

## 2·4 Habitats and wildlife

Nidderdale has a greater range of habitats than other dales, supporting a wider variety of plant and animal species. It is home to important populations of birds that are in decline nationally, including lapwing, curlew, ring ouzel, skylark and snipe.

There are four main habitat types:

- moorland
- grassland and upper dales
- woodland and hedgerow
- reservoirs and rivers

### Moorland

Originally the upper parts of Nidderdale were forested, but timber-cutting and grazing have left the moors largely tree-less. Blanket bog covers the fell tops and upper slopes. Lying beneath is a deep layer of peat formed by plant material decomposing slowly under wet, acidic and anaerobic conditions. Typical bog plants include sphagnum moss, sundews and sedges such as cotton grass. Blanket bog supports a wide range of insects, reptiles and ground-nesting birds such as snipe, golden plover and short-eared owl. In spring, especially in heathland areas, you may spot adders, slow worms and common lizards as they emerge from hibernation to bask on south-facing slopes.

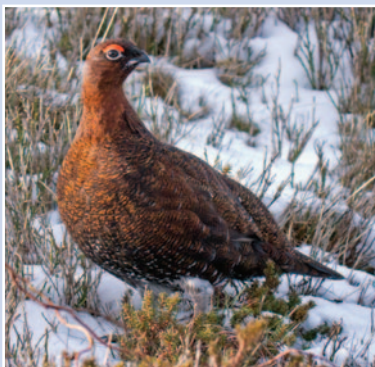


*Ring ouzel*

Every year, house martins nest on the dam tower at Scar House. Birds of prey such as buzzards and peregrine falcons may be sighted, but persecution has reduced their numbers. The merlin, one of the UK's smallest birds of prey, has a square cut tail and broad pointed wings. It nests in the heather and can be spotted hunting near Scar House Reservoir.

The heather moorland is spectacular in late summer when its flowers turn purple. Heather provides nesting for curlews and lapwings. Ring ouzels ('moorland blackbirds') are the rarest kind of thrush in the UK – slightly smaller than blackbirds, with a white breast band. In summer this endangered bird breeds in Upper Nidderdale, particularly around Scar House Reservoir.

The high moorland may appear wild and untamed, but on the shooting estates it is carefully managed to optimise breeding conditions for red grouse. In spring, the gamekeepers burn patches of heather to create the range of vegetation heights that the grouse need for breeding and feeding. You will see grouse butts and shooting lodges in places along the route. The shooting season runs from 12 August to 10 December.



*Red grouse*

## **Grassland and upper dales**

Below the moorland line, most of Nidderdale is grassland – traditionally a sheep and cattle breeding area. All the farms keep a hill sheep flock, usually Swaledales with their distinctive spiral horns - adopted as the logo of the Yorkshire Dales National Park. Lower down the dale there is some arable farming as well as livestock.

The moorland transitional zone is mainly rough pasture with clumps of rushes. The undrained land is wet, with a tussocky structure and lots of invertebrates – thus encouraging the breeding of upland waders such as redshank, snipe, curlew, and lapwing. Nidderdale is an important stronghold for these birds, whose numbers have declined nationally. Oystercatchers have also moved into these upland areas in recent years.

Skylarks, with their spectacular song-flight, still fly over open farmland in Nidderdale, although their numbers are in decline. Red-legged partridge are common, but the native grey one is much rarer. Upper Nidderdale is one of the few places where black grouse numbers are rising, due to a small programme of introduction.



*Skylark*

You may be lucky enough to see hares in the grasslands. They are more active at night, but forage at dusk and dawn and, unlike rabbits, they live exclusively above ground. When startled, or to escape predators, they can run at speeds of up to 45 mph/72 kph.

*Brown hare*





*Wood cranesbill with meadow buttercup*

Over the last 60 years, most of Nidderdale's wildflower-rich meadows have been lost due to more intensive farming practices. However, the remainder support a wide diversity of plants including red clover, marsh marigold, wood cranesbill and lady's mantle. Meadows provide feeding and nesting sites for birds, invertebrates and bats. Nidderdale AONB is encouraging local farmers to re-establish wildflower meadows by cutting the grass only once a year, in late summer.

### **Woodland and hedgerow**

Woodland and hedgerows are important habitats. In upland areas most of the trees have been cleared, but small wooded patches occur in sheltered gills where ferns, mosses and lichens flourish. Lower Nidderdale contains significant wooded areas, both of native trees and of conifers – which provide nesting sites for goshawks and long-eared owls.

Wetter areas in the valley bottom have alders and willows as well as ferns and sedges. Wild garlic, wood anemone,



*Pheasant (male)*

bluebells and primroses commonly grow on the woodland floor. Pheasants are plentiful in the valley wooded areas and grassland where they are reared for shooting. You may well startle these birds into flight as you approach. Roe deer lurk in most wooded areas but you are unlikely to see them except at dawn or dusk.

Most field boundaries within Upper Nidderdale are dry-stone walls, but lower down the hedgerows sustain hawthorn, elderberry, blackthorn, holly and blackberry. These are important mini-habitats and provide corridors for small mammals and birds to move around safely. Stoats and weasels sometimes nest in stone walls, and you may see traps laid for them.

*Stoat*



## Reservoirs and rivers



*Goosander female (foreground) with male behind*

Gouthwaite Reservoir is a haven for wildlife and vital for the flocks of migrating ducks and geese that use it as a stopping point and for breeding. It was designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest in 1984, and its owner, Yorkshire Water, runs it as a nature reserve with three viewing areas on its western shore. It attracts a wide range of wetland birds, small birds, waders, migrants and birds of prey, with over 200 bird species recorded.

At its north-western end extensive mud flats and lagoons make ideal breeding grounds for waders such as common sandpiper, dunlin, godwit and little ringed plover, and for the great crested grebe. Large numbers of ducks over-winter here, including teal and mallard. Goosanders, tufted ducks and whooper swans are regular winter visitors. In the trees and shrubs around the shoreline, willow warbler and blackcap are commonplace. If you are lucky, you may see pied and spotted flycatchers or kingfishers.

You may spot raptors such as buzzards and red kites soaring above the wooded ridge to the east of the reservoir, and perhaps even the occasional hen harrier or golden eagle. An artificial sand martin wall was built in 2014 on the west of the reservoir to replace a natural bank lost to flooding.



*Curlew*

The rivers and becks of Nidderdale contain wild trout and support birds such as kingfishers, dippers and grey wagtails. Otters are enjoying a comeback, probably due to cleaner water, but water voles have been decimated by mink predation.

The curlew – Europe's largest wading bird – has a distinctive long curving bill, long bluish legs and an evocative call like an old-fashioned whistling kettle. It was chosen as the logo for the Way. In spring, curlews fly to the upland areas to breed, and in winter they live on estuaries and coastal marshes.



*Grey wagtail*