

Bridgwater & Taunton Canal and the River Tone Navigation Wildlife & Space Walk



WILDLIFE

Walking or boating along the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal is an ideal way to experience nature at close quarters. Common birds on this canal are the moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*) and coot (*Fulica atra*). Moorhens have nearly-black plumage and a red forehead, whereas the similar coot can be distinguished by its distinctive white forehead and bill. Both have large families of up to a dozen chicks.

The much larger grey heron (*Ardea cinerea*) is a stately bird that often stands motionless in shallow water watching for fish or frogs. When disturbed, it takes to the air majestically, with slow beats of its grey wings.



Iris pseudacorus

The clean water of the canal supports abundant plant life. Tall reeds overshadow rushes and clumps of yellow flag iris (*Iris pseudacorus*) along the edge of the waterway, while the wide, leathery leaves of water lilies (*Nymphaea alba*) float on the surface. Many different types of weed grow

profusely in the water as it becomes warmer in summer due, in part, to the infrequent use of narrow boats on this canal and the ingress of nutrients from neighbouring fields.

One of the plants often seen growing alongside canals and rivers is the tall, thin Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*), ideal habitat for the aptly named reed warblers (*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*) and their close relatives, the sedge warblers (*Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*).

These warblers are dependent upon the tall reeds to build their nests and will arrive from their overwintering grounds in faraway Africa around April time, ready to breed in summer. They will weave

their delicate cup shaped nests in the dead stems of the previous reeds, while the current year's growth begins to grow up around them. You can often hear them long before you spot them, as they are very good at hiding, so listen out for their repetitive, rhythmical 'chirr, chirr, chirr' from within the reeds.



Insect life flourishes in summer. You can often see the colourful bodies of dragonflies sparkling in the

sun while, on the water's surface, whirligig beetles and pond skaters dance about. Beautiful butterflies can also be seen fluttering along the towpaths in the spring and summer, often many species can be seen on just a short walk along the towpath.

Feeding on insects are small animals such as water voles (*Arvicola amphibius*), their presence given away by a sudden “plop” in the water. These dumpy looking burrowing mammals look a lot like the brown rat (*Rattus norvegicus*), but have more of a snub shaped nose, with ears hidden by fluff and a shorter tail. Water vole burrows are excavated into the river and canal banks, using their large, orange, front teeth to scrape out chunks of mud. The entrances are similar in size and shape to a tennis ball, have neatly kept 'lawns', where



Lacerta vivipara

they have popped their heads out for a quick munch, and you will not find the 'fan' of excavated material that you get from rats.

Reptiles and amphibians will be out hunting for insects too. The reptiles, such as common lizards (*Lacerta vivipara*), need to warm

up by basking in the sunlight before stalking their prey. Frogs, toads and newts need water to lay their eggs in, but choosing the canal can be a dangerous strategy, as their eggs and larvae (tadpoles in the case of frogs), become the prey for larger insects such as dragonfly larvae and small fish, as well as the semi aquatic grass snake (*Natrix natrix*) which can often be seen swimming across the canal.

Insects are not safe at night either as the bats emerge from their day-time roost sites. Bats, such as the water loving Daubenton's (*Myotis daubentonii*), use their ears to hunt for their prey by shouting out a loud, ultrasonic echolocation call - just like radar! These sounds are beyond the range of people but sometimes their silhouettes can be spotted swooping low over the water, plucking insects from just above the surface, or up amongst the leaves of the hedgerow trees.



Esox lucius

The canal is renowned for its excellent fishing. Most coarse species are present – they include roach (*Rutilus rutilus*), pike (*Esox lucius*), perch (*Perca fluviatilis*), bream (*Abramis brama*),

tench (*Tinca tinca*) and small minnows (*Phoxinus phoxinus*). The aggressive pike is the largest of all canal fish and often lurks among weed beds bursting out to catch their prey of smaller fish and sometimes even other pike! You will sometimes find the large shells of fresh water swan mussels (*Anodonta cygnea*), or occasionally, the invasive zebra mussels (*Dreissena polymorpha*), lying on the canal bank, having been dredged up with mud from the water, or possibly caught and munched by the elusive otter.

SOMERSET SPACE WALK

The Somerset Space Walk uses the canal to illustrate our solar system through models of the sun and planets on a scale of 1 millimetre to every 530 kilometres. The Space Walk was completed in 1997. It was designed by Pip Youngman and opened by British Astronomer Heather Cooper. The model of the sun is situated at Higher Maunsel Lock and the planets are set out along



the towpath in each direction. So, whether you walk towards Bridgwater or Taunton, you will end up at Pluto, the planet furthest from the sun. Pluto is located at

Bridgwater's YMCA and Taunton's Brewhouse Theatre. The other planets in order from the sun are Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune.



FURTHER READING

The Canals of South West England

(Charles Hadfield)

By Waterway to Taunton

(Tony Haskell)

Bridgwater Docks & The River Parrett

(Brian Murless)

REFRESHMENTS

Bridgwater: many pubs and cafes

Huntworth: The Boat & Anchor

Tel: 01278 662473

North Newton: The Harvest Moon

Tel: 01278 662980

Maunsel Lock: Maunsel Lock Tea Rooms

Tel: 01278 238220

Creech St Michael: The Bell Inn

Tel: 01823 444566

Bathpool: The New Mill

Tel: 01823 335258

Taunton: many pubs and cafes

BOAT HIRE

Somerset Boat Centre

Higher Maunsel Lock TA7 0DQ

Tel: 07508 959996

TOURIST INFORMATION

Kings Square, Bridgwater TA6 3AR

Tel: 01278 427692

Fore Street, Taunton TA1 1JD

Tel: 01823 340470

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This leaflet is one of a series published by the West Country Branch of the Inland Waterways Association to encourage greater use and appreciation of the West Country's canals and rivers.

The IWA is a membership charity that works to protect and restore the country's 7,000 miles of canals and rivers. The Association also provides practical and technical support to restoration projects through its expert Waterway Recovery Group.

To find out more visit the IWA website: www.waterways.org.uk or e-mail iwa@waterways.org.uk



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