



Moors Lake Audio Trail

'A Ranger in your Pocket'

Introduction

Hello and welcome to Moors Valley. My name is Katie and I am one of the Park Rangers working for East Dorset District Council, who manage the Country Park area including the Moors and Crane Lakes. Today, I am going to take you on a short tour around Moors Lake. Along the way we will look and listen out for a variety of wildlife.

The trail is about $\frac{3}{4}$ mile in length. There are 7 stopping points along the walk each marked by a green Audio Trail marker.

If you have dogs with you, in order to protect the wildlife and habitats around the lake and riverside, please keep them on a lead and under close control at all times around this trail and do not allow them to jump in the river. Thank you.

As the seasons change, so will the wildlife you will see here. You can spot the most wildlife during the spring and summer months but it is a nice level route to enjoy at any time of year. There are also activity sheets for families which can be downloaded from our website.

All year round Moors Lake is home to lots of water birds including our resident Swans, Mallards, Moorhens and Coots, as well as visiting species such as Tufted Ducks and Shelducks.

Woodland birds can also be seen and heard throughout the year. The most common species around Moors Lake include Blackbirds, Blue Tits, Long-tailed Tits, Robins, Great Tits and Goldfinches.

If you are lucky you might also catch a glimpse of some of the more secretive mammals that live along the riverbank – our resident water voles and maybe even some otters.

From late spring into the summer the banks of the lake are alive with a colourful show of wild flowers like purple loosestrife, red and white campion, foxglove, meadow cranesbill, comfrey, water mint, stitchwort and ragged robin. And if you are visiting in the summer months the air will be filled with the iridescent shimmer of dragonflies and damselflies as they dart over the water.

So let's begin our trail... As you leave the front doors of the Visitor Centre, turn right, cross the zebra crossing and head over the mound. Follow the path as it skirts the picnic area and look for the first trail marker near the dragonfly sculpture.

Track 1 – Dragonflies and Damselflies

We chose the dragonfly as the Moors Valley logo because of its special significance to the park. The Moors River which feeds and runs alongside Moors Lake is an SSSI; a Site of Special Scientific Interest. This special designation was given to the river in 1990 and helps to protect this superb habitat for dragonflies and other wildlife.

Moors Valley is one of the best places to see dragonflies and damselflies in Britain with 27 species regularly recorded here. That's more than half of the British species and an impressive 80% of those which can be found in Dorset. This is because we have such a wonderful variety of water bodies from small and large ponds to rivers and of course Moors Lake, each providing something to suit many different species.

Although dragonflies are usually larger than damselflies, the easiest way to tell the difference between them is to look at their wings. Dragonflies cannot fold their wings so even when they are resting they are held out at right angles to the body. Damselflies fold their wings along their body when they rest on vegetation.

From this spot you should be able to see Moors Lake's dragonfly sculpture. The sculpture shows the life cycle of a dragonfly; from eggs, laid in the water and their aquatic nymph stage to the flying adults.

The eggs may be randomly into the water or carefully attached or inserted into the floating or submerged plants for more protection. The larvae live in the water and as they grow in size, they have to shed their skin between 8 and 16 times. This can take up to 5 years. Then when the larvae are ready, they leave the water by climbing up the water plants. They pump up their body so their larval skin splits open and the young dragonfly pushes itself out of the hole. Emergence can take as much as 2 hours until the wings have fully unfolded and hardened and during this time they are very vulnerable to predators.

The adult dragonflies spend only a few summer months on the wing to complete their life cycle, mate and lay eggs.

Our largest dragonfly is the Emperor Dragonfly which has a large blue and green body and a wingspan of up to 10cm. The most common species you might see around Moors Lake during the summer months are the Emperor Dragonfly, Brown Hawker, and the Common Blue and Red-Eyed Damselflies. If you would like to know more about dragonflies and damselflies you can buy an identification sheet at the Gift Shop in the Visitor Centre which will help you identify the ones you see during your walk.

Dragonflies and damselflies are predatory and feed by catching other insects.

Of the dragonflies, there are four main types, which can be identified by their behaviour in flight and catching their prey.

Hawkers, like the Emperor Dragonfly, are large and fast flying. They whizz around, usually above head height and rarely settle.

Chasers, like the 4-spotted Chaser, perch on vegetation and then chase after prey. They are usually seen about 2 feet above the surface of the water.

Darters, like the Black Darter, are smaller and more delicate. They sometimes settle on the ground but are more often found perching on leaves or tops of plants.

Skimmers, like the Keeled Skimmer, are often seen flying low over the water, just skimming the surface.

If you do see a dragonfly perched, you may want to approach it very slowly as they have excellent eyesight. Each of their compound eyes is made up of as many as 30,000 facets so they have 360 degree vision.

Now continue along the path until you reach the next stopping point.

Track 2 – Something Fishy

Moors Lake and Moors River are both important habitats for wildlife.

Moors Lake was dug in 1985, primarily to help control flooding along the Moors River. It has a natural clay bottom and is fed from and then into the river itself. This makes it a great place for fish.

