ENGLISH NATURE

Get close to nature

Visiting Spotlight National Nature Reserves

working today
for nature tomorrow

Juniper, a native plant that can be found on several Spotlight National Nature Reserves.
English Nature

National Nature Reserves (NNRs) are the jewels of England's wildlife and geological treasures. Many of these very special places offer people unrivalled opportunities to get close to nature – and in doing so can stimulate your mind, body and spirit.

This booklet points you towards 35 'Spotlight' NNRs – places that offer some of the best opportunities for you to enjoy the open air and marvel at the country's outstanding wildlife and geology.

England has well over 200 NNRs. They were established to protect the country's most important areas of wildlife and most significant geological formations, and as places for scientific research. But this does not mean they are no-go areas for people. The Spotlight reserves in this booklet have been specially selected because they are among the best places for people to see our special wildlife and geology without inadvertently disturbing or damaging the very things they have come to enjoy. They all have their own character and unique attractions, to be enjoyed by everyone.

John Robinson

Redstart.

Most of the places mentioned in this booklet have self-guided nature trails and viewing areas that help you to see and learn about their features at first hand. A growing number offer easy access to people, including those who use wheelchairs.

Visiting NNRs isn't just about spotting colourful birds and butterflies, fascinating plants or beautiful scenery. They are tranquil havens where we can unwind quietly and rediscover our natural world. Nature is for everyone, so please come and enjoy it!

More detailed leaflets on each NNR will be available locally. You can also find out more about the reserves

This booklet uses a number of symbols to some of the main facilities on each NNR.

- P Car parking
- £ Admission fee
- Bus service
- Trails
- Railway
- Easy access
- Cycle parking
- E Events/ guided walks

Ainsdale Sand Dunes, Merseyside

Lynne Collins/English Nature

Kite flying at Ainsdale.

Part of the Sefton Coast, this is the finest system of sand dunes on the north-west coast of England and a hugely popular place to walk.

With so many different habitats – from sand flats to dunes to woods – there are many different types of wildlife too.

Visitors might spot sand lizard, natterjack toad, great crested newt and red squirrel, as well as 460 species of flowering plants! Or you may just enjoy a walk in the bracing coastal air. The sea shore is an important winter stopover for waders and gulls.

John Robinson

Red squirrel.

Getting there:

Ainsdale Sand Dunes are between Ainsdale village and Freshfield, along the Southport coast road. The nearest car park is 2.5km (1 mile) away on Ainsdale beach. Buses run to Liverpool Road 2.5km (1 mile). Trains run to Ainsdale and Freshfields station (10 minutes' walk).

Trails, facilities and events:

There are colour-coded paths through the dunes. Information leaflets available. The sand and rough ground is unsuitable for wheelchairs. Toilets in Ainsdale village 2.5km (1.5 miles). Toilets and refreshments at the Victoria Road National Trust property 4km (2.5 miles).

When to visit:

Summer for wildflowers. Spring for natterjacks. Autumn for red squirrels.

Aston Rowant, Oxfordshire

Richard Brooks/FLPA

Simon Melville/English Nature

The unmistakable red kite is something you may chance upon at Aston Rowant (inset).

This beautiful area of chalk grassland, juniper and beech woods is a glimpse of the way much of this part of the Chilterns used to look.

The reserve – with its massive blocks of sandstone 'sarsens' – overlooks the Vale of Oxford. Today, the grassland, with its many rare chalk-loving herbs and flowers, is kept in top condition through grazing by rare breed sheep.

In spring, the beech woodlands are carpeted with bluebells. There are also many butterflies, including the dark green fritillary and the silver-spotted skipper. The juniper, an evergreen that is native to England, is home to many extremely rare insects. And here, visitors can spot the spectacular red kite.

Getting there:

Signed from Christmas Common Road (off the A40). Visitors to the northern section can park in the English Nature car park about 400 metres down a lane off Christmas Common Road. Visitors to the southern section can park in Cowleaze Wood.

Trails, facilities and events:

Six marked walks – one of them designed for wheelchair users. Picnic area and woodland sculpture trail at Cowleaze Wood. Events such as red kite walks are organised throughout the year.

When to visit:

October to March for the red kites. Spring for bluebells and migrating birds. Spring to summer for orchids and wildflowers.

Barnack Hills and Holes, Cambs

Peter Wakely/English Nature 22,906

Chris Gomersall/English Nature 27,538

Young walkers enjoy a stroll over the Hills and Holes. Top right: the rare pasque flower.

The unique hummocky landscape of the Hills and Holes was created by quarrying for limestone. The stone, known as Barnack rag, was prized by Roman builders more than 1,500 years ago. In mediaeval times, many abbeys, including Peterborough and Ely, were built from the stone. It was carried on barges down the fenland waterways.

Today, the wildflower-covered meadowland is one of Britain's most important wildlife sites and one of the best places in the region to see the strange green lights of the glow-worm.

Getting there:

The reserve is in the village of Barnack, north-west of Peterborough. Car park at Wittering Road. Cycle parking is also provided. Buses from Stamford and Peterborough stop close to the reserve.

Trails, facilities and events:

The circular, 1.3km, Limestone Walk takes around 30 minutes. Follow the orange arrows from the main car park. Warden on site in the spring and summer.

When to visit:

April and May for the rare pasque flower. June and July for orchids and other wildflowers. Summer for glow-worms. The site is open all year.

Castle Eden Dene, County Durham

Peter Wakely/English Nature 16,119

A walk on the wild side of Castle Eden Dene. Below: nuthatch, one of the woodland birds.

This tangled landscape is a survivor of the wildwood that once covered most of Britain. It is a magical world where a deep gorge with yew, oak, ash and dying elm creates a home for other plants and creatures. For thousands of years, people have been fascinated by the dene, creating legends of the Devil to explain its strange rocks and mysterious atmosphere. The fact that melt-water from the last Ice Age carved out the spectacular limestone cliffs and gorges is no less a fascinating story. Once upon a time, the Saxons called this area Yoden, meaning Yew Dene. Yoden became Eden.

Getting there:

Castle Eden Dene is signposted from the A19 and from Peterlee town centre. Car park at Oakerside Dene Lodge. For bus details, phone 0345 124 125.

Trails, facilities and events:

Two marked walks. The Yew Tree Trail is 3.75km (2.5 miles) and takes up to three hours. The Red Squirrel Trail is 2.75km (1.75 miles) and takes up to 2.5 hours. Toilets, baby changing and touch screen interpretation are at Oakerside Dene Lodge. A year-round programme of wildlife events.

John Robinson

When to visit:

Spring for wildflowers. Autumn for leaves. Bad weather can cause landslips.

Derbyshire Dales – Lathkill

Of the five limestone valleys in the Peak District National Park that make up the Derbyshire Dales NNR, Lathkill is the best to visit. With its steep, grassy slopes, meandering river and ancient woodlands, Lathkill Dale offers a quiet beauty.

