

## **Stanmore Country Park Nature Trail**

Text version, describing the trail starting from the Dennis Lane car park.

Stanmore Country Park is a large nature reserve immediately north of Stanmore town centre. On warm summer weekends it is busy with walkers and visitors; on a frosty winter's day it can be deserted of people but loud with passing birds and foraging muntjac deer. The reserve is open all year round and welcomes all visitors. All that we ask of visitors is that you treat the site with respect – that includes not dropping litter, not picking flowers or fungi, not lighting fires, not damaging trees or fences, and keeping dogs under control.

The Park is managed by voluntary wardens who work to record species and enhance the site's biodiversity. Larger scale work, such as mechanical cutting of the open areas to prevent scrub growth, is performed by council contractors.

### Geology

The Stanmore Beds gravels at the northern edge of the Park grades via a thin band of Eocene Claygate Beds to heavy London Clay in the south and east. As the Stanmore and Claygate Beds drain freely, water washes nutrients out of the surface layers causing the soil to be acid.

### Natural History

Birds spotted at Stanmore Country Park include buzzard, sparrowhawk, tawny owl, all three species of woodpecker, nuthatch and tree creeper. In summer several species of warbler are found including blackcap, whitethroat and lesser whitethroat. Also breeding are blackbird, song and mistle thrush, and many tit species including long-tailed tit. Grey herons, moorhens and kingfishers can sometimes be seen feeding around the ponds. Mammals recorded at the Country Park include fox, the occasional weasel as well as grey squirrels and rabbit. More unusually, badgers and roe deer have been recorded here from time to time and muntjac deer can be spotted in the woodland shrubbery.

Stanmore Country Park is rich in butterfly and moth species. In particular, elm trees in the Park are home to the white-letter hairstreak butterfly, a relatively rare insect

that is a Harrow biodiversity flagship species. Over 240 species of “macro moth” have been recorded in the Park over the past few years.

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Stanmore Country Park needs volunteers. If you would like to help, whether at one of our working parties or as part of the warden team, contact the warden or Harrow Nature Conservation Forum. Regular working parties are listed at [www.harrowncf.org](http://www.harrowncf.org).

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The development of this nature trail was the result of a joint project between Harrow Council and Harrow Nature Conservation Forum, as part of a 2012 Green Grid initiative to improve the borough's open spaces for people and wildlife - and improve the connections between them.

The aim of the initiative, developed by Harrow Council's Place Shaping team, was to encourage healthy living and access to nature.

Further information from: 020 8863 5611

Web: <http://www.harrow.gov.uk/>

The nature trail comprises two loops - a northern loop one kilometre long and an eastern loop 1.3 kilometres long. They can be walked independently, or combined into one trail. Both the trails run together until post 4.

The trail is numbered for visitors beginning at the Dennis Lane car park, but if you enter the reserve from the north-west Dennis Lane or Kerry Avenue entrances you can begin the trail at posts 9 and 24 respectively.

**Post 1:** Ahead is the lower of two artificial ponds built to balance the flow of water down Cloisters Brook. Look for Water Mint *Mentha aquatica* which bears attractive pink flowers in late summer. Crush a leaf in your fingers and sniff – this is a real mint! Follow the boardwalk to post 2.

**Post 2:** To the left is a copse of aspen *Populus tremula*. The leaves quiver in the slightest breeze. Turn left and follow the well trodden path. This is a good place to see butterflies including the comma and speckled wood, gatekeeper, common blue and small copper. The path curves right, entering woodland to reach post 3.

**Post 3:** Stanmore Country Park is rich in fern species. The prominent fern immediately opposite the post is the western scaly male fern (*Dryopteris affinis*). In spring this section of woodland is lovely with flowers including wood anemone *Anemone nemorosa* and lesser celandine *Ranunculus ficaria*. Lesser celandine is a close relative of the buttercup and has very similar shiny yellow flowers.

