

2·4 Habitats and wildlife



*Duke of Burgundy
butterfly on cowslip*

The very name Cotswold is a clue to its landscape. Its likely derivation is from cot, meaning 'sheep enclosure' and wold meaning 'hill' – sheep enclosures in rolling hillsides. The western and north-western boundaries of the Cotswolds form what is essentially a steep escarpment, sometimes called the Cotswold Edge, which overlooks the Severn Vale and the Avon Valley. From here an undulating slope, cut with valleys and streams, runs south-east. The Cotswold landscape is made up of a variety of features including rolling agricultural land, flower-rich limestone grassland, deeply incised valleys, country parks and ancient woodland rich in beech, bluebell and lily of the valley.

Gloucestershire has widespread traces of the ridge-and-furrow farming system. Wherever you see a corrugated field of grass, you are probably looking at the remains of medieval ploughing under the open field system – very large fields owned by the lord of the manor, farmed in strips by local families. In Britain some examples date from the early post-Roman period, and some persisted until the 17th century. Surviving ridges are parallel, ranging from 9 to 66 feet (3 – 20 m) apart and up to 24 inches (61cm) tall. When in use, they were up to six feet (1·8 m) tall, and older examples are often curved. The effect was created by ploughing with non-reversible ploughs on the same strip of land each year.

In 1966 an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) was designated within the Cotswolds. The protected area is the largest in England and Wales (2038 square km or 787 square miles). AONB status has its origins in the post-World War 2 movement to protect the countryside. Government funding comes through agencies such as Natural England and the Countryside Council for Wales and is match-funded from other sources, including the lottery and landfill tax. The principal aim is to maintain the character and integrity of the area. The aim is laudable, but its implementation controversial. Some argue that protection and conservation have stifled the natural evolution of the area, whilst others argue that the protection has not been rigorous enough.

The Cotswolds AONB was designated primarily for its rare limestone grassland habitats and ancient woodlands – the last refuge for some endangered wildlife species. Aside from Cheltenham itself, the walks in this book lie wholly within the Cotswold AONB; and in many places you walk through nature reserves and Sites of Special Scientific Interest.

The Cotswold Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty



Farmland and limestone grassland

In the spring the grassland is carpeted with cowslips and in summer many varieties of orchid can be found, including the bee orchid, a convincing mimic, and the pyramidal orchid. The rare adder, Britain's only venomous snake, is found especially on Cleeve Hill and near Sapperton. They are not aggressive, using their venom only as a last resort; if you see one, please treat this protected species with respect.

A very rare plant that you may spot in fields is the adderstongue spearwort, also known as the

Badgeworth buttercup. Although

its flowers resemble those of buttercups, its leaves are a wholly different shape: pointed ovals. It is found in marshy places, including around ponds in fields.

Limestone grassland is also a haven for rare species of butterfly. In summer, look out for the Duke of Burgundy, one of Britain's fastest-declining species. It feeds mainly on cowslips and primroses, and may be found in woodland clearings as well as grassland.



Adder on Cleeve Hill



Adderstongue spearwort



Adonis blue



Red kite

The Adonis blue butterfly died out in the Cotswolds in the 1960s, but conservation work by the National Trust has led to its return. Adonis blues are still very rare: the only food source for its caterpillars is horseshoe vetch leaves. Only the male has the striking blue colour, whilst the female is chocolate brown.

In the air, look out for soaring buzzards, with their distinctive mewing sound, especially in spring. They prey on small mammals, birds and reptiles. Listen also for the twittering arpeggio of the skylark, with its near-vertical flight. Red kites, rare birds that went to the brink of extinction in the 19th century, have recently returned to the north Cotswolds and are thought to be breeding for the first time in over 200 years. They mainly feed on carrion, but were persecuted because they were wrongly thought to be a threat to game birds.

Woodland

West of Cirencester, in a corner of the Bathurst estate, Siccaridge Wood is a fine example of ancient woodland. The presence of small-leaved lime (linden), wych elm and other species suggests that this area has been wooded since prehistoric times. As a result, it is home to various rare and endangered species.

Linden



For example, the greater horseshoe bat is one of Britain's largest, as well as rarest, bat species, with a huge wingspan of 14-15 inches (36-39 cm). They need ancient deciduous woodland to thrive, and Britain's population, although drastically reduced, is of international importance given their greater decline elsewhere in Europe. The name derives from the shape of a complicated leaf-like structure on their noses, used in echo-location.

Greater horseshoe bat





Dormouse

Sicaridge Wood is coppiced woodland. Coppicing is a technique whereby smaller trees, especially hazel, are cut to the ground every 7-20 years, and left to regrow as many thin stems instead of a single thick trunk. This benefits the dormouse, an enchanting tiny mammal that makes its home in the dense shrub layer in summer. It forages for flowers, fruit and insects, found mainly on hazel, honeysuckle, oak and bramble. In winter it hibernates on the ground.

Woodland is also home to larger mammals, such as badgers, foxes and deer. Around dawn or dusk you may see deer, probably roe or fallow, but you might also glimpse the miniature muntjac, also known as 'barking deer' from their strange calls. Deer are shy animals, and if startled they show a flash of white on their rumps as they rapidly disappear into the trees.



Muntjac deer

In early spring, the woodlands are carpeted with snowdrops, later with bluebells, cowslips and primrose. Orchids, including the convincing-looking bee orchid, flower in summer. Shady woodland is home to swathes of the sweet-smelling (but highly poisonous) lily of the valley.



Lily of the valley

River banks



Otter

The grand circuit includes a stretch beside the River Churn, north of Cirencester, as well as shorter sections beside the River Frome and across the Coln. The latter has an abundance of trout, and its angling is comparable with that of the great chalk streams elsewhere in England. The less disturbed Cotswold river banks are also home to the elusive otter, which came close to extinction in Britain during the 1970s but has returned. You are unlikely to see this shy mammal but may see traces, for example its paw prints and excrement (spraint).

Sapperton Valley is a good example of undisturbed wetland habitat, and is heavily vegetated. The flood meadows of the River Frome and the disused canal support a wide range of species. Bird life includes dippers, wagtails and (if you are lucky) the turquoise flash of a kingfisher.

Insect life includes spectacular butterflies, wood ants and dragonflies, including the ruddy darter.

Cotswold rivers and streams are a refuge to the water vole, one of Britain's most threatened native mammals and a distant relative of the rat. Already under pressure from habitat loss and drought-related food shortage, their population crashed because of predation by the voracious American mink.



Dragonfly (Ruddy darter)



Water vole