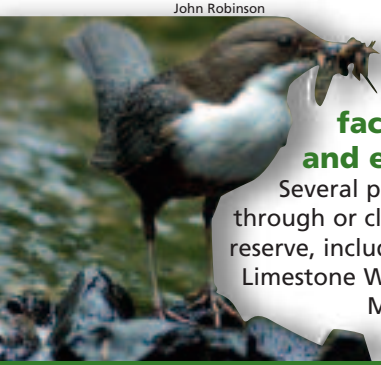
Yet this was once a place of industry, fuelled by the rush for lead. Scattered among the woods and slopes are remnants of the mines and workings, slowly being absorbed by nature back into the landscape.

The limestone cliff faces and rocky outcrops in the dale tell of another story. 350 million years ago, the whole White Peak area was part of a tropical lagoon, with coral reefs and volcanoes. The dale is rich in fossils and its grasslands are among the most flower-rich in Britain.

Getting there:

Lathkill Dale is 3.5km (2 miles) south west of Bakewell, between the villages of Over Haddon, Monyash and Youlgreave. Car parks at Over Haddon and Moor Lane, Youlgreave.

John Robinson



Trails, facilities and events:

Several paths run through or close to the reserve, including the Limestone Way and the Monsal Trail. Leaflets and interpretative boards. Underground viewing platform at Bateman's House.

Paul Glendell/English Nature 26,872

Above: walkers near Three Castles Haddon Grove footpath in Lathkill Dale. Left: the dipper is among the river residents.

When to visit:

Year-round, though some concessionary paths may be closed occasionally.

Duncombe Park, North Yorkshire

Set in beautiful parkland in the picturesque valley of the River Rye, Duncombe is made special by its gnarled and ancient trees. Their rot-holes and hollow trunks are a haven for rare and spectacular insects. The insects are direct descendants of those that once lived in the wild wood that used to cover this part of the country.

Birds such as woodpeckers and the elusive hawfinch make their nests in the rot-holes, and bats make roosts. In the spring, the woods are stunning, with bluebells, primroses and wild garlic.

A beautiful, unspoilt stretch of river winds through the park – home to trout, otter and birds such as kingfisher and grey heron.

Getting there:

Just south-west of Helmsley off the A170. There is a car park.

Trails, facilities and events:

Parkland open daily from Easter to October. Circular river walk and a programme of events, including guided walks. Toilets and refreshments, shop and interpretation centre. Admission charge to the park, garden and house. For opening times and events, call the estate office on 01439 770213.

When to visit:

Spring for bluebells and beetles. Summer for pied flycatcher and redstart.

One of the many old trees that give Duncombe Park its special charm.

Peter Wakely/English Nature 21,605

Durham Coast

Peter Wakely/English Nature 19,543

Minden Pictures/FLPA

The Durham Coast NNR is important for birds like the little tern. Above right: flower-rich coastal grassland.

The Durham coastline is a landscape of striking limestone cliffs, headlands and beaches. Glacial meltwaters have carved out gills and denes along its length. In the past the coast has been disturbed by a century of colliery waste dumped on the cliff-tops and beaches. With the closure of the coal pits in the early 1990s and the cleansing action of the sea, the spoil-covered beaches have recovered.

The reserve is of tremendous importance for its unique grasslands. Two national rarities, the Durham argus butterfly and the day-flying least minor moth, feed on the common rock rose, which thrives on the limestone. Sand dune flowers include nationally scarce species such as sea barley and burnt orchid. The reserve is also important for little tern and purple sandpiper.

Getting there:

The reserve is in the Easington District and comprises sections of coastline between Horden in the north and Crimdon in the south. Parking at Crimdon Park, Blackhall Rocks and Warren House Gill. Extensive cycle route through the Heritage Coast. Regular local bus services.

Trails, facilities and events:

The Durham Coastal Footpath is a 17.5km (11 miles) route from Seaham to Crimdon, through stunning clifftop scenery. Range of leaflets and guides available locally.

When to visit:

Summer for flowers and insects. Winter for birds.

East Dartmoor Woods and Heaths, Devon

People have worked in and shaped Yarner Wood – the most accessible part of the NNR – for centuries, and today the place teems with birdlife.

Trails within the Wood give visitors a chance to discover an old leat, a watercourse that used to carry water 8km from Becky Falls to a pottery at Bovey Tracey. There is also a section of the Haytor granite horse-drawn tramway and, in the ruins among the trees, the disused Yarrow copper mine.

Yarner Wood is one of three neighbouring nature reserves that make up the East Dartmoor Woods and Heaths.

In this beautiful area of Devon, there are internationally rare Western oak woodland, moorland, valley mire and the deep valley of the River Bovey. It is important habitat for otter, dipper, grey wagtail, salmon, sea trout and many dragonflies. The nationally rare Dartford warbler nests on the heathland.

Paul Glendell/English Nature 25,092

Otters live on the River Bovey.

English Nature

Outside the site office at Yarner Wood.

Getting there:

The NNR is in Dartmoor National Park on the B3344 from Bovey Tracy to Manaton.

Trails, facilities and events:

Yarner Wood's main visitor area and car park opens from 8.30am to 7pm (or dusk, if earlier). Short loop – 2.5km (1.5 miles), and long loop – 3.5km (2 miles). These can combine to make a 6km (3.5 miles) walk with short cuts back to car park if needed.

When to visit:

Year-round to enjoy the changing wildlife.

Farne Islands, Northumberland

One of Europe's most important seabird sanctuaries, this archipelago of small islands off the Northumberland coast is home to more than 20 different species, including puffin, eider duck and four species of tern. Many of the birds are quite confident near people so visitors can enjoy close views. There is also a large colony of grey seals.

Paul Glendel/English Nature 24,589/24,606

Children view the nests of shag from a boardwalk on the Outer Farnes.

The Farne Islands are probably best known for their Christian associations with the Northumbrian Saints – most notably St Cuthbert and St Aidan. St Cuthbert died on Inner Farne in 687 AD and there is a chapel in his memory.

Getting there:

The islands are in the North Sea, around 2km from Seahouses. There are 15-28 islands (depending on the tide), but only Inner Farne and Staple are open to the public. There is parking at Seahouses. The islands are accessible only by boat, and local people run trips from Seahouses.

Trails, facilities and events:

A short nature trail on Inner Farne. Details in the information leaflet available on site. Toilets on Inner Farne and in Seahouses. Refreshments and information centre at Seahouses. There is an admission charge, which does not include the boat fare.

When to visit:

Mid-April and early August for seabirds. The islands are open all year round, but at restricted times. Check with the National Trust on 01665 721099 for opening times.

Puffin is another Farne Islands bird.

Fenn's, Whixall and Bettisfield Mosses, Shropshire

Peter Wakely /English Nature 19,954

Mires are a major feature of the special Mosses landscape.

