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Cheddar Complex

Somerset Wildlife Trusts



Somerset Wildlife Trust is the county's leading environmental charity, with around 20,000 members and 72 nature reserves over the county. As a charity we rely on the generous support of our members and the general public to help raise over £2 million every year.

We are dedicated to restoring our battered ecosystems by creating living landscapes for wildlife and people.

Join us
Become a member today by visiting www.somersetwildlife.org/membership or by calling 01823 652400

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Introduction

Situated at the heart of the Mendip Hills AONB, Somerset Wildlife Trust's Cheddar Complex comprises three individual nature reserves each with its own unique character and wildlife. All of the nature reserves are Sites of Special Scientific Interest which provides protection to the plants and animals found there.

Black Rock nature reserve is managed by Somerset Wildlife Trust on behalf of the National Trust, who purchased the site in 1971. It consists of 74 hectares (182 acres) of flower rich limestone grassland, woodland & rock outcrops at the head of Cheddar Gorge.

Long Wood nature reserve is one of Somerset Wildlife Trust's oldest nature reserves having been leased from Bristol Water in 1969, until it was purchased in 1998. The reserve consists of 17 hectares (42 acres) of ancient semi-natural woodland and a small area of species rich grassland known as the Orchard Slope. The history of the woodland can be traced back as far as the 13th Century.

Velvet Bottom nature reserve lies on the floor of a dry river valley and is long and narrow in shape. Most of the reserve can be seen from the main path. The 17 hectare (42 acre) reserve is mostly rough grassland with small areas of woodland & scrub. The reserve has a long history of lead mining and there is still much evidence to be found of the site's industrial heritage. Velvet Bottom has been managed by Somerset Wildlife Trust since 1975 and was purchased from the former owners, Bristol Water, in 1998.

There are way-marked trails to help you explore these reserves.

Black Rock short nature trail is 1.6km – follow the green way-marked posts from Black rock entrance.

Black Rock long nature trail is 2.4km – follow the red way-marked posts from Black Rock entrance.

Long Wood nature trail is 1km – follow the green way-marked posts from Long Wood entrance.

There is also a linear walk through Velvet Bottom reserve of 1.7km which leads to Charterhouse & Ubley Warren Nature Reserve.

If you are visiting as a family why not try the Hedgehog Award activities.



Ferns and Bluebells

Mendip Hills Living Landscape

Somerset Wildlife Trust is aiming to create a Living Landscape for the Mendip Hills by working to restore, recreate and reconnect wildlife habitats across this beautiful landscape. We need to do this because the habitat our wildlife depends upon has become fragmented, leaving stranded pockets of wildlife which are vulnerable to changing conditions such as intensification of land management and climate change.

If we don't link up these islands of habitat by creating corridors for movement that connect wildlife populations, we risk losing some of our most vulnerable and best-loved species. We are working to create a landscape where wildlife flourishes, alongside thriving rural communities that enjoy a healthy natural environment.

We cannot create a living landscape by working with wildlife alone. To secure the future of our natural environment we must also inspire people to understand and appreciate Somerset's wonderful landscapes. In Mendip this includes helping children and their families explore, understand and get to love our Cheddar wildlife.

Creating a Living Landscape

In Mendip we are:

- identifying the best areas of species-rich grasslands, heaths and woodlands
- identifying land that can be restored to wildflower-rich meadows
- providing advice to landowners on land management that benefits wildlife
- assisting landowners with grant applications for agri-environment schemes
- providing practical help to restore wildflower grasslands
- surveying key species such as dormice and bats
- Running reserve open days, and organising walks and talks
- Organising volunteering opportunities in winter and summer
- Working with local schools on environmental education projects
- Running fun learning activities for children and their families



Velvet Bottom Slag Heaps

Black Rock Nature Trails

There are two circular nature trails to follow in Black Rock reserve. Both the short trail (1.6 km) and the long trail (2.4 km) are way-marked with numbered stops at points of interest and begin at the reserve entrance. Follow the green marker posts for the short trail and the red marker posts for the long trail.

1 1

From the reserve entrance follow the path to stop 1. The restored limekiln was built in 1929 whilst there was still active quarrying taking place on site. It was used to heat the quarried limestone rock along with coal or charcoal to produce lime. This was used either as building mortar or was spread on the surrounding fields of the plateau to prevent the soil from turning more acidic.

Opposite the limekiln is a dry-stone wall that is typical of those found across the Mendip landscape. This wall was rebuilt by volunteers at an average pace of three metres per day. If you look closely at the wall you should be able to find lichens, mosses and ferns including the rare limestone fern.

Hedgehog Award – Whilst exploring the nature trails, take photos of the different wildlife you spot.

Further along the path is the former quarry where it is possible to see a section through the underlying limestone strata of the area. The vertical 'joints' drain rainwater away quickly into underground streams and rivers which form caves and tunnels. This is the reason that the valley bottom is dry except at times of very heavy rainfall when the valley floods. Follow the path beyond the quarry to a stone stile in the wall on your right.

