



Wybunbury Moss National Nature Reserve



Introduction

Wybunbury Moss lies close to the village from which it takes its name and is one of many peat-filled depressions that are dotted across Cheshire and its surrounding counties. Most of these peat-filled depressions have their origins in the last great Ice Age when a huge ice sheet moved across the region, scouring and reshaping the underlying rocks. When the ice melted; approximately 8,000 years ago, it revealed a landscape pock-marked with hollows, some of which filled with water to form lakes with the local name of **Meres**, whilst others filled with peat and are known in the area as **Mosses**.



Devil's-bit scabious

The Formation of the Schwingmoor

At first glance, Wybunbury appears to be a typical Moss in which layers of peat (the partially decomposed remains of bog plants) have gradually accumulated in the glacial hollow. However, on this site the formation of the basin is intriguing because the peat forms a raft which floats on a water-filled basin measuring over 12 metres deep. In some places the peat raft is only one metre thick. It is believed that the floating nature of the Moss may have been created by the subsidence of salt-bearing rocks beneath the Moss basin, a process which may also be responsible for the leaning nature of the nearby tower of St Chad's church.

Only three such 'subsidence mires' are known to exist in the British Isles (the others being Chartley Moss in Staffordshire and Brookhouse Moss Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in Cheshire) although floating bogs of other types occur infrequently in other parts of northern Europe where they are known as Schwingmoors, a German word which means 'swinging bog' and aptly describes their oscillating nature.



The National Nature Reserve

Wybunbury Moss together with its surrounding woodland, reedswamp and flower-rich meadows covers an area of approximately 16.5 hectares and forms one of England's most unusual National Nature Reserves (NNR). The reserve was first designated in 1955 with further land acquisitions been added to the area between 1957 and 2009.

The Reserve is home to a rich variety of uncommon plants and animals that once would have occurred more widely in similar hollows across the Cheshire Plain. The reserve is owned and managed by Natural England to protect this unique site and its wildlife for future generations.

Wild Flowers

The central, floating part of the reserve – known as the Sphagnum lawn, is a harsh, waterlogged world in which only specialised cross-leaved heath and the osses and a few other plants can grow. Bog moss or *Sphagnum* and common cotton grass dominate the lawn area; they and rainfall are the basic ingredients for the formation and growth of a peat bog. Other characteristic



Cranberry

© Natural England



Sundew

© Dr Ross Piper

plants include cranberry, cross-leaved heath and the insect-eating sundew, together with rarities such as bog rosemary and bog sedge.

Towards the edge of the Moss – where the raft thickens and grades into solid peat, trees are able to gain a foothold but grow slowly in the harsh conditions. Commonly occurring species include downy birch, rowan and alder buckthorn. Scots pine; not native to this part of the UK, was introduced at least a century ago and formed extensive stands before Natural England began active management of the site.

Away from the floating part of the site, the peat is influenced by more nutrient-rich water draining from the surrounding land. This has led to the development of contrasting plant communities on the edge of the raft with a zone of reedswamp and fen woodland characterised by alder, willow, reedmace, common reed, tussock sedge, marsh fern and marsh cinquefoil.

The woodland and fen – which ring the Moss are surrounded by flower-rich pastures where plants such as ragged robin, marsh violet, yellow rattle, heath spotted orchid and devil's-bit scabious can be found.



Orange Tip



Thanasimus formicarius

Animals

Reptiles: The Moss supports a strong population of the harmless grass snake, a species no longer common in Cheshire and also common lizard.

Amphibians: Common frogs breed on the site and common toads are present.

Birds: A good range of common woodland birds occur on the reserve including the song thrush and bullfinch together with more local species such as woodcock.

Insects: The Moss is particularly important for its range of invertebrates for which it is one of the best sites in Cheshire. These include butterflies, moths, spiders, hoverflies and beetles, many of which are rare in the region or nationally. These include the leaf beetle (*Cryptocephalus decemmaculatus*), for which Wybunbury Moss is thought to hold 95% of the British population.