Pete Boardman

Right: the four spotted darter.

The open landscape of Fenn's, Whixall and Bettisfield Mosses is a rare wilderness in a sea of lowland agriculture. Here, in the largest part of the Meres and Mosses straddling the English-Welsh border, visitors can spot curlews and waders, dragonflies and butterflies.

Intensive commercial peat extraction had all but destroyed the area, but extensive rehabilitation and restoration work by English Nature and its partners means that mire species are rapidly returning.

Protecting the fragile area is very important, so visitors need to stick to the trails for that – and their own safety. Lifetime permits that give access to all parts of the reserve are available for people who want to explore the specialist wildlife further.

Getting there:

6.5km (4 miles) south west of Whitchurch, 16km (10 miles) south west of Wrexham. South of the A495. Roadside parking at the entrances, and a large car park at Manor House.

Trails, facilities and events:

A series of waymarked trails, information panels at all main entrances and a programme of events. Leaflets available. Refreshments and toilets are available in local pubs. Disabled access along the old railway line by prior arrangement. It is risky to leave the marked trails.

When to visit:

June and July for dragonflies and butterflies. April for the birds. Autumn for the colourful bog mosses.

Finglandrigg Woods, Cumbria

A fascinating mosaic of different habitats, Finglandrigg Wood is vital to lots of well-known wildlife, as well as many less-common species. Keep your eyes peeled for a red squirrel, as well as roe deer, brown hare and wood mouse. Badger and otter are likely to keep well hidden! Finglandrigg has more 40 species of breeding birds including buzzard, tawny owl, willow tit and reed bunting.

The whole of the Solway Plain area was carved out during the most recent Ice Age, leaving a landscape of low hills with boulders, called drumlins. Human hands shaped the site in the late 1700s and early 1800s, when the Enclosure Acts placed much of the common land at Finglandrigg into private ownership.

Getting there:

The reserve is about 13km (8 miles) from Carlisle, off the B5307, 3km (2 miles) after Fingland. Park in the Haverlands lay-by and continue on foot along marked paths.

Trails, facilities and events:

Two marked walks. The 2km (1.25 miles) Chalybeate Well Trail takes 45 minutes to an hour. Little Bampton Common Trail is a 3km (1.75 miles) walk that takes around two hours. Information panels around the site. Guided walks and children's events throughout the year.

When to visit:

March to July for birds. April onwards for butterflies. All seasons – especially at dawn and dusk – for squirrels.

Peter Wakely/English Nature 17,253

John Robinson

Finglandrigg is home to lots of wildlife, including birds like the willow tit.

Gait Barrows, Lancashire

All pictures: Rob Petley-Jones/English Nature

Limestone pavement is a rare and outstanding feature to be enjoyed on the trails.

Gait Barrows is a maze of grikes, clints and runnels – all features of an impressive limestone pavement that is one of the most important in Britain. This rare, water-worn limestone, laid down in the shallow warm seas around 300 million years ago, dominates the 300-acre reserve, but has suffered at the hands of 20th century home-improvers. Until the site was protected, people dug up the rare stone to decorate their gardens as rockeries.

Fascinating plants and insects thrive in the fissures (grikes) between the blocks of stone (clints). The grikes drain into runnels – and these gutters carry away the water that re-emerges in the reserve's two lakes. The pavement is surrounded by rich woodland where more than 1,600 species of fungi have been recorded. Watch out for 800 species of moth too.

Getting there:

Gait Barrows is 3km (2 miles) from Silverdale. There is a small car park. A Sunday bus service runs in summer.

Trails, facilities and events:

Three trails – Limestone, Yew and Hawes Water – cover all the reserve features. Permits available for off-trail visits. The Hawes Water Trail has good disabled access. Moth evenings and children's events.

When to visit:

Spring and summer for flowering plants. All year for woodland birds.

Hawes Water reedbeds and high brown fritillary on common spotted orchid.

Gibraltar Point, Lincolnshire

Gibraltar Point is part of an ever-changing coastline. For centuries, the dynamics of sea and land have affected the people who live here. The nearby town of Wainfleet was a busy port in medieval times, but its access to the sea gradually silted up until it became completely isolated. For a while, Gibraltar Point was the closest that larger boats could get to the town, and a small community grew up. But by the early part of this century, the sea had retreated and new lines of dunes formed.

The reserve is made up of sandy and muddy seashores, sand dunes, saltmarshes and freshwater habitats along three miles of the coast, from the southern end of Skegness to the entrance of The Wash. Among the Point's famous birds are little tern and it hosts more than 200 species of migrating birds.

Getting there:

5.5km (3.5 miles) from Skegness. Well signposted from the town. Two pay and display car parks.

Trails, facilities and events:

A network of marked paths, an observation platform at Mill Hill and public hides overlooking the Mere and Fenland lagoon. Visitor centre near the South Car Park, open daily from May to October and on weekends and bank holidays the rest of the year.

When to visit:

All year round for birds.

Redshank is one of the birds at Gibraltar Point.

John Robinson

Peter Wakely/English Nature 12,546

One of the trails at Gibraltar Point, looking from Mill Hill.

Golitha Falls, Cornwall

Visitors enjoy the all-ability trail in Draynes Wood, within the Golitha Falls reserve.

Peter Wakely/English Nature 20,420/19,274A

Spectacular cascades and hundreds of years of human history make Golitha Falls a special place. Picturesque woods grow on a steep-sided valley gorge, where the River Fowey cascades down a series of waterfalls. These woods are a remnant of the ancient woodland that covered much of the surrounding area.

The history of managing the wood by coppicing goes back to at least the time of the Domesday Book. Today, small-scale coppicing has been re-started.

Although naturalists love Golitha for its plantlife, it is the overwhelming beauty of the place that draws visitors. Here, wood, water and stone combine to create an enchanting landscape.

Getting there:

5km (3 miles) north west of Liskeard. 4km (2.5 miles) north of Dobwalls on the A38. There is a car park.

Trails, facilities and events:

Marked trails, including easy access trail. Toilets in the car park. Ice cream van during the summer. There is a leaflet available and an information panel.

When to visit:

April to July for wildflowers. Any time of year for the river and falls.

Holkham, Norfolk

As a boy, Lord Nelson loved to explore this stretch of coast. And it's not surprising. Holkham is the most extensive, diverse and dramatic nature reserve on a coastline famous for nature reserves. There are windswept tidelines, a maze of creeks and saltings, miles of dunes and sandpits, shady pinewoods, green pastures and marshes.

The area's history, though, stretches back long before Nelson. Holkham Fort dates back to around AD47 and is the remains of an Iceni tribal settlement. Warriors of this tribe fought with Queen Boadicea against the Romans. The only battles today are the skirmishes as thousands of knot and a seasonal mix of redshank, grey plover and dunlin dibble about over the surface of the mud to find food.