2 2

Stop 2 is at the stone stile. Take a look at the south facing slope opposite, this species rich grassland has many plants adapted to survive on these dry limestone soils such as common rock rose, common mikwort and wild thyme.

Hedgehog Award – Look carefully in the grassland, see how many different colours of flower you can find.

Once over the stile you will begin to climb uphill towards an area of thorny scrub & grassland at stop 3. Here you may spot butterflies such as the common blue nectaring on flowers from May onwards or the dark green fritillary flying low and fast across the hillside during July. Black Rock provides good habitat for adders and it is often possible to spot them basking near walls and rocky outcrops. As well as being venomous they are a protected species and should not be touched or disturbed.

Continue up the slope to the top and then bear right alongside the wall. This is a good location for watching birds such as buzzards, kestrels and ravens, their presence is often given away by their distinctive calls. Follow the path alongside the wall.

4 4

Stop 4 is at one of the highest points of Black Rock, there are often far-reaching views to the south-west across Somerset to the North Devon coast beyond Cheddar Gorge. To the north behind Long Wood is Black Down, the highest point on Mendip.

Hedgehog Award – Stop and listen for singing birds. Count how many different types of bird song you think you can hear.

From this point you can choose to complete the short trail (green markers) or the long trail (red markers). For the long trail see point 6.

The short trail bears right and drops down the slope to a gate in the fence. Beyond the shelter belt of pine trees the woodland is being cleared of planted larch and replaced with native broadleaves. As you walk through the woodland look out for scrapes and holes which are signs of badger activity.

5 5

Stop 5 is at the pedestrian gate at the woodland boundary and marks the end of the short trail. To return to the main entrance & car park turn left. To explore Long Wood & Velvet Bottom reserves turn right.

6 6

The long trail continues alongside the wall from stop 4 until you reach stop 6 at a gate in the corner of the field. If you look back in the direction you have walked you will see a large patch of nettles on the steep slope. This is a well used badger sett and rabbit warren, the tracks used by the badgers during their twilight foraging can be seen leading away from the sett. Beyond the gate follow the enclosed track-way to a kissing gate on your right.

7 7

Pass through the kissing gate at stop 7 and follow the trail through the woodland, which is dominated by ash trees, although scots pine, yew can be seen. The abundant hazel & honeysuckle that grows on this sheltered slope provides an ideal habitat for the common dormouse. This secretive mammal lives almost exclusively in the tree canopy and shrubs where it must forage for enough food to build the necessary fat reserves to survive its winter hibernation.

Hedgehog Award – Look alongside the path for hazelnut shells. What type of animals do you think eat these nuts.

At the woodland edge walk through the kissing gate and follow the path through the grassland to another kissing gate. Beyond the gate, follow the steps through the woodland.

8 8

Stop 8 is at the pedestrian gate at the woodland boundary and marks the end of the long trail. To return to the main entrance & car park turn left. To explore Long Wood & Velvet Bottom reserves turn right.

Long Wood Nature Trail

This circular walk (1 km) is way-marked in green with numbered stops at points of interest.

1 1

Hedgehog Award – Use the map to lead your group around the Long Wood nature trail.

From the start of the trail near the reserve entrance follow the path uphill to stop 1. From here you may still be able to see some of the stumps that are all that remains of the trees felled in 1948 when the woodland was cleared and replanted with beech. Somerset Wildlife Trust is gradually restoring the wood back to the original mix of trees, principally ash, oak and field maple with hazel under-storey. In areas where beech trees have been removed the extra light allows woodland plants and butterflies such as the silver washed fritillary to flourish. Follow the path bearing right up the slope.

2 2

At the top of the slope near the wooden bench is stop 2. You may be able to see fossils in the rocks of the dry-stone wall, including sea-lilies (Crinoids), molluscs and corals. This is evidence that the underlying limestone rock was formed in a clear tropical sea around 300 million years ago in the carboniferous era.

Hedgehog Award – Look at the stones in the boundary wall, can you spot any fossils? Please do not remove any stones from the wall.

Long wood is at its best in spring when the bluebells and wild garlic make a striking contrast of colours. You may also see smaller patches of wood anemone and yellow archangel. From here follow the path north alongside the boundary wall.

3 3

In the area around stop 3 wild raspberries are taking advantage of the increased light levels created by thinning of the woodland. There are numerous animal paths in this part of the wood; some will lead to 'badger gates' built into the walls. The path descends to a T junction, take the right hand path.

4 4

On the right hand side of the path at stop 4 is Long Wood swallet. The stream which flows underground here will finally emerge at the lower end of Cheddar Gorge. Occasionally after exceptional rain fall the water will flood the valley beyond flowing down the gorge road. Just upstream is the concrete blockhouse which controls access to the cave. Retrace your steps and continue along the valley bottom path.