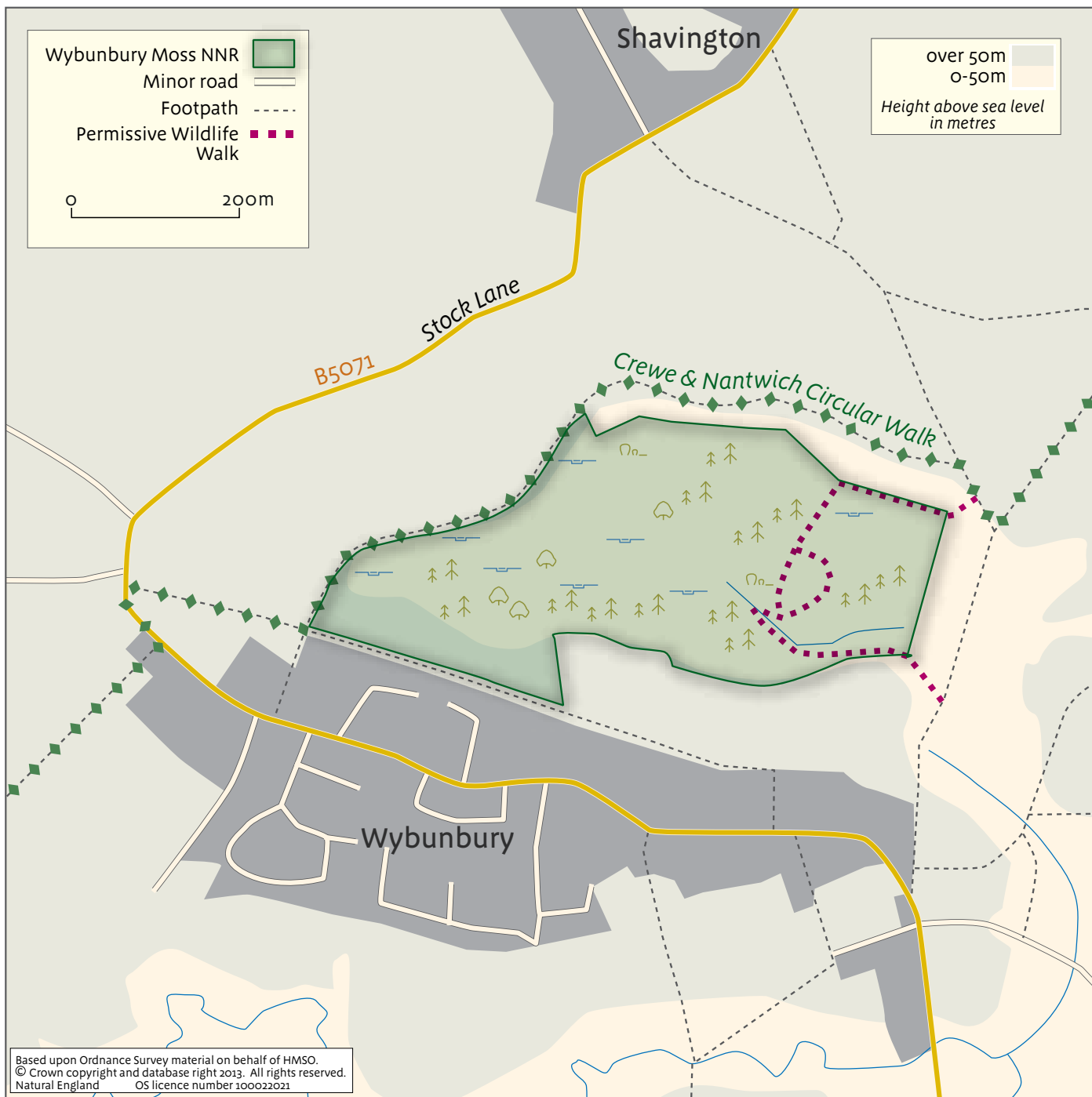
Other obvious species to look out for are the Orange Tip butterfly which can be seen between April and June, and the lemon yellow Brimstone butterfly which can be observed from March to October.



Cryptocephalus decemmaculatus



Brimstone



Management

Like many peat bodies in the UK, Wybunbury Moss has suffered from past attempts to drain the site, resulting in a drying of the peat and a subsequent encroachment of trees. As a result, many parts of the Moss, which were formerly open sphagnum lawn now support much drier woodland. Natural England staff, assisted by local contractors and volunteers, have gradually removed much of the invading pine woodland to restore the Moss to an actively-growing peat bog.

The ongoing management requirements to maintain the schwingmoor are the maintenance of water levels via a series of sluices and the control of invading woodland and scrub.

Access

The central floating part of the reserve is very dangerous and for this reason there is no general public access to the site. Access to this area is by permit only, predominately for study or research purposes. Permits can be obtained from the Reserve Manager. Natural England staff will escort interested parties around the site given prior notice. A regular programme of guided walks is advertised locally each year.

A circular walk around the Moss is possible via public footpaths. These pass through some of the reserve's meadows and give views into the Moss itself. Easy-access gates exist on Natural England owned sections of footpath.

A permissive path leads off the public footpath network and provides visitors with an opportunity to visit part of the peat bog.

- For your own safety please do not enter the centre of the Moss
- Please keep dogs on leads where grazing animals are present

Location

Wybunbury Moss is situated in south Cheshire, close to Nantwich and Crewe and just to the north of Wybunbury village. The nearest railway stations (Nantwich and Crewe) are approximately 3.5 miles away.

Parking and refreshments are available in the village.



For further information please contact the
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Find out more at www.gov.uk/natural-england

Front cover photograph:
Wybunbury Moss © Natural England



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