Getting there:

Holkham stretches from Burnham Norton to Blakeney and covers about 4,000 hectares. There are three car parks. At Burnham Overy, parking is free but there is a charge for parking at Lady Ann's Drive and Wells Beach Road.

John Robinson

Dunlin are among the shoreline birds.

Robin Chittenden/English Nature 26,862

Walkers at Holkham. The coastal NNR also offers shady pinewoods.

Trails, facilities and events:

The core section of the reserve, from Wells to Holkham Bay, is criss-crossed by paths. There is a cycleway and bridleway, comprehensive leaflet and beach users' guide. Toilets and refreshments at Wells Beach Road car park.

When to visit:

Winter for migrant birds and thousands of pink-footed geese. Summer for sea lavender, orchids and terns.

Ingleborough, Yorkshire

English Nature

Walkers on the reserve. Below right: one of the limestone pavement plants, bloody cranesbill.

At Ingleborough, natural processes have created a majestic landscape of exceptional limestone pavements, gritstone capped peaks and underground caverns. The range of rock types, soils and altitudes, together with the effects of human management down the years, have created an intriguing mix of plants, insects, birds and other animals. The rocks at Ingleborough were laid down around 300 million years ago. The huge expanses of Great Scar limestone rock, revealed and pressurised by glaciers, produced this giant cobbled 'runway'.

Evidence is strong that man has farmed this area since prehistoric times. There are ancient fields, traces of lost villages and an Iron Age fort tops the summit plateau. Ingleborough Hill is one of the famous Three Peaks in the Yorkshire Dales National Park.

Getting there:

8km (5 miles) north of the A65. About 9.5km (6 miles) from Ingleton. There are car parks and lay-bys. Rail stations at Ribblehead or Horton in Ribblesdale on the Settle to Carlisle railway.

Trails, facilities and events:

There are four marked walks of between 3.5km and 15km, taking 1-1.5 hours to 5 hours. One runs between rail stations. Ingleborough can be challenging, even for experienced and well-equipped walkers.

When to visit:

May to July for limestone pavement plants.

Peter Wakely/
English Nature 19,551

Kingley Vale, West Sussex

Paul Keene/English Nature 27,330

Inspirational moments with Kingley Vale's yews.

Some of Britain's oldest living things – ancient yews – are found in this beautiful, but sometimes eerie, reserve. Certainly the yew grove at twilight is no place for the faint-hearted and it is little wonder that legends of hauntings abound. People have been associated with Kingley Vale since far beyond recorded history. On the summit of Bow Hill are the tombs of ancient chieftains of the tribes who lived here around 1,000 BC. These barrows are known locally as the Devil's humps. Elsewhere, there are signs of Roman, Celtic and mediaeval settlements and cultivation.

The rich downland blooms with up to 50 species of flowering plants and grasses per square metre, and 39 of Britain's 58 butterfly species have been recorded here.

Getting there:

5km (3 miles) north west of Chichester. Leave the A286 at Mid Lavant, or bike from Chichester station. The main car park is near the village of West Stoke. The reserve is signed from there and is about 15 minutes' walk.

Trails, facilities and events:

Small field centre with wheelchair and pushchair access. Permanent displays and information. A marked circular trail through the main habitats, starting and finishing at the field centre.

When to visit:

All year round, but May to August are recommended.

Lindisfarne, Northumbria

In 635AD, Holy Island, much of which sits within the Lindisfarne NNR, became a reknowned Christian priory in the then kingdom of Northumbria. After the death of the Priory's greatest bishop, Cuthbert, in 687AD, it produced perhaps the 7th century's greatest work of art, the Lindisfarne Gospels. These are now housed in the British Library, but a computer version can be seen at the Lindisfarne Heritage Centre.

The ever-changing coastline of the NNR offers a variety of wildlife seldom seen elsewhere. Tidal mudflats, saltmarshes and dunes combine to create a home for fascinating plants and bird visitors from thousands of miles away. Every autumn, the jet-set fly in! Six internationally important species of wildfowl and wading birds overwinter here. For the pale-bellied Brent geese, this is their only regular wintering place in Britain.

Pinkfooted and greylag geese, widgeon, grey plover and bar-tailed godwit are the other VIPs. Brought ashore by water and wind, the sand of the dunes is gradually tamed by marram grass. The dunes support many plants, such as the early forget-me-nots.

Getting there:

Holy Island is sign-posted from the A1 south of Berwick-upon-Tweed. The island can only be reached at low tide across a long causeway. Always check the tide timetables. Car parks at Budle Bay on Holy Island, and at Beal on the mainland.

Trails, facilities and events:

The trail covers 5km (3 miles) and takes 1.5 to 3 hours. Childrens activity booklet available.

When to visit:

July and August for butterflies. Autumn for the wildfowl and waders.

Peter Wakely/English Nature 19,991

Visitors to Lindisfarne.

Lower Derwent Valley, East Yorkshire

Lower Derwent Valley is a series of flood meadows, pasture and woodland teeming with fascinating plants and thousands of birds.

More than 80 species of birds have bred here in recent years. The wildfowl include pintail, gargany and gadwall, and the waders include curlew, lapwing, snipe, redshank and oystercatcher.

In winter, the grasslands attract up to 5,000 teal, up to 70 Bewick's swan and as many as 10,000 widgeon. Watch out, too, for the red-eyed damselfly, which likes to bask on the water lilies, and other colourful dragonflies.

Getting there:

Three main access points: Duffield Carrs car park is 1.5km (1 mile) east of North Duffield off the A163; Bank Island is 1km south-east of Wheldrake off the Wheldrake to Thorganby road; Wheldrake is 1.5km (1 mile) south-east of Wheldrake off the Wheldrake to Thorganby road.

Trails, facilities and events:

Duffield Carrs has two hides, wheelchair access and bike racks. Bank Island has two hides, a viewing platform and bike racks. Wheldrake has six hides. Access to the Pocklington Canal, a tributary of the lower Derwent, is available at nine locations and is ideal for walking, though not accessible for wheelchairs.

When to visit:

December – March for waterfowl, May and June for breeding birds and flowering meadows.

P N Watts/English Nature 25,228

Lapwing, above, and, below, meadowsweet in the Derwent Valley.

Peter Wakely/English Nature 14,079

Moor House-Upper Teesdale

Remote, dramatic and exhilarating, Moor House is a place of spectacular geological formations, waterfalls and panoramic views. Cauldron Snout and High Force waterfalls are simply astounding, particularly after rain, and are well worth the walk to them.

One of England's largest NNRs, it is particularly well known for the plants that originally colonised the highest Pennines after the Ice Age. You can also see outstanding rock formations such as outcropping sugar limestone and the Great Whin Sill.

Today in this renowned outdoor laboratory, scientists from the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology are investigating the effects of a changing climate on upland plants and animals.

