



# Shapwick Heath

National Nature Reserve



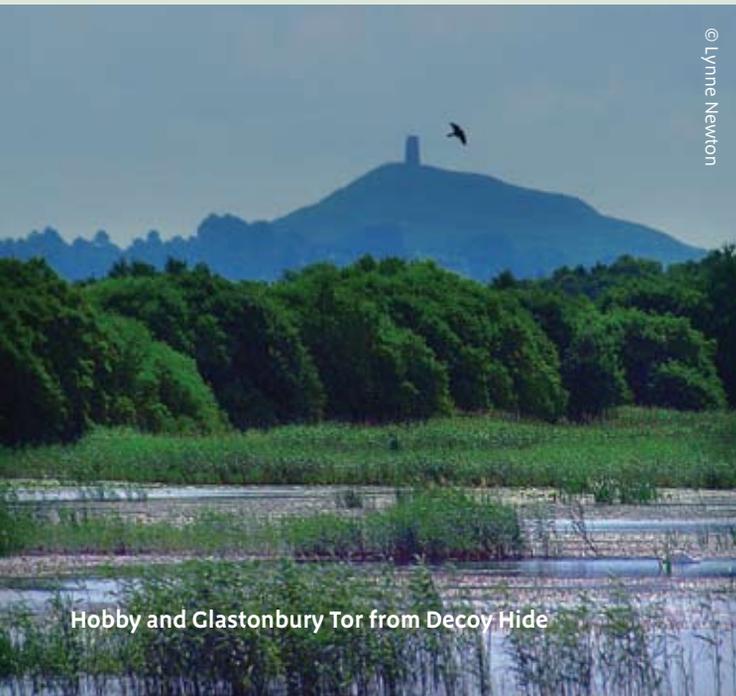
# Welcome to Shapwick Heath NNR

This magnificent wetland reserve covers over 500 ha at the heart of the Somerset Levels and Moors. It's an area that's steeped in history, and an atmospheric landscape of great skies and endless horizons.

It's a superb place to watch wildlife, whether it's an elusive bittern or otter lurking in the reed beds, or the fantastic, swirling flocks of starlings that come here to roost in winter.

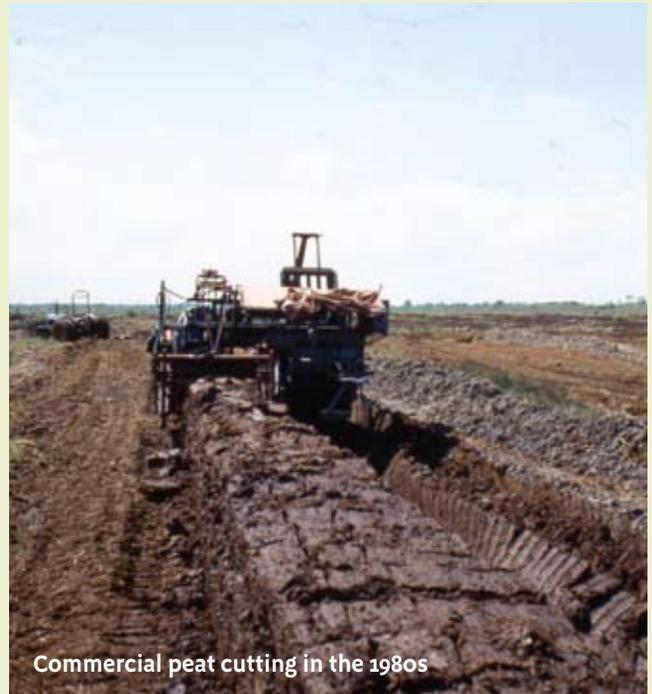
And it's a great place to simply come and enjoy the varied scenery/explore the lakes and reedbeds for wildlife/go for a walk in the woods/ even have a picnic!

Habitats include lush green wildflower meadows; still, dark ditches; damp, secretive fens, shady, wet fern woods; and open water, fringed with rustling reedbeds.



© Lynne Newton

Hobby and Glastonbury Tor from Decoy Hide



© Natural England

Commercial peat cutting in the 1980s

It's this mix which makes the Reserve so rich in wildlife. An incredible 64 different species of birds nest at Shapwick, including Cetti's warbler and great-crested grebes, while dragonflies and over 27 species of butterfly abound in the summer. These include the silver washed fritillary, purple hairstreak and orange-tip, while the path to Meare Hide is the best place to see the large and impressive white admiral.

Over 24 different mammals have also been seen at Shapwick, including water voles, lesser horseshoe bats and, of course, otters.

Until around 4,500 BC, the sea covered Shapwick Heath. When it gradually began to retreat, reedbeds, followed by a mixture of sedge and fen woodlands, colonised the drying marshes. Then, as the old vegetation died and decayed, thick seams of peat were formed.

