

2.4 Habitats and wildlife



Great Gable from near Esk Hause

When humans first entered the Lake District, the valleys were tangled with dense woodland and lake margins were choked with vegetation. Tree cover was extensive, mainly oakwoods, thinning at higher altitudes to leave rocky summits protruding. Today's habitats have been influenced by thousands of years of human occupation, and most notably by centuries of intensive sheep-grazing, leaving the fells looking barren. Below we describe the area under four headings: waterside, woodland, moorland and fell.

Waterside

There are two major lakes on the Cumbria Way – Coniston Water and Derwent Water. Both contain trout and perch, while Coniston Water is notable for char and Derwent Water also contains roach. Both lakes are busy with visitors in summer, which keeps most wildlife distant, although birds such as swans and mallards are attracted by people feeding them. Bird watchers find the lakes more rewarding in winter, when they attract a greater variety of ducks, geese and other fowl.

Watch rivers carefully to spot dippers, which use their wings to stay underwater while feeding. Herons are seen infrequently, but stand out because of their size and slow-motion, low-level flight.

Shelduck



Although the Cumbria Way is some distance from the coast, gulls are seen around Ulverston and Carlisle, and lonely moorland pools will occasionally attract raucous groups of black-headed gulls, or waders such as curlew, with its distinctive 'bubbling' call.

Ospreys had been absent from the Lake District for 150 years until a pair nested near Keswick and fished in Bassenthwaite Lake in 2001, and raised a chick.

Since that time ospreys have re-appeared annually and have bred successfully. Osprey viewing areas are established annually near Keswick and details can be checked at www.ospreywatch.co.uk.

Woodland

Only small remnants of the original oakwoods that once covered the Lake District remain, clinging to rocky slopes where they regenerate without too much interference from sheep. There are many colonies of juniper, mostly struggling, but surviving because of re-planting and controlled grazing.

Although there are many mixed woodlands, most are secondary plantations, having been harvested for timber in the past, or managed as coppices for the production of charcoal. Modern plantations, mostly dating from the 1900s, are generally dense coniferous forests, featuring non-native trees. The poet Wordsworth had a particular dislike of larch trees when they were introduced.

Spreading oak tree



Curlew



Cumbria is one of England's last outposts for red squirrels, which have largely been displaced elsewhere by grey squirrels. Polecats barely cling to existence and are rarely seen. Deer are common, but generally seen only at dawn and dusk when they venture to graze alongside woods, where they can quickly retreat if disturbed.

Red squirrel



Moorland

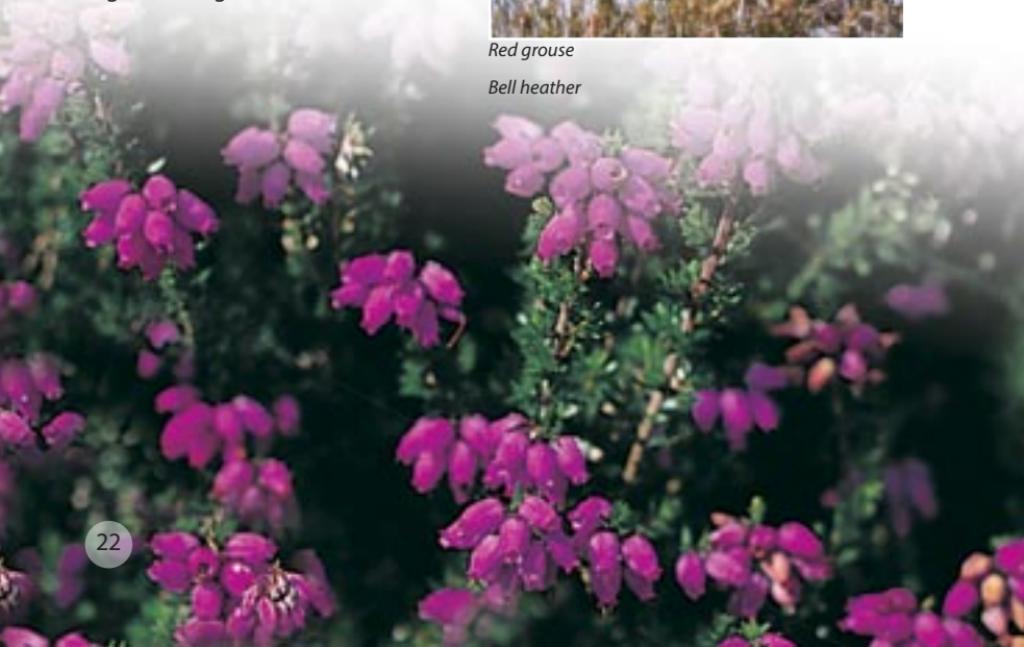
The most extensive moorlands on the Cumbria Way are the ones 'Back o' Skiddaw', featuring swathes of heather that are flushed purple in the middle of summer. This area is particularly important for ground-nesting birds, such as red grouse, with its distinctive 'ge-back ge-back' call. Ground nesters also include stonechat, lapwing, short-eared owl and merlin. The months of April and May are crucial for nesting and rearing young: disturbance caused by people walking off-path or, worse still, allowing dogs to run free, can have fatal results.

Some moorland areas are wet and boggy. Permanently waterlogged ground may be covered in sponge-like sphagnum moss, or it may sprout clumps of rushes. Look out for sticky insectivorous plants, such as butterwort, or more rarely, sundew. In a couple of places, such as near Beacon Tarn or at the head of Derwent Water, the aromatic shrub called bog myrtle grows profusely. It is used by some as protection against midges.



Red grouse

Bell heather





Fell

Open fells in the Lake District have been developed over many centuries as rough grazing for sheep, particularly Herdwicks. As a result of grazing, they are generally covered in short grass, heather and bilberry. Flowers tend to be small and inconspicuous, but some species, such as foxgloves, are tall and colourful. Invasive bracken often dominates the lower slopes, and trees only survive if they can grow out of reach of sheep. The most notable trees to grow in rocky clefts on the fells are rowans, also known as mountain ash. Thorny gorse bushes grow on many fellsides, covered in bright yellow flowers that smell similar to coconut.

Rocky areas look lifeless, but are usually crusted with blotches of lichen. Cracks in the rock and gaps on rocky scree often sprout clumps of parsley fern. The poet Southey claimed it was 'the most beautiful of all our wild plants, resembling the richest point lace in its fine filaments and exquisite indentations'. It cannot tolerate lime, or competition with other plants, so it is confined to the most rugged central parts of the Lake District.

Ravens roost high in the fells and are year-round residents, seeking carrion wherever they can find it. They are the biggest members of the crow family, and show off incredible flying skills, even flying upside-down at times, and make a deep 'cronk-cronk' call. Other big birds noticed on the fells include buzzards, and very rarely golden eagles.

There are foxes on the fells, and five packs of foxhounds are kennelled in the Lake District, with the nearest pack to the Cumbria Way being at Coniston. Huntsmen, who are mostly fell-farmers, follow the dogs on foot, rather than horseback, because of the rugged terrain. The most famous huntsman, immortalised in song, was John Peel (1776-1854) who is buried at Caldbeck. It became illegal to hunt foxes with dogs in 2005, so most 'hunts' now follow a scent trail to keep the dogs exercised.

*Upper: Parsley fern
Inset: Gorse flowers
Lower: Fox in woodland*

