June. Wild garlic (or Ramsons) is plentiful, easily identified by its distinctive smell. It blooms with white star shaped flowers during May and June. It is illegal to dig up the bulbs without the landowner's consent, but you can pick the leaves and stems if you are certain of your identification. Lily of the valley and Autumn crocus are poisonous, but look rather similar: beware.

*Goosander female
(foreground) and male*





Roe deer (buck)

Woodland and forestry

Foxes are widespread in Scottish woodland. Its red-brown body has a pale underside, and its long brush-like tail helps its balance. Carnivores by preference, foxes hunt for small mammals, but they adapt to whatever food is available, including fruit, vegetables, fish, frogs and worms. Foxes tend to move stealthily through in the undergrowth, and you will be lucky to spot one.

Roe deer are common, and can be seen in woodland areas and in some farmland, notably while grazing around dawn. They are generally solitary, but may form small groups in the winter. Bucks, can have short straight antlers that fall off in the winter and grow back again in the spring. These deer do not have tails but small white patches at the rump, making them easy to identify.

Red squirrels are rare in the Borders, however certain pockets of mixed conifer woodland support the species. They are more delicate than their grey cousins, with distinctive hairy tufts on their ears. They are at risk from the American greys, not only because of competition for food, but also because the greys carry squirrelpox, a disease that's deadly to reds. If you sight any squirrels, red or grey, please report them online: www.scottishsquirrels.org.uk.

Fox





Red squirrel

Woodland in the Borders includes productive forest, often planted with fast-growing Sitka spruce. These giants can grow up to 50 metres tall. The Scots pine, Britain's only native pine tree, has a distinctive orange-brown bark with pairs of dark green needles. Larch trees are unusual among conifers in being deciduous: in winter their needles turn brown and drop.

Other deciduous trees include oak, rowan and ash. Oak trees have leaves that grow in bunches with distinctive scalloped edges. Their acorns ripen in the autumn and drop off. The trunk of a rowan tree is a smooth and may be silvery, with leaves in pairs and a rich red berry-like fruit. Ash trees can be mistaken for rowan, but they grow much larger – up to 40 metres tall, cf rowans grow up to 10 metres.

The woodland floor is home to many wildflowers in summer, including wood sorrel, which has heart-shaped trefoil leaves and frail, five-petaled, white flowers. The Scottish primrose is a rare flowers with five heart-shaped petals, their vibrant purple contrasting with the yellow centre. Red campion has hairy leaves and stems, with heart-shaped petals of a deep pink-red. The delicate harebell, also known as the Scottish bluebell, does well in woodland shade, but it also thrives on exposed hillsides and grassland.

Bluebell woodland; inset harebell



Upland farm and hillside

The Borders is home to small birds of prey including kestrels and sparrowhawks, but the one you are most likely to see is the buzzard, either over higher ground or farm fields. Typically buzzards soar with their wings held in a shallow V-shape, with tail fanned out; they also sometime perch on fence posts. The buzzard's wingspan ranges from 1.1- 1.35 metres (43-53 inches), whereas that of the golden eagle (which you are extremely unlikely to see) is 2



Red grouse

metres or more. Buzzard wings are broad and curved, varying in colour from very dark to light brown, but always with dark wing-tips. Its melancholy mewing sounds similar to a cat, heard mainly in the spring.

You may see and hear skylarks over high ground as well as over lower farmland. The hills are home also to many small birds including wheater and meadow pipits – and the cuckoo which is a brood parasite that targets meadow pipits and dunnocks.

Heather grows in abundance across the moorlands, including the Eildon Hills, in late summer carpeting the hillside with colours ranging from pale pink to deep purple. Most of this is common heather, but on the south-facing slopes of the Eildons, it gives way to bell heather. Heather moorland supports red grouse – a plump game bird which depends on heather not only for food but also for nesting sites. It has become scarce on the Eildons, but may be in the process of returning from higher ground.

Many flowers and plants flourish on the high grounds. Gorse is a spiny shrub that flourishes in poor soil and bears masses of golden yellow flowers with a pleasing coconut smell. Although it can flower in almost any frost-free month, it can paint certain hills a striking yellow in April/May.

Tormentil has a glossy yellow four-petalled flower, and clumps of tormentil are an important source of nectar for bees. The Devil's-Bit Scabious is also widespread. Wild orchids are flowers that use amazing visual devices to attract fertilisation by insect visitors. Two fairly widespread species are the Common spotted orchid and Northern marsh orchid, and in acidic soil the Heath spotted orchid.



Common spotted orchid