Moors Lake is used for fishing and by those who want to find a quiet place to sit and enjoy the views and is full of fish species that have travelled here via the Moors River. There are lots of baby fish species like Dace and Rudd in our lake as it is a perfect habitat of slow moving water to raise young.

They shelter near the edges and under lily pads. The body of the Rudd is blue-green with a silvery-white belly and deep red fins.

You will also find meat eating, or carnivorous fish species like Perch and Pike who feed on smaller fish.

Perch are often nicknamed 'Stripey'. They have a greenish body with black stripes down their sides, a white belly and bright orangey-red, spikey fins.

Pike are ferocious fish with a long striped or spotted body, a large broad head and a huge mouth full of sharp teeth!

If you look closely from our fishing platform, called a 'swim', you may be able to see slight ripples on the surface, or bubbles rising from the edges of the lake. These are signs of the fish living and feeding below the surface.

The bubbles are released by some fish as they feed in the mud at bottom of the lake, which releases bubbles that rise to the top and pop on the surface.

Now continue along the path until you reach the next stopping point.

Track 3 – Water birds

From this spot you should get a good view across the lake, both north and south. There will always be some water birds on the lake all year round, which you should be able to spot or listen out for from here.

Some of our resident species are mute swans, moorhens, coots, black headed gulls and mallards.

We always have at least one breeding pair of mute swans, sometime two. The mute swan is a very territorial bird and will chase invaders off their lake. They can be aggressive when they have their young, called cygnets. Our mute swans make a large and impressive nest at the side of the lake, made from dried reeds and then lay between 2 and 9 eggs in April or May. The cygnets will stay with their parents throughout summer, autumn and winter until March the following year, as they lose their grey downy feathers which are replaced with their white adult flight feathers. Then the parents will chase them away so they can start to build their next nest for another brood.

Although they are called mute swans they do make a variety of noises, most commonly hoots or hisses, especially when they are protecting their young cygnets. (*sound* Xeno-canto, Fraser Simpson)

Mallards are very common and the males are easily identified by their green iridescent head, especially in the spring when they compete to attract a mate. The females are much less colourful so they are camouflaged when sitting on their nest which they make on the banks of the lake. They will have up to 12 fluffy ducklings each spring. If you visit in spring or summer you will see the ducklings swimming closely behind their mother. (*sound* Xeno-canto, Matthias Feuersenger)

Coots have black feathers and white beaks. They are quite cross birds and are often seen quarrelling with each other as well as other birds. (*sound* Xeno-canto, David Farrow)

Moorhens look very similar but have red and yellow beaks and large yellow feet. They are shy birds and often hide in the reeds. When they are scared you might see them running across the surface of the water to find somewhere to shelter. (*sound* Xeno-canto, Patrik Aberg)

Occasionally you might see grey herons stood still in the water's edge or cormorants perched on a tree. They both feed on small fish. Particularly in the early morning, you can often see the cormorants standing with their wings outstretched drying them after diving for fish.

If you are especially lucky you might also catch sight of a Kingfisher perched in a tree on the bank of the lake or river or a bright blue flash as they fly past.

Now continue along the path until you reach the top of the Lake and the next stopping point.

Track 4 – Water voles

Although once a common sight along rivers in Dorset, the number of water voles has declined dramatically over the last 20 years; mostly due to habitat loss and change through the intensification of agriculture and the invasive and non-native American Mink.

Here at Moors Valley, the water vole population was eradicated following the release of American Mink by animal rights activists, from a fur farm in nearby Ringwood. Now that the Mink are no longer found here, between 2010 and 2012 the Rangers from East Dorset District Council carried out an extensive re-introduction programme to bring water voles back to the Moors and Crane Rivers. Happily, once again, we now have a successful breeding population of water voles.

They are much bigger than other voles, with chestnut-brown fur, a flat nose and small ears. Be careful by the edge of the river while you try to spot them. After heavy rainfall the river can be very full and fast flowing.

The voles are secretive and shy animals so if you do spot any you are very lucky. However, even if you can't see any, there are a few indications to look and listen out for.

If they are sitting on the riverbank as you approach, they will jump into the river for safety so do listen for their distinctive 'plop' as they enter the water. (*sound*)

Also, look out for small ripples coming from the edge of the water, which don't stretch all the way across to the other bank unlike those made by water birds. These are a sign of the voles sitting just at the edge of the water as they eat.

Water voles will eat pieces of grass, reeds and rushes; in fact over 200 different species of plants. They create a tunnel in the vegetation from their burrows up the side of the river bank where they can find food.

Water voles can be seen along the entire stretch of Moors River. You should easily be able to spot some burrow holes in the sides of the bank on either side of the river. Because the voles make their burrows in the banks of the rivers they are sensitive to flooding.

If you do manage to spot a water vole please remember to report your sighting to the Rangers in the Visitor Centre.

Keep looking carefully as you walk the short distance to our next stop.