Getting there:

B6277 Alston Road out of Middleton-in-Teesdale for 11km (7 miles) to the Langdon Beck Hotel, left to the car park at Cow Green Reservoir. Cumbria side of the reserve: A66 north of Appleby-in-Westmorland, then minor roads through Long Marton and Knock.

Trails, facilities and events:

Three nature trails. The 5km (3 miles) Widdybank Fell is accessible for wheelchairs and takes about 2 hours. Waterfalls and wildlife trail covers 12 km (7.5 miles) and takes about 5 hours. The 'up on the ridge' trail covers 12 km (7.5 miles) and takes about 5 hours.

Peter Wakely/English Nature 14,150

High Force, an exhilarating and much-visited sight within the NNR.

Programme of events includes guided walks and story-telling. The Pennine Way runs through the NNR.

When to visit:

Spring and summer for alpine wildflowers and waders.

North Meadow, Cricklade, Wiltshire

Once there were many meadows like this along the upper Thames but most have been destroyed by agricultural improvement or gravel extraction. North Meadow is an old, flower-rich hay meadow with a huge variety of wildflowers – so many, in fact, that it is one of Europe's finest. The spectacular blossoming of snake's head fritillary flowers brings people from all over the country during April. In winter, the Rivers Thames and Churn frequently flood the meadow. This is vital to help the plants thrive.

The people of Cricklade have managed North Meadow for hundreds of years, latterly in partnership with English Nature which has owned most of the meadow since the early 1970s. Ancient carved stones mark the boundaries separating the different 'hay lots'.

Getting there:

Off the A419, 20 minutes walk north west of Cricklade town centre. Car parking and bus links in the town. Roadside parking within 300 metres of the reserve.

Trails, facilities and events:

Three marked trails. Leaflets and information panels. Toilets and refreshments in Cricklade. Guided walks.

When to visit:

April for snake's head fritillary flowers. June and July for the meadow flowers. All year for birds.

Peter Wakely/English Nature 11,656

Stephen Davis

North Meadow is renowned for its snake's head fritillary show.

Old Winchester Hill, Hampshire

Bob Gibbons/English Nature 27,443

Peter Wakely/English Nature 597

Time to kick off the footwear in a quiet corner of Old Winchester Hill.
Right: round-headed rampion.

The spectacular ancient hill-fort is said to pre-date the Iron Age and gives views as far as the south coast and the Isle of Wight. There are many overlapping layers of history here. Bronze Age burial mounds for important members of local society were built on the crest of the hill between 4,500 and 3,500 years ago. These mounds – known as barrows – can now be seen as large grassy lumps.

The fort, which has never been excavated, is believed to have been a defended settlement for a Celtic chieftain. Within the fort itself, you can still see the site of the huts as subtle hollows. Some of the hollows, though, were created during World War II, when the army used the hill as a mortar firing range!

Several types of orchids thrive here, as do flowers like the round-headed rampion. Look out, too, for juniper bushes. Butterflies such the chalkhill blue appear in large numbers in summer.

Getting there:

1.5km (1 mile) south west of Warnford, along minor roads. There is an on-site car park, sign-posted from the A32.

Trails, facilities and events:

2.5km (1.5 mile) nature trail. Leaflets, and information panels. Easy access trail from a dedicated car park fitted with Radar padlock. Keep to the paths. There may be unexploded ammunition. Picnic tables and an ice cream van in summer.

When to visit:

June and July for wildflowers. May to October for invertebrates.

Redgrave and Lopham Fen, Suffolk

For centuries, local people dug peat for fuel, harvested reed and sedge for thatching and grazed the drier margins with cattle. But, as these activities dried up, so did the fen. Drainage and water abstraction dried the fen even further.

The National Trust is working to rehydrate the fen and re-create its wonderful wildlife habitats. Already wetland species such as butterwort, marsh and fragrant orchid and birds such as snipe have made a comeback.

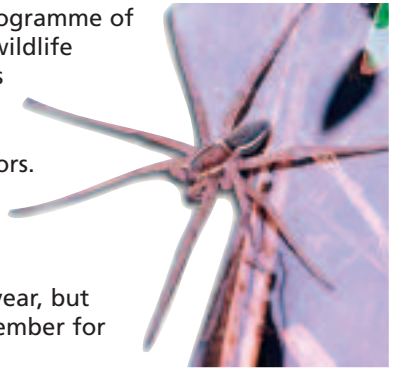
Redgrave and Lopham Fen is the largest remaining river valley fen in England and the source of the River Waveney. It is also one of the most important wetlands in Europe with fantastic wildlife, including many species now rare in Britain. The small pools are home to the elegant fen raft spider found in only one other area in the UK.

Getting there:

From the B1113 (between Redgrave and South Lopham). From the A1066 (between South Lopham and Bressingham). The main car parks are at the visitor centre.

Trails, facilities and events:

Three nature trails, a nature trail leaflet, and information panels. The visitor centre is open 10am-5pm on Saturdays and Sundays – toilets and refreshments available. Programme of courses and wildlife events. Paths and viewing platform for disabled visitors.



When to visit:

Any time of year, but April to September for wildlife.

Boardwalk and (above) the fen raft spider.

Peter Wakely/English Nature 16,679/21,919

Saltfleetby-Theddlethorpe Dunes, Lincolnshire

Paul Glendell/English Nature 24,178

Sand dunes and (below) southern marsh-orchid.

Military as well as natural history makes this 8km stretch of dunes a fascinating place. This constantly changing coastline in north-east Lincolnshire was a bombing range in the 1930s and was fortified with pillboxes and tank traps in World War Two. It became a nature reserve in 1969 and is a haven for plants, insects, resident and migratory birds and mammals such as water vole.

In the 13th century, a series of unusually violent storms began to form today's dunes. The sea threw up shingle and other beach-building material, and strong winds blew sand to the back of the beach. The same processes are still at work, creating new shingle ridges, dunes and saltmarsh.

Getting there:

A short distance from the A1031 between Saltfleet and Mablethorpe. There are seven car parks. The main one – Rimac – is signed from the main road. Bus services nearby.

Trails, facilities and events:

Sea View trails (three walks); Churchill Lane trails (two walks); Rimac trail (one easy access route). Public toilets open from May to October. Free guided walks from May to September. Trails leaflet available from the reserve office.

When to visit:

Summer for flowers, insects and birds. Winter for migrant birds.

Peter Wakely/English Nature 17,873

Shapwick Heath, Somerset

Shapwick Heath is a monument to the history and culture of Neolithic man, who came here 6,000 years ago and made this his tribal homeland. For centuries, peat was harvested and those areas have been transformed into a wilderness of open water, reed swamp and reedbed. With green, flowery meadows, still dark ditches, secret fens and shady wet woodlands, this is a tranquil, atmospheric landscape.

