

## **Fenny Compton Walk**

The first part of the walk passes by or through five old meadows which are still managed traditionally as hay meadows. These are grazed by sheep during the winter and then left until late summer when they are cut, thus providing a now very rare habitat for a profusion of wild flowers, grasses, sedges and insects.

The first meadow, a long one which skirts the new houses on Fieldgate Lane, is not as rich in species as the others, having been partly drained and semi-improved. However many common species of meadow flower can be seen, including the Yellow Rattle. This creeping plant with yellow deadnettle-like flowers is common in all these meadows. Interestingly it is semi-parasitic on grasses and makes a good show of colour from May onwards. By July most of the flowers have gone, leaving hollow cases filled with loose seed which gives a dry rattle as you walk through them, hence the name.

The next meadow, a small one adjacent to the sewage works, is wetter and has a much greater range of species. In one corner where standing water tends to collect since the works was rebuilt, a small marsh has developed. Among the wildlife to be regularly attracted to the small muddy pools are Mallards, Moorhens and Common Snipe. Often a Grey Heron can be watched stalking spawning frogs in spring, while Grass Snakes can also be seen here. From the rush tops a Reed Bunting (like a long-tailed sparrow with black head and white collar) can often be heard singing its simple refrain sounding like "don't-hit-me!", while further off the creaking song of Reed Warblers can be heard from May to July in the new reed filter beds on the works. In May the pools are often covered with a carpet of white Water Crowfoot flowers, but dry periods will see these stretches of water shrink and disappear.

Under the old Kineton branch railway and into the next meadow, one comes to the best of this group of hay meadows. In summer hundreds of butterflies can be seen flying up and down here on sunny days, particularly Meadow Browns, Gatekeepers, Ringlets, Marbled Whites and Skippers, but including scarcer species such as Common Blue, Small Heath, Small Copper and Brown Argus. Even in May one should see a good number of early flying species, such as the Orange-tip and Green-veined White. Keep your eye open for wagtails, both Pied and Yellow, as they feed along the ridges and furrows.

Follow the footpath over to the main railway and pause near the stile. This part of the meadow is one of the best places for wild flowers. Most are not yet out, but you should find a good variety such as the spectacular Ragged Robin which forms a great splash of pink in the wetter parts. Another pink flower which just about still hangs on here and should be in flower during May is the now nationally rare Green-winged Orchid. More numerous in the meadow, though equally scarce nationally and no easier to find is the strange and rather inconspicuous Adder's-tongue Fern. This is a small plant rather like an arum with a green tongue-like spike of spores surrounded by a single unserrated leaf. Hundreds of these can be seen in the meadow to the east of the stile, quite close to the fence.

The railway embankments attract many small birds to nest in the patches of scrub and tall vegetation, such as Common Whitethroat, Linnet and Yellowhammer, while a Cuckoo can sometimes be seen sitting on the fence.

Go under the main line and walk across the set-aside towards Wharf Road. Here you will see Skylarks rising up here and there as you walk. Set-asides have boosted numbers of breeding larks in recent years, though breeding success in the smaller fields tend to be lower due to predation by weasels, stoats and foxes. Keep your eyes out also for Lapwings and Red-legged Partridges which also breed in the vicinity, and Brown Hares.

Continue over the road and then through the Marina and down the Oxford Canal to the A423. There is much of interest on all fronts along this stretch of canal. In the hawthorn scrub along the embankments are many warblers, such as Garden Warbler, Blackcap, Common and Lesser Whitethroats and Willow Warblers, while the Chiffchaffs sing their names at intervals all along here. One scarcer bird to keep your eyes open for is the Willow Tit, a small brown-backed tit with black cap and chin which has a nasal "chee-chee" call and a sweet little song. This interesting bird excavates its own nest holes in soft wood, and along here usually selects an elder tree for this purpose. The canal attracts many different dragonflies and damselflies later in the summer, including the local White-legged Damselfly which is often numerous here and can be identified by its white legs! Also watch out for such waterside plants as Skullcap, Water Mint and Water Figwort along the water's edge. One rare plant was found here a few years ago, namely Wild Celery, which normally prefers slightly brackish water.

From the main road follow the bridleway under the lee of Mill Hill. The old hollow ash trees along here provide valuable nest sites for breeding Tree Sparrows. These are smaller more handsome versions of the once familiar House Sparrow, with a copper-coloured crown, and white cheeks with black spot at the centre. Although they have suffered a huge national decline and are now absent from whole counties, they are still quite common locally, with Fenny Compton being one of Warwickshire's strongholds. These old ash trees also provide nest sites for Kestrel and Little Owl both of which can be seen if the tree is approached quietly.

Up the slopes of Mill Hill, with typical farmland birds such as Skylark, Yellow Wagtail, Red-legged Partridge, Common Whitethroat, Linnet and Yellowhammer all possible. From the top a scan with binoculars will usually reveal soaring Buzzards, Sparrowhawks and Kestrels, while Hobbys and Ravens are now regularly encountered here. A few years ago Ravens were very rare in the county, with only two records since the 1850's. However since 1994 a slow spread eastwards from the Welsh borders has brought a remarkable explosion of records, with three pairs breeding in 2000 increasing to 15 pairs by 2002! Breeding at a site on the Dassett Hills has been annual since 2001.

From the top of the hill is an easy walk back down into the village.