Track 5 – Otters

Otters are a native species to British waterways, and unlike the American Mink, they can live alongside the water voles without harming their population.

Although some visitors do manage to spot the otters during the day, this is very rare. More often you might be able to spot some signs of where the otters have been, as they are mostly active at dusk and during the night. If you look down from the bridge to the muddy edges of the river underneath, you might be able to see otter footprints in the mud. The otters have webbed feet with five short toes and you might also be able to make out a mark where their tail drags on the ground.

Occasionally you might also find some dark, slimy, splodges. This is otter poo, called 'spraints'.

Some people say it smells musky, a bit like old hay.

They leave their spraints on tree stumps, boulders and bridge ledges as a way of communicating with other otters.

Most of the otter's diet made up of fish, especially eels, but they also eat other animals like rabbits and young water birds. They have incredibly sharp teeth.

Otters have long streamlined bodies, about 1 metre in length, and a flat head with a wide muzzle.

They are only found near water, where the roots of the bankside trees make safe places for sleeping and raising cubs. They live solitary lives and only the females will remain with their cubs, teaching them how to swim and fish before they become independent at about one year old. In the late evening you might hear whistling along the river as the mum calls her cubs.

From this stop, don't cross over Kings Farm Bridge. Instead keep heading around the lake and past Kingsmere Railway Station.

Track 6 – Underwater World

From the boardwalk here you might be able to see some of the smaller animals that live in the pond below. These are a very important source of food for many of the larger animals we have already discovered.

Even the smallest of freshwater areas can contain a surprisingly large amount of these small and fascinating water invertebrates. Invertebrates are animals without a backbone and many of them living underwater in this pond are insects. All insects have 3 body parts and 6 legs, just like dragonflies and damselflies.

If you look carefully into the pond you might see some small boat-shaped insects with one pair of longer legs which they use like oars propelling a rowing boat. These are called water boatmen. The greater water boatman can be seen swimming upside-down with the legs towards the surface whereas the lesser water boatman swims with legs hanging below.

On the top of the water you might see some insects which look like they are skating on the surface. Pond skaters have thin bodies and long legs which they use to move across the surface of the pond. They feed on dead or dying insects that have dropped onto the water. Watch them closely and you may notice they are very agile and can jump to get away from predators.

Whirligig beetles look like small black dots which are constantly moving round in circles and spirals on the surface of the water.

Look out for pond snails and other water beetles beneath the surface.

If you visit in early spring you might also be able to spot some frogspawn or toadspawn or some of the tadpoles.

To help you learn more about these creatures The Rangers run regular pond dipping events during the summer. Take a look at the Moors Valley website for details.

From here, continue along the path for a short while until you reach the final stopping point.

Track 7 – Woodland birds

Whatever the time of year you will be able to spot and hear a variety of birds as you walk around Moors Valley. If you have headphones with you, you might want to put them on now so you can better hear the differences between the bird calls.

Some of the most common birds that you can see and hear all year round include Blackbirds. They have a beautiful low singing voice which is very tuneful. (*sound* Xeno-canto, Niels Krabbe)

The Robin's song is similar to the blackbird with a higher singing voice although Robins are rarely seen or heard during the height of summer in July and August when they are moulting and become rather reserved. At other times they can usually be heard singing their melodious warbling song from strategic perches, often quite high up. (*sound* Xeno-canto, Patrik Aberg)

Long-tailed tits have a twittering, trilling song, but it is their high-pitched contact calls that will usually get them noticed. They usually fly around in flocks of up to twenty or so, and they are twittering continually to one another. When they are in the trees, they can be seen busily flitting from branch to branch looking for insects. Long-tailed tits are very acrobatic and will hang upside-down from the end of branches. (*sound* Xeno-canto, Patrik Aberg)

The Great Tits' song is varied, but it's perhaps best known for its piercing "teacher-teacher" song, which sounds very much like a bicycle pump, and is usually heard in the spring and summer. (*sound* Xeno-canto, Stein O Nilsen)

The most common call of a Goldfinch is a pleasant rambling twitter. Their song is a mixture of this call with other rattling notes. (*sound* Xeno-canto, Ruud van Beusekom)

Blue Tits feed mostly on seeds and insects, especially caterpillars. In springtime they feed also on pollen, nectar and sap, and in the autumn on berries. They are one of the most agile birds and can often be seen hanging upside down from branches or bird feeders. (*sound* Xeno-canto, Patrik Aberg)

The Wren is one of the smallest birds in Britain but also one of the loudest with a shrill song which lasts about 5 seconds and usually ends in a trill. Chances are that you will hear its amazingly loud song before you see it. (*sound* Xeno-canto, Patrik Aberg)

Swallows visit in summer and nest every year in the eaves of the Visitor Centre – look out for the television screen in the building. They can often be seen swooping low over the lake to catch insects. Their long tail feathers give them exceptional manoeuvrability.

From here, follow the path back to the zebra crossing and Visitor Centre.

Thank you for downloading our audio trail.

We hope you enjoyed hearing about the wildlife along your walk around Moors Lake.