The Romans were the first to harvest peat to burn as fuel. Between April and September, when the ground was at its driest, men would cut the peat by hand, while women and children would stack the turfs to dry, before loading them onto carts or flat-bottomed boats.

The peat was cut this way for hundreds of years until the 1940s, when coal became more popular. In the 1960s, peat was removed by huge machines for horticultural use, but this stopped in the 1990s.

Today, these former peat pits have been transformed into a landscape of open lakes, reedbeds, fens and wet woodland, and have become a hugely important area for nature conservation.

Around 6,000 years ago, Neolithic people lived on the higher, dry ground around the heath, and built wooden trackways to cross the wetlands.

Large parts of the Neolithic 'Sweet Track', the oldest man-made routeway in Britain, still exist on the Reserve, preserved beneath the wet peat. This remarkable timber track was built around 3,806 BC to cross 2km (1.2 miles) of reed swamp that separated Meare Island from the Polden Hills.

Many amazing Neolithic artefacts have since been found on the heath, including pots of hazelnuts, a child's toy tomahawk, and an extraordinary polished jadeite axe from the Alps. Many are now on display at Taunton Castle Museum.



A murmuration of starlings over the reed beds

## Seasonal spectacles

The sheer size and richness of habitats at Shapwick Heath make it a fantastic place to visit at any time of year.

Over recent years, the once humble starling has become one of the undoubted stars of British wildlife. The dramatic scene as millions of birds twist and turn against an evening sky, before dropping down to settle in a reed bed to roost, is truly magical. From November to February, Shapwick Heath is one of the best places in England to see it happen. For further information call the Starling Hotline (07866 554142).

Winter is also a good time to watch waterfowl, such as gadwall, shoveler and tufted duck, gathering to feed on the Reserve's lakes.

Visit in spring for a cacophony of birdsong and fantastic displays of flowering plants.

In the summer, hundreds of migrating hobbies visit the Reserve, while families of otters are frequently seen in streams and lakes.

## Reed beds

Many of the Reserve's old peat workings have been restored to reed bed habitat, and provide a haven for wildlife.

### Look out for:

- bittern – this rare and elusive member of the heron family will, if disturbed, stretch its neck skywards to mimic the reeds in which it nests and feeds. In early spring listen for the 'booming' call of the male.
- otter – Shapwick Heath is now one of the best places in England to see this iconic animal. With large areas to feed and live in, there is a great chance you'll catch a glimpse of one from a hide.
- marsh harrier – these rare and impressive raptors fly at slow speeds just above the reed beds before stalling, mid-flight, and dropping down onto their prey.



© Lynne Newton



© Lynne Newton

## Fen

The fenland areas of Shapwick Heath are rich in plant and insect life.

### Look out for:

- hairy dragonfly – many types of dragon and damselflies patrol the wetlands during summer. One of the rarest is the hairy dragonfly, so-called because its upper body (thorax) is covered in hair.

## Meadow

The meadows at Canada Farm are managed organically and cut in late July when the wildflowers have set seed. The hay is then turned regularly and left to dry, allowing seeds to fall, enter the soil, and hopefully germinate next year.

Red Devon cattle and Shetland sheep graze the meadows, helping to spread seed in their dung, and also control the growth of coarse grasses and scrub.

Surface water drains off the fields into water channels known as 'rhyne' (pronounced 'reens'), first dug over 200 years ago. The rhyne also act as 'wet fences' to control grazing stock and are a perfect habitat for plants such as yellow flag iris, great water dock and purple loosestrife.

### Look out for:

- water vole – this is a nationally important haven for these rare rodents, that make their homes along the rhyne and ditches. Look out for their distinctive burrows, and listen for the tell-tale 'plop' as one is disturbed and swims for cover.