5 5

In the woodland surrounding stop 5 you will notice several fallen trees. These trees are left where possible to decay as they provide an important home for many invertebrate species such as longhorn beetles. The fungi which grow on the dead trees play a vital part in the woodland by breaking down the dead plant material and returning nutrients to the soil for living plants to use. Continue along the valley path.

Hedgehog Award – Try to find five different types of leaves within this area of woodland.

6 6

At stop 6 is a cave excavation known as Long Wood Valley Sink which was first opened during a flash flood in 1968. In 2013 the dig was restarted, with a new entranceway and dam created, to help prevent flooding in the valley beyond by allowing excess water to escape underground when the Long Wood swallet overflows.

Hedgehog Award – Turn over a small branch or stone. See what different mini-beasts you can find. Remember to replace the stone or branch once you have finished.

Follow the valley path to the trail end at the reserve entrance gate.

Velvet Bottom Trail

This linear walk leads 1.7km (3.4km return) from Black Rock nature reserve, through Velvet Bottom nature reserve, to Charterhouse and Ubley Warren nature reserve.

The trail follows the path at the bottom of a long dry valley which has been associated with lead mining since pre-Roman times. The remains of this industrial past can still be seen amongst the grassland and woodland which has recolonized the site since the lead working ceased in the 1880's.

The south facing slopes at the western end of the reserve have many rock outcrops and thin soils which allow flower rich grasslands to flourish, including species such as rock stonecrop, harebell and carline thistle.

There are two small caves alongside the valley path, Timber Hole & Hangover Hole, which have gated entrances in order to protect the underground environment from disturbance.

As you walk through the reserve you will encounter a series of dams and levels left over from the lead mining operations. They were designed to help prevent the contamination of the local water supply by allowing the harmful lead sediments to settle out of the water. The remaining high lead level reduces the species diversity on these levels. The bracken growing at the edge of the level areas contains the unusual plant, meadow saffron. In September the leaves of the plant die back leaving only the pink crocus like flowers on display. The plant contains a poison called Colchicine.

Below the small woodland at the northern edge of the reserve are the remains of the buildings used to smelt the lead ore, it is difficult to imagine the bleak industrial landscape that would have existed at this spot when the lead works were in operation. There is an extensive badger sett in this area and you may be able to spot their well worn paths leading through the grassland to their foraging grounds.

The areas of bare ground that the path crosses are mounds of lead slag, the waste material left over from the smelting process. It takes a long time for plants to colonise these inhospitable areas. A specialised community of plants including spring sandwort, alpine pennycress & bladder campion are able to tolerate the difficult conditions and gain a foothold. These areas of bare ground and the nearby dry-stone walls are often good places to see adders and common lizards as they bask on the warm rocks before heading off to hunt in the grasslands.

The rows of shallow circular depressions just visible in the grassland below the path are buddle pits which were used to clean and separate out the heavy lead ore from the crushed limestone rock.



Green Woodpecker



Black Rock Lime Kiln



Yellow Necked Mouse



Wild Garlic



Peregrine Falcon



Long Wood stream entrance

wildlife watch



www.wildlifewatch.org.uk

The Wildlife Watch Hedgehog Award is a simple and fun way to earn an award while exploring nature in different ways. See if you can complete the eight wildlife activities whilst walking the nature trails; when you have completed them all fill out the form below and send it to Somerset Wildlife Trust and you'll get a Hedgehog Award certificate.

If you are happy for us to contact you by e-mail please add your e-mail address below.

Name:

Address:

Postcode:

Return to: Somerset Wildlife Trust,
34 Wellington Road
Taunton
Somerset
TA1 5AW

Your next challenge

If you are aged eight and above and a member of Somerset Wildlife Trust try our Kestrel award. Just tick the boxes below to find out more.

- I am over the age of eight and a member of Somerset Wildlife Trust. Please send me information about the Kestrel Award
- I am not a member. Please send me information about how to join Somerset Wildlife Trust.

When you are out exploring nature please make sure you always follow the countryside code.

Respect, Protect & Enjoy



Health & Safety Information



- There is a disused quarry alongside the main path in Black Rock and other areas of natural rock face. Please keep to the footpaths and be aware of the potential for falling rocks.
- Rock climbing at the quarry is undertaken at your own risk. The British Mountaineering Council has information about climbing at Cheddar.
- Take care to avoid any unprotected drops.
- Animals may be grazing at any time of year so please keep dogs under close control at all times.
- The nature trails and paths have uneven surfaces and can be slippery in areas of exposed rock. Please take care especially when crossing the dam walls in Velvet Bottom.
- At times of high rainfall the valley path in Long Wood may become flooded. Please do not walk through flooded areas as there may be hidden hazards.
- Please pay attention to all safety signs.
- Visitors on foot are welcome year round but please do not ride or cycle off the bridleway.
- No camping, fires, organised games or other recreational activities permitted.