Parts of the Neolithic Sweet Track – the oldest man-made route in Britain – still exist here, preserved beneath the peat. This remarkable timber track was built in the spring of 3,806 BC to cross the reedswamp. Many artefacts have been found, including a child's toy tomahawk and pots of hazelnuts. Today, watch out for otters, waterfowl, hairy dragonflies and listen for the elusive bittern.

Visitors can also explore the history of the area in the Iron Age reconstruction village near the Peat Moors Centre.

Getting there:

Near Shapwick, off the A39. Car parks clearly marked.

Trails, facilities and events:

Marked paths, an easy access trail and a series of hides. The Peat Moors Centre is open all year-round and has a café and toilets. Guided walks and events.

When to visit:

December and January for wildfowl. May for the hobby. Summer for warblers.

Paul Glendell/English Nature 27,388

English Nature

Enjoying a stroll through Shapwick, where it's not hard to imagine the ancient Sweet Track.

Slapton Ley, Devon

Paul Glendell/English Nature 27,398

Slapton Ley provides people with opportunities to spot birds like the great crested grebe.

Slapton Ley is a highly unusual wetland, and is divided into two 'leys', or freshwater lakes, separated from the sea by the narrowest of land bridges. It is a mosaic of habitats, including reedbed, fen and woodland. These create a wide variety of 'ecological niches' and a wonderful diversity of plants and animals.

Slapton is famous for migrant warblers and the open water is home to many species of waterfowl. The reserve also has more than 490 species of plants and 2,000 species of fungi. Porpoises, basking sharks and grey seal can occasionally be seen off Slapton Sands during the summer months.

John Robinson

Getting there:

Alongside the A379, 13km (8 miles) from Kingsbridge, 9.5km (6 miles) from Dartmouth. There are three car parks. The Dartmouth to Kingsbridge bus runs near the reserve.

Trails, facilities and events:

Two birdwatching hides and a 2.5km (1.5 miles) nature trail. Leaflets from the field centre in Slapton village. Disabled access, toilets and viewing ramp. Refreshments.

When to visit:

April to October for birds and wildflowers.

Stiperstones, Shropshire

John Mason

Laurie Campbell

Paul Glendell/English Nature

The Stiperstones ridge is rough, but there is an easy access trail at its foot.

If the Devil can flatten the Stiperstones, all of England will perish – so says one of the many legends inspired by this spectacular 10km quartzite ridge. Four cairns and a Bronze Age long barrow are evidence of human activity going back 3,000 years. There is also an Iron Age hill fort, and a lost and ghostly Roman legion is rumoured to march the ridge.

The landscape, wildlife and history have inspired novels by Mary Webb and DH Lawrence, musical works – and a beer!

Much of the area is heather heathland, created when people first cleared trees so that they could graze their animals. There are also hay meadows and woodland. These habitats are home to lots of animal and birdlife – from the curlew and grouse to the brown hare and emperor moth. The walking varies from the easy to the highly strenuous.

Getting there:

Near Minsterley, Shropshire. The reserve is well signed from the main roads.
Five car parks around the reserve. The Stiperstones Shuttle bus service – summer weekends and bank holidays.

Trails, facilities and events:

500 metre all-ability trail. 8km (5 miles) Stiperstones Stomp trail over exposed, rough terrain. Toilets and refreshments in nearby villages and pubs.

When to visit:

Late summer for the heather and gorse in full bloom. Weather can make it tricky in winter.

Stodmarsh, Kent

Peter Wakely/English Nature 20,082

John Robinson

Birdwatching from the Stodmarsh causeway. Right: sedge warbler.

Earliest records show that the Augustinian monks were the first to use this land. They dug ditches to bring the floodwater of the adjoining River Stour onto the meadows. The marsh was excellent grazing for mares in foal and was known as Stud-marsh, now changed to Stodmarsh. Flood barriers and mining have been subsequent influences.

These large wetland habitats attract a rich variety of wildlife. The reserve is particularly noted for its large population of breeding and wintering birds, some of which are rare. Birds like bearded tit and the secretive bittern, breed here. Other birds, like reed bunting and sedge warbler use the reedbeds for nesting and the reserve is also home to the endangered water vole, 'Ratty' from *The Wind in the Willows*.

Getting there:

Stodmarsh NNR lies between Stodmarsh village and Grove Ferry near the A28 Canterbury to Thanet road, about four miles from Canterbury city centre.

Trails, facilities and events:

Four bird hides, an observation mound, and an easy access nature trail of between 0.6km (0.3 miles) and 1.1km (0.6 miles), depending on the chosen route. Information panels and leaflets. Toilets in one of the two car parks. Refreshments available locally.

When to visit:

Any time of year for birds.

Studland and Godlingston Heath, Dorset

Mysterious man-made hollows, barrows and standing stones, 20th Century bunkers and shell holes. Studland's archaeology is just as fascinating as its geology and its wildlife. Fine beaches stretch continuously for miles from South Haven Point to the chalk cliffs of Handfast Point and Old Harry Rocks. The heathland behind this beach is a haven for many rare birds, including the Dartford warbler and nightjar.

Sand dune ridges have built up over the last 400 years to enclose the Little Sea – an acidic freshwater lake which attracts wintering wildfowl. One unmissable landmark is the Agglestone, a large block of iron-rich sandstone, which has stood up to erosion by wind and water.

Getting there:

On Studland Peninsula, 1.5km (1 mile) north of Studland village. Pay and display car parks. A bus and private ferry also operate to the reserve.

Trails, facilities and events:

Four birdwatching hides and various nature trails, from 400 metres to 1.5km (1 mile). Leaflets and signs. The boardwalk to the beach is suitable for wheelchairs. Visitor centre, shop and café. Guided tours and a programme of events. Toilets at Shell Bay, Knoll and Middle Beach.

When to visit:

Winter for wildfowl. Summer for heathland plants and animals.

Bob Gibbons/English Nature 27,486

Riders take advantage of the heathland tracks. Inset: sand lizard.

John Robinson

Teesmouth, Cleveland

Teesmouth is a nature reserve with a difference. In this extraordinary blend of industry and nature, you can find tens of thousands of water-birds, common and grey seals – and a reminder that industry isn't a modern phenomenon. In mediaeval times, the salt industry had already begun to change the Tees estuary. You can still see the grass-covered mounds of ash from the fires that evaporated the sea water to crystallize the valuable salt. 18th Century industrialists shipped raw materials from here and manufacturing developed.

Magnificent seals became extinct in the Tees estuary during the 19th Century because of pollution, disturbances to their habitats and hunting. Today, they have returned and are breeding again. Several hundred shelduck converge at Teesmouth, along with great flocks of migrant birds. You may also spot merlin and peregrine hunting here.