Wildlife watchers

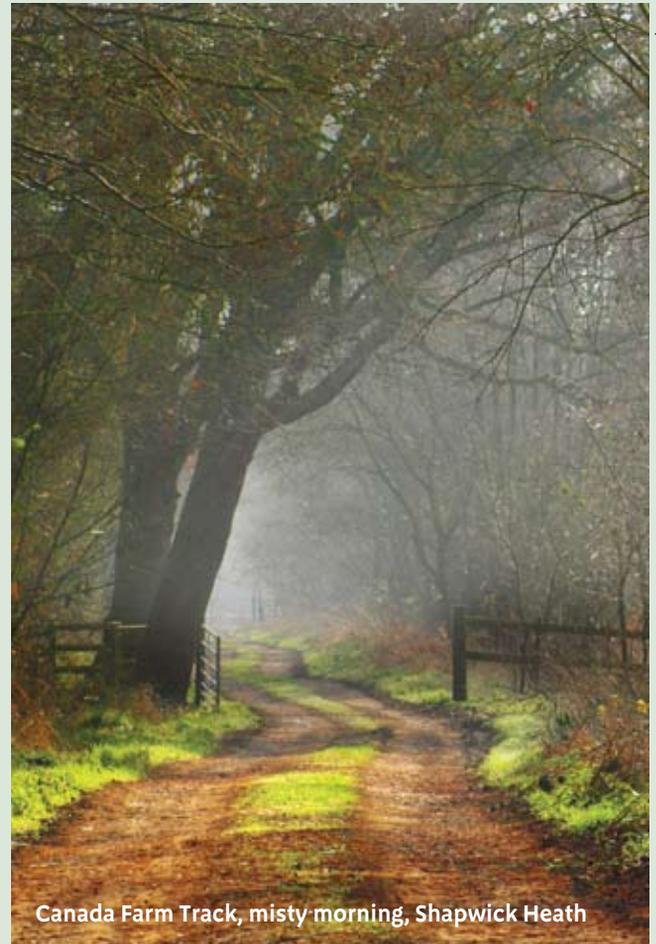
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## Wet woodland

The damp woodland surrounding the meadows are dominated by alder, willow, birch, and are a haven for many unusual plants and a huge number of insects, including the rare lesser silver diving beetle.

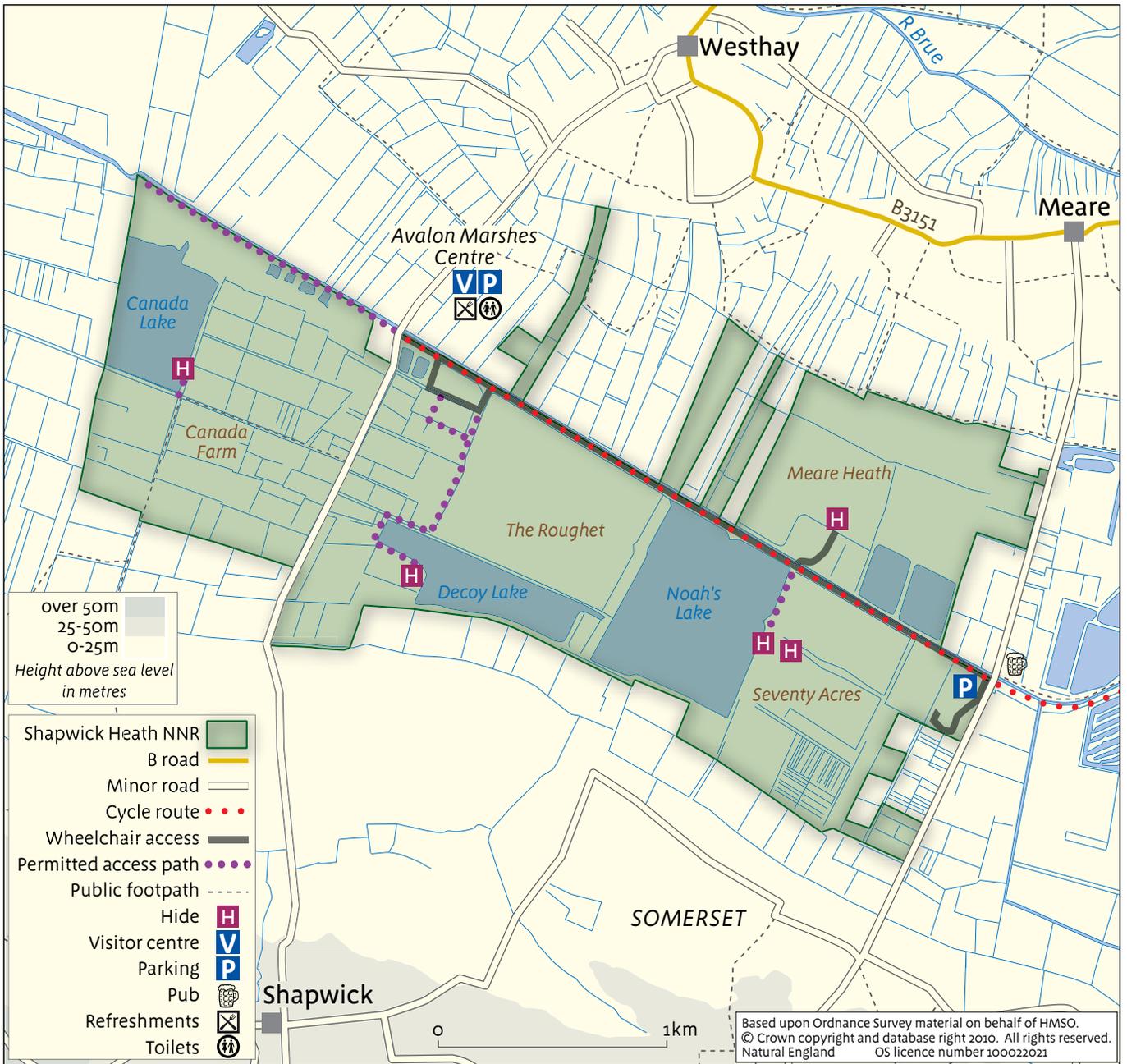
### Look out for:

- the royal fern – one of the tallest European ferns, the central leaves turn golden brown in summer and resemble a flower spike.



