

## SOUTH STAFFORDSHIRE **RAILWAY WALK**

### **WILDLIFE**

Until the Railway Line closed in 1965 the embankments were mostly grassed and kept open by clearing, rabbit grazing and regular cinder fires. Since the closure a scrub layer and immature woodland has established over most of its length.

The predominant species are oak, ash, hawthorn and willow with sycamore, birch and elm. One significant exception to this is at the Himley to Holbeache section. Here is a long stretch of Corsican Pines which were planted so that the Earl of Dudley's view from Himley Hall was not spoilt by the sight of the trains. Other features include heathland plants, flower rich glades, streams and watercourses plus bare sandstone cuttings.



Speckled Wood

A substantial resident bird population can be found which is largely characteristic of woodland or open farmland. In winter, migrants from northern Europe are found such as Redwings, Fieldfare, Redpoll, Siskin and Brambling. Spring brings the Blackcap, Garden Warbler, Chiff Chaff, Willow Warbler and Whitethroat. Birds of prey such as Sparrow Hawk, Kestrel, Barn Owl, Buzzard, Tawny Owl and Little Owl have all been recorded.

Lapwing and Skylark were once common singing and displaying, especially near Orton. However, national decline in these species due to modern agricultural practices means you have to be a bit luckier to see them these days. Linnets nest in the cuttings where the Gorse grows, whilst Common Whitethroat and Yellow Hammers breed in the scrubby areas.

In winter large flocks of finches such as Greenfinch, Chaffinch, Tree Sparrow and Goldfinch congregate in neighbouring fields. The occasional Brambling may be seen with these flocks.

Over 280 species of wild plants have been recorded, including some local rarities. Some of the more significant and rare include the Early Purple Orchid near Castlecroft and Ploughmans Spikenard near Lower Penn. Most common mammals frequent the area including mice and voles. Badger frequent the Walk as do foxes, stoats and weasels. Even polecat have been noted.

There is a good record of 22 species of butterfly such as Speckled Wood, Small Tortoiseshell, Peacock, Brimstone and Large White. It also includes the scarce Purple Hairstreak. This is very difficult to see due to its habit of flitting in the tops of oak trees in July and August.

The Walk as a whole is managed as a 'Woodland Ride' for its whole length. This is a feature of managed woodlands where a track

is bordered by mown grass, scrub and then woodland. This is perfect for butterflies allowing shelter from the wind, sunny spots plus food plants for the caterpillars and nectar for the adults. Indeed the whole line now forms an excellent shelterbelt and green corridor through the intensively managed agricultural area and also the urban area of Wombourne.

The site is managed by South Staffordshire Council's Leisure Services and it's Rangers. Grant aid and management advice is provided by the Forestry Authority. The diversity and range of habitats is managed to improve the potential for wildlife and creating a beautiful and pleasing feature of the South Staffordshire landscape. If you wish to discuss the wildlife or the management of the Railway Walk then contact the Rangers on 01902 882605.



Spotted Orchid