Getting there:

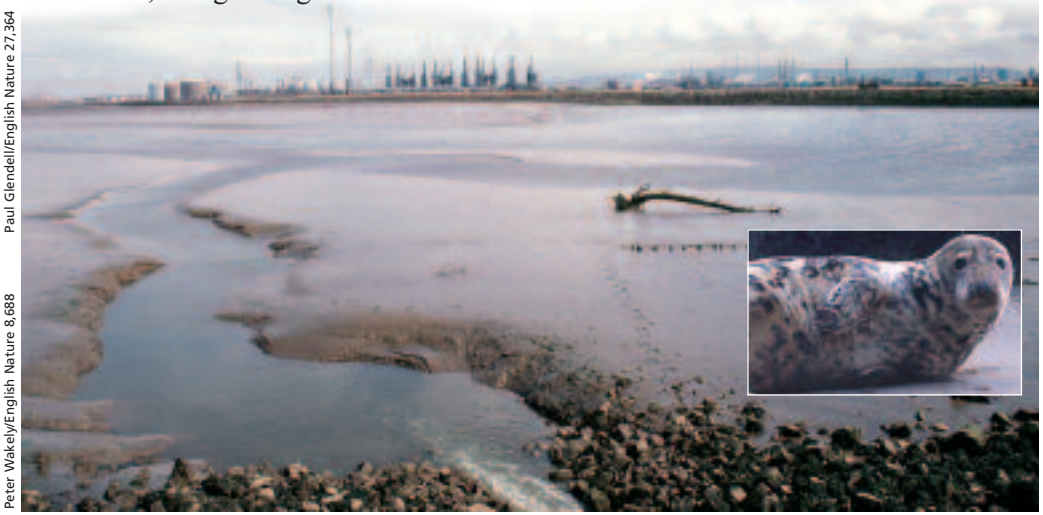
1.5km (1 mile) east of the A1778 and north of Middlesborough. Two car parks at North Gare and Cowpen Marsh. Hourly bus service.

Trails, facilities and events:

Seal Sands easy access path. Two observation hides, information panels and leaflets. Toilets and refreshments at nearby British Energy Visitor Centre and in Seaton Carew.

When to visit:

Spring and summer for dune flowers. Autumn for cormorant, curlew and redshank. Winter for flocks of knot, shelduck and sanderling.



Paul Glendell/English Nature 27,364

Peter Wakely/English Nature 8,688

Teesmouth – industry makes it different but hugely interesting. Inset: grey seals are frequent visitors.

The Lizard, Cornwall

David Chapman

Paul Glendell/English Nature 27,348

Children build a sandcastle on Kennack Sands. Marsh fritillary (inset) is one of the butterflies of The Lizard, and buzzard (below) hunt across the Downs.

The Lizard peninsula's extraordinary geology erupted from the planet's core 400 million years ago. The rocks were shoved and cooked by Earth-shattering forces, and deposited in a series of multicoloured layers onto the most southerly part of the British mainland, in Cornwall. A wealth of wildlife can be found here.

Kennack is one of the finest and most accessible beaches on The Lizard. In summer, the world's second-largest fish, the plankton-eating basking shark, can often be glimpsed close inshore.

At Goonhilly Downs, the heaths are bright with colourful plants – especially in July and August. Buzzards, owls and other birds of prey hunt across the downs. With its turquoise sea in a shallow cove with islands and caves, Kynance can feel like the Mediterranean.

Getting there:

The A3083 and B3293 cross the area. 12 car parks at different sites around The Lizard.

John Robinson

Trails, facilities and events:

The South West Coast Path continues around the perimeter of the whole peninsula. Easy access area on Goonhilly. Information panels and leaflets. Footpath and bridleway network. Visitor centre at Goonhilly.

When to visit:

Lizard flowers are at their best in spring and summer, but the mild climate ensures blooms all year.

Thursley, Surrey

Walkers on a Thursley boardwalk. Below left, the purple emperor butterfly.

Paul Keene/English Nature

Derek Middleton/ FLPA

The Devil stands on the hills nearby and Thor throws a stone at him. It misses and lands in the marsh instead. This is the legend that is said to give Thursley – in the lee of Thor's throw – its name. Myth this may be, but Thursley is still a colourful place. With its lowland heath, mire and woodland, it is one of the largest areas of heathland in Surrey.

Twenty-six species of dragonfly have been recorded on the reserve, along with healthy populations of silver-studded blue, grayling and purple emperor butterflies. Birds to watch for include woodlark, hobby and Dartford warbler.

Getting there:

Between the villages of Elstead and Thursley. The A3 runs along part of the eastern boundary. Main car park at the Moat. Limited parking in Thursley village. Bus service from Godalming.

Trails, facilities and events:

Extensive network of bridleways and paths, and boardwalks to the wetter areas. Leaflets and information. Toilets at the National Trust's Witley information centre. Parts of the site have been used for military training – suspicious objects should be left untouched and reported to the police.

When to visit:

May to September for birds, dragonflies and flowers.

Walberswick, Suffolk

A whole range of habitats comes together at Walberswick. There are some of the best remaining areas of Sandlings heathland, along with reedbeds, inter-tidal mud-flats, grazing marsh, hay meadows, woodland and the tidal estuary of the River Blyth.

The reserve's Westwood Marsh is probably the largest block of freshwater reedbed in Britain – ideal for one of its most secretive residents, the bittern. The area was reclaimed for grazing at the beginning of the 18th Century, but flooded for defence purposes during World War II. This allowed the reeds to spread back over the marsh, restoring its former glory.

There are otter, five kinds of deer, more than 240 species of birds and around 500 different sorts of butterflies and larger moths.

Getting there:

Just south of the village of Walberswick (between Southwold and Dunwich) on the Suffolk coast. The western edge follows the A12. Three English Nature car parks and two more in Walberswick. Hourly bus from Lowestoft to Ipswich.

Trails, facilities and events:

20 miles of footpaths. Observation hide. Guided walks in summer.

When to visit:

All year, but spring for marsh harrier and bittern. Winter for avocet. Summer for nightjar and butterflies.

Minden Pictures/FLPA

Robin Chittenden/English Nature 27,151

Walkers on a sweep of coastline at Walberswick. Top: bittern.

Wicken Fen, Cambridgeshire

Chris Gomersall/English Nature 27,254

A school party takes advantage of Wicken Fen's facilities.

Wicken Fen has been shaped by centuries of use by man. The wetland has played an important role in the social and economic life of the area. It provided materials for thatching local houses, bedding and feed for animals, fish and fowl for food, and peat for fuel.

Wicken Fen is highly unusual in landscape terms. A remnant of the once massive Cambridgeshire Fens, it preserves a true sense of wetland wilderness.

Boardwalks take visitors into the original peat fen, which supports rare fenland plants such as marsh pea, fen violet and marsh fern. In the rough pasture, reedbeds and pools of Adventurer's Fen, breeding wetland birds and wintering wildfowl include teal, wigeon, shoveler, pochard and tufted duck. The dykes, abandoned claypits and other watercourses carry a wealth of aquatic plants, and the rich insect-life includes notable dragonflies, spiders and snails. Charles Darwin collected beetles on the Fen in the 1820s.