Canada Farm Track, misty morning, Shapwick Heath

© Lynne Newton





© Natural England

Music and Storytelling Event

## Education and volunteering opportunities

Shapwick Heath has a well-established and successful education programme for visiting school and youth groups. Our outreach officer is able to visit schools to enhance the Reserve visits. The Reserve has classroom facilities and numerous pre-prepared locations to make environmental learning both easy and fun.

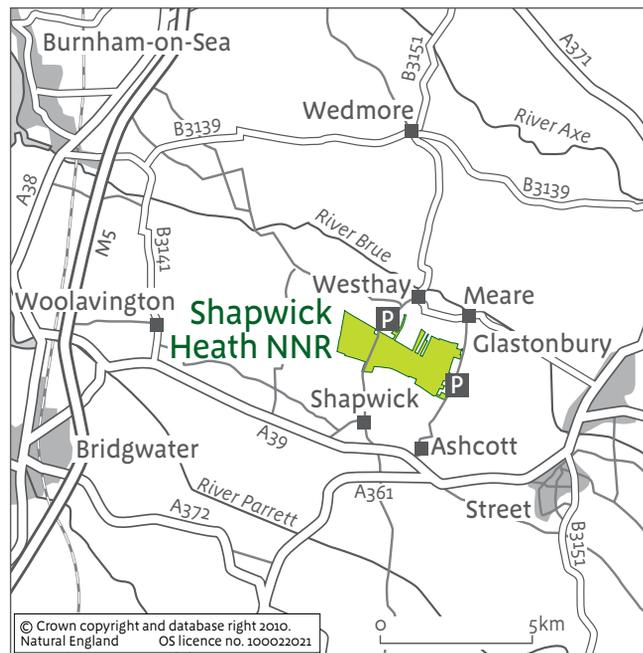
Each year Natural England runs numerous guided walks, open days, courses and activities relating to the environment.

There are also opportunities for people interested in volunteering and learning new skills.



© Natural England

Habitat Management Volunteers on Shapwick



## How do I get to Shapwick Heath?

**By car:** From J23 on the M5 take the A39 Bridgwater to Glastonbury road. After six miles take the minor road left, signed Shapwick. Enter Shapwick Village and at the church continue north, following the brown tourist sign for Shapwick Heath NNR.

There is parking at both the Avalon Marshes Centre, on Shapwick Road, near Westhay, or the Ashcott Corner Car Park, near the Railway Inn, on the Ashcott to Meare Road.

**By public transport:** Public transport access to Shapwick Heath is very limited. For information call Traveline on 0870 6082608.

**Cycling:** The Reserve is close to National Route 3 of the Sustrans National Cycle Network. There are cycle racks at both main entrances to the Reserve.

## Access

The Reserve has two main entrances, both clearly marked by welcome boards. One is accessed from the Meare to Ashcott Road, the other from Shapwick Road.

There are eight trails running across the Reserve. As a wetland site the ground can often be uneven and soft. Our way-marked paths are the most accessible, and we encourage visitors to use these to avoid areas of deep water.

All our way-marked paths are accessible for parents with buggies. The main access route, marked as a 'cycle route' is safe for use by mobility vehicles and wheelchairs.

Dogs unfortunately are not allowed on the main Reserve as they would disturb our resident otters.

Cycle access is available along the disused railway line that runs through the Reserve from Shapwick Road to Ashcott Corner. Allow about 40 minutes to walk at a gentle pace from one end to the other.



Visitors using elevated Boardwalk at Ashcott Car Park

© Natural England



Sweet Track reconstruction

© Somerset County Council

This route can also be used by wheelchairs and mobility scooters.

Shapwick Heath NNR is also featured on The Nationwide Access Register:  
[www.directenquiries.com](http://www.directenquiries.com)

## Facilities

The nearest toilet and refreshment facilities are at the Avalon Marshes Centre.

## Please follow the Countryside Code

- Be safe, plan ahead and follow any signs.
- Leave gates and property as you find them.
- Protect plants and animals and take your litter home.
- Keep dogs under close control.
- Consider other people.

## For further information please contact the NNR team:

Tel: 0300 060 2570

Email: [somerset@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:somerset@naturalengland.org.uk)

**Front cover image: School group visiting Shapwick**

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