

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



## WILDLIFE

The Bridgwater & Taunton Canal is an ideal place to experience nature at close quarters. Birds common to this canal are the moorhen and coot. Moorhens have nearly-black plumage and a red forehead, whereas the similar coot can be distinguished by its white forehead and bill. Both have up to a dozen chicks.

The grey heron is a much larger, 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 wings.



Yellow flag iris.

Plant life is abundant. Tall reeds overshadow rushes and yellow flag iris along the edges, while the wide leaves of water lilies float on the surface. Many different types of weed grow profusely in the water, due, in part, to the ingress of nutrients from neighbouring fields.

The tall, thin common reed provides habitat for the aptly named reed warblers and sedge warblers. Arriving from Africa around April time, these birds weave delicate, cup shaped nests in dead stems, while the new growth springs up around them. You can often hear them before you spot them; listen for a rhythmic 'chirr, chirr, chirr' from within the reeds.

Insect life flourishes in summer. Look out for colourful dragonflies sparkling in the



Dragonfly.

sun while, on the water's surface, whirligig beetles and pond skaters dance about. Beautiful butterflies can be seen fluttering along the towpath in spring and summer.

Feeding on insects are small animals such as water voles. Sometimes mistaken for brown rats, water voles have more of a snub shaped nose, a shorter tail and ears hidden by fluff. Their burrows can be distinguished from rat burrows by the neat 'lawn' at the front, where they pop out for a quick munch, while rat burrows have a fan of excavated material outside.



Common lizard.

Reptiles and amphibians hunt for insects, too.

Reptiles, such as common lizards, need to warm up by basking in sunlight before stalking their prey. Frogs, toads

and newts need water to lay their eggs in, but their eggs and larvae (tadpoles in the case of frogs) become prey for larger insects, small fish and the semi aquatic grass snakes that you may spot swimming across the canal.

At night, bats such as the water loving Daubenton's emerge from their roosts. Bats use their ears to locate prey by emitting then listening for ultrasonic sounds - just like radar. They can be spotted swooping low over water, plucking insects from just above the surface, or high amongst the trees.

The canal offers excellent fishing. Most coarse species are present, including roach, pike, perch, bream, tench and minnows. The aggressive pike is the largest of all canal fish and often lurks among weed beds,



Pike.

bursting out to catch its prey of smaller fish. You may find on the canal bank large shells of freshwater swan mussels, or the invasive zebra mussels, possibly caught and munched by elusive otters.

## SOMERSET SPACE WALK

The Somerset Space Walk uses the canal towpath to illustrate our solar system through models of the sun and planets positioned along the path on a scale of 1 millimetre to every 530 kilometres.

Completed in 1997, the Space Walk was designed by Pip Youngman and opened by British Astronomer Heather Cooper.

The Sun is situated at Higher Maunsel Lock, midway along the canal, and the planets are set out along the towpath in each direction. So, whether you walk towards Bridgwater or Taunton, you pass each planet in order and end up at Pluto, the planet furthest from the sun. Pluto is located at Bridgwater's YMCA and Taunton's Brewhouse Theatre.



The Sun at Higher Maunsel Lock.

The other planets in order from the sun are Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune.

The Space Walk was upgraded in December 2023 to track the path of Halley's Comet.

The comet reached its furthest point from Earth on December 9, 2023 and it will take 38 years to appear in our skies again. South Somerset Astronomical Society has committed to a unique

project that will annually track the comet's return.

The society created a moveable Halley's Comet marker post that will be repositioned to scale annually along the Taunton side of the Space Walk. The first location of the marker was between Obridge and the Children's Wood in Taunton. Unfortunately, funding was not available to permit a similar exercise from the Bridgwater end.



The new Halley's Comet marker post features a QR code to scan for information. *Photo: Phil Reilly.*

Halley's is probably the most famous comet in history. It appears on the Bayeux tapestry, having passed the Earth months before the Battle of Hastings. There are accounts of its visits going back over 2,000 years and its return was the first astronomical event to be predicted, confirming Newton's theory of gravity.



Explanatory plaque at Higher Maunsel Lock.

## 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 664324

**Maunsel Lock:** Maunsel Lock Tea Rooms  
Tel: 01278 238220

**Higher Lock:** The Lock Inn at Somerset Boat Centre  
Tel: 07508 959996

**Creech St Michael:** The Bell Inn  
Tel: 07927 259015

**Bathpool:** The New Mill  
Tel: 01823 335258

**Taunton:** many pubs and cafes

## 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. IWA is a national organisation with a network of volunteers and branches who deploy their expertise and knowledge to work with navigation authorities, government and other organisations. 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](http://www.waterways.org.uk) or e-mail [iwa@waterways.org.uk](mailto:iwa@waterways.org.uk)



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