Getting there:

South of the A1123, 5km (3 miles) west of Soham, 14.5km (9 miles) south of Ely. Car parking on site.

Trails, facilities and events:

Three nature trails and bird hide. Visitor centre and café open Tuesdays to Sundays. Full programme of events. Admission charge. More information from the National Trust on 01353 720274.

When to visit:

All year.

John Robinson

Water rail.

Wye, Kent

Peter Wakely/English Nature 13,935/17,665

The views from Wye Downs are matchless. Right: flowers include early spider orchids.

What first strikes most visitors to this reserve is the fantastic view and the spectacular landscape. Who could fail to be impressed by the Devil's Kneading Trough – a steep-sided 'coombe' carved into the chalk escarpment by melt waters from the last Ice Age.

Turn your eyes to the ground, and you will be looking at one of Britain's best examples of chalk grassland, noted for its rich plant-life. The reserve boasts around 4,000 different plant species. As well as 19 different types of orchids, there are fragrant herbs, such as wild marjoram, basil and thyme. You only have to walk on the grass in summer to smell their presence. The steepness of the landscape is what saved Wye Downs from the plough. This reserve is now grazed, as it would have been traditionally, to conserve the plant-rich downland and its other wildlife.

Getting there:

9.5km (6 miles) from Ashford on the North Downs, near the village of Wye. Car parking opposite the reserve.

Trails, facilities and events:

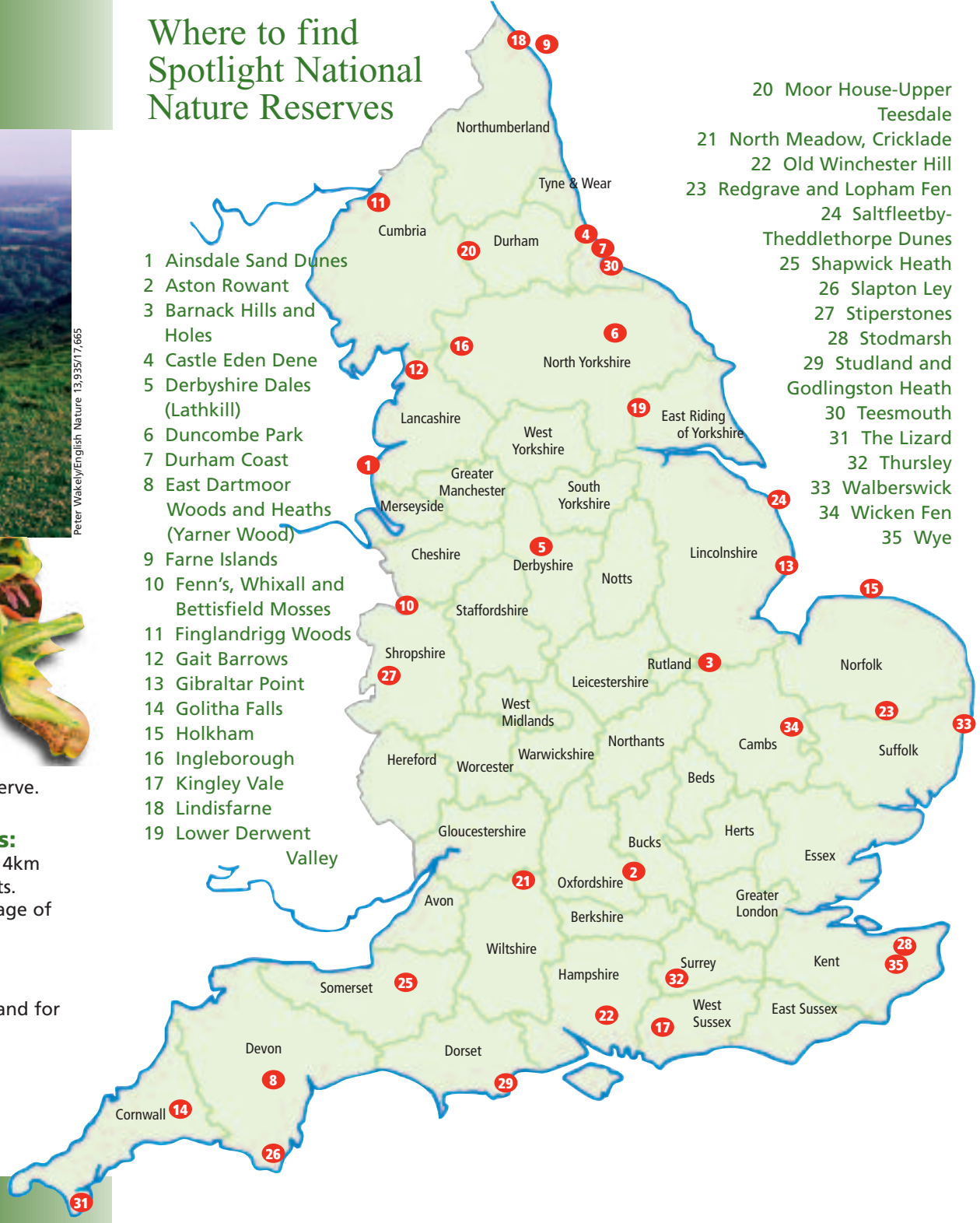
Nature trail (very steep in places) – 4km (2.5 miles). Information and leaflets. Toilets and refreshments in the village of Wye.

When to visit:

Summer for views over the Weald and for wildflowers and butterflies.

Where to find Spotlight National Nature Reserves

1 Ainsdale Sand Dunes
2 Aston Rowant
3 Barnack Hills and Holes
4 Castle Eden Dene
5 Derbyshire Dales (Lathkill)
6 Duncombe Park
7 Durham Coast
8 East Dartmoor Woods and Heaths (Yarner Wood)
9 Farne Islands
10 Fenn's, Whixall and Bettisfield Mosses
11 Finglandrigg Woods
12 Gait Barrows
13 Gibraltar Point
14 Golitha Falls
15 Holkham
16 Ingleborough
17 Kingley Vale
18 Lindisfarne
19 Lower Derwent Valley
20 Moor House-Upper Teesdale
21 North Meadow, Cricklade
22 Old Winchester Hill
23 Redgrave and Lopham Fen
24 Saltfleetby-Theddlethorpe Dunes
25 Shapwick Heath
26 Slapton Ley
27 Stiperstones
28 Stodmarsh
29 Studland and Godlingston Heath
30 Teesmouth
31 The Lizard
32 Thursley
33 Walberswick
34 Wicken Fen
35 Wye



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Top left: Bee orchid. Peter Wakely/English Nature
Bottom left: Tree sparrow. John Robinson
Main: A family enjoys a walk across Studland and Godlingston Heath NNR. Bob Gibbons/English Nature

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