

2.3 Habitats and wildlife



Roe deer doe

The wildlife along the Way reflects the underlying geology identified on page 15. We describe some of the species you are likely to see under the same three headings. The best times to spot wildlife are early morning and late evening; make the most of your chances by walking quietly and carrying binoculars.

Tabular Hills and valleys

The first part of the Way climbs up the escarpment of the Tabular Hills and heads north along the Hambleton Hills, through patches of farmland and woodland. These support many species of birds, especially tits (blue, great, coal and long-tailed) and woodpeckers. The woodland floor is home to wildflowers including primrose, violet, wood anemone and bluebells. The mammals you are most likely to see are brown hare or roe deer.

The walk through Nettle Dale takes you past large freshwater ponds, probably constructed by monks from Rievaulx for farming fish. Here you will see many kinds of ducks, most commonly mallard and tufted, and also perhaps moorhen and grey heron.

The limestone bedrock of these hills makes for good arable land, and where pastures are 'unimproved' you will see wonderful displays of lime-loving wildflowers in season: cowslip, dogwood, violet, marjoram, fairy flax and agrimony. Limestone grassland supports a wide variety of butterflies, including the common blue.



Wren



Common blue butterfly (male)

At Sutton Bank, visit the National Park Centre—about 80% of the Way lies within the National Park: see panel. Afterwards, you head north along the Hambletons with wonderful views and varied wildlife. Bird life ranges from the tiny russet-coloured wren darting among bushes and trees to the birds of prey, including kestrel and buzzard, soaring overhead.

North York Moors

The middle sections of the Way pass over the North York Moors – high heather moorland that at first follows the line of Cleveland Hills. This is the largest continuous expanse of heather moorland in England & Wales, and it is protected as home to internationally important numbers of breeding birds including merlin and golden plover. You'll see three kinds of heather: first to flower in July is bell heather with purple pink blooms, then the pale pink cross-leaved heath and finally the commonest, ling heather whose tiny pale pink flowers appear in mid to late August. Between them, they make an ocean of colour for several months of summer.

Sheep are everywhere, but they have to be hardy to survive the moorland climate – breeds such as the curly-horned Swaledale and long-coated Blackfaced. Their grazing creates gaps that allow other plants to thrive, and in places bilberry and cotton grass succeed in competing with the pervasive heather.



North York Moors National Park

This National Park celebrated its 60th anniversary in 2012. It is rich in history and pre-history with many religious monuments including the cross known as Young Ralph (see page 13), which it adopted in its logo. Its habitats include vast stretches of heather moorland, broadleaved woodlands, coastal cliffs, rivers and farmland.

The park's resident population is about 25,000 heavily outnumbered by visitors, about 9 million pa, much less than most of England's National Parks. Its main Visitor Centre is near Danby, but the one at Sutton Bank lies on the Way and is open daily Feb to Oct, weekends only Nov to Dec; tel 01845 597426 www.northyorkmoors.org.uk.



Swaledale sheep (ram)

Bell heather



Red grouse

The moors are managed for the game shooting of red grouse, whose raucous 'ge-back, ge-back' cry you will hear from afar. Red grouse feed on the new green shoots, but they need the taller heather for shelter and nest-building. So the landowners operate a system of controlled burning of patches of old heather in rotation, so as to encourage new young shoots while leaving plenty of older heather intact. Land managers also wage a constant war on the invasive bracken which occupies 20% of the National Park area.

In addition to red grouse, look out for three waders that arrive on the moorland in spring to breed: lapwing, curlew and golden plover. Lapwings are black and white with a rounded wing shape and an exuberant, wavering flight pattern; their 'peewit' call is distinctive. The curlew is Europe's largest wader, with a long down-curved beak and a strange cry like an old-fashioned whistling kettle.



Curlew



Golden plover

The golden plover also has a shrill, persistent call and amazingly effective camouflage – gold/black in summer and buff/white in winter – so its plumage blends into the moorland year-round. If you are alert, you may even spot the dashing, twisting flight of the merlin, Britain's smallest bird of prey, which makes its nest amongst banks of thick heather.

North Sea coast

From the clifftop path, there are continual great chances to view seabirds, especially in spring when they nest and breed in the crevices and narrow ledges, in some places (such as Whitby foghorn) forming closely packed colonies. Many kinds of gulls will make their piercing cries heard – herring, black-headed and great black-backed. The kittiwake is a medium-sized grey-backed gull which shows its black wing-tips in flight, and has short black legs.

The fulmar looks gull-like, but is actually a miniature cousin of the albatross, a stiff-winged master of updraughts, gliding and banking with shallow wingbeats. If one flies close to you, look closely at its hooked beak with tubular nostrils: like the albatross, it has special glands to dispose of excess salt.



Fulmar

Bar-tailed godwits at Skinninggrove



Hardy vegetation clings to the cliff edges, often shaped into wild forms by the strong winds. Gorse, hawthorn and blackthorn bushes play host to small birds which, protected by their thorns, can rest, feed and shelter from predators. At any time of year you may see finches (seed eaters with characteristic heavily tapering bills) such as chaffinches and linnets, once popular as a caged songbird. Linnet numbers have dropped by 60% over the last 40 years, yet they are common hereabouts if you know where to look.



Linnet (male)

The Way descends to beach level from time to time, giving a closer view of other birds including the many shore waders: the handsome oystercatcher has smart black and white plumage, pink legs and a long straight bill with which to probe for cockles and mussels. (You may also see them inland where they mainly feed on worms.) Other waders are seen at certain seasons only: for example, the bar-tailed godwit overwinters here but heads to the Arctic to breed. Its long straight bill is distinctive.

The North Sea is also rich in marine mammals, and you may well spot seals near the coastline, especially at low tide when they bask on rocks. Two kinds are found on this coastline: grey and common. Grey seals are larger and have more pointed heads, with dark brownish-grey fur. Common seals have a mottled coat and look more slender than greys, often arching their backs when ashore. If you carry binoculars, look at the nose: the common seal's nostrils make a pronounced V-shape.

Common seal