**Post 4:** Here the nature trail meets the London LOOP link path. The London LOOP is a 152 mile circular route around the whole of London, and runs just north and west of Stanmore Country Park. The link path gives access to the main LOOP from Stanmore Station. From post 4 the northern and eastern nature trail loops diverge. To follow the eastern loop only, bear right to post 13. Otherwise turn left over the bridge.

**Post 5:** This is Spinney Field. From June to September look for birds foot trefoil *Lotus corniculatus* twining through the grass. The pretty yellow flowers are tinged with red as they emerge from the bud, giving the plant its alternative name of bacon

and egg plant. Look also for square stalked St John's wort *Hypericum tetrapterum*. Like all St John's worts this has attractive yellow flowers with five petals; the square stalk of this species is obvious when rolled between the fingers. In autumn the plant bears bright red berries. The trail now leads up the ride.

**Post 6:** When we wrote this guide in 2012 this was a magnificent healthy ash tree *Fraxinus excelsior* that bore many bunches of the seeds known as ash keys. Sadly, it may fall victim to ash dieback disease caused by the fungus *Chalara fraxinea*, which was first detected in England in the autumn of 2012.

**Post 7:** At this point the ride widens into Spring Meadow. Beside the post is a Siberian crabapple, *Malus baccata*. This species is native to East Asia so how it came to be here is a mystery. In April through May it is lovely with white blossom, while in the autumn it bears many tiny red fruits, less than a centimetre across.

From this point, continue up and round to the right. The path dips to the spring that gives this field its name, but the route is good in all but the wettest weather. On the other (eastern) side of the spring, continue through a narrow gap then hug the edge of the woodland on the right (at times this is a rather indistinct path) to post 8.

**Post 8:** To the right of the post is a small tree of cherry plum *Prunus cerasifera*. Although not a native to Britain it is common, in part because it was often used as the rootstock for other commercial plum varieties. Cherry plum is one of the first trees to flower in spring. There are many cherry plum trees on Wood Farm to the north that flower when the season still seems stuck in winter.

**Post 9:** On the other side of the row of fence posts is a prominent line of male fern *Dryopteris filix-mas*. Follow the path to the right into the woods. Soon you pass a rather eerie area of blackthorn trunks coloured red by the filamentous alga *Trentepohlia*.

**Post 10:** In 1968 a linear clearing was created when a gas main was laid. These birch trees have grown to their present size since that date. Birch has tiny winged seeds that are carried long distances by the wind and is one of the first trees to

invade open ground. However birch trees cannot compete with the slower growing oaks, which eventually shade them out.

**Post 11:** The large oak tree (*Quercus robur*) to the right is at least 200 years old, much older than the smaller trees that surround it. Until 1950 Stanmore Country Park comprised open fields separated by hedges, and this tree stood in a hedge. The routes of the hedges can still be made out, delineated by these giant oaks that dwarf the 60 year old trees around them.

The path ahead crosses the Cloisters Brook then climbs steps up onto Wood Farm. If you do not know Wood Farm, it is worth going to the top of the steps to get the impression of this very different site. However the Stanmore Country Park nature trail turns right here onto the narrow path leading past the old oak.

**Post 12:** Cloisters Brook runs here in an attractive little valley where hart's tongue fern *Asplenium scolopendrium*, soft shield fern *Polystichum setiferum* and lady fern *Athyrium filix-femina* grow. The large shrubs to left and right, with leaves with a pointy "rainspout" at the tip, are hazel. A little way ahead the path passes through a gap in a fallen oak – another of the giants that used to stand in the hedgerows. The top of the fallen tree is now a wealth of vegetation, including male fern and broad buckler fern *Dryopteris dilatata*.

As you continue down Cloisters Brook, look out for leaky dams constructed to slow the flow during times of spate to reduce the risk of flooding downstream as well as create a new water habitat. On reaching the main path, turn left to regain post 4. From here turn right to return to the car park, or left to continue on the eastern loop of the nature trail.

**Post 13:** The spiky bush is the midland hawthorn *Crataegus laevigata*. Botanists can distinguish the midland hawthorn from the more widespread common hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna* by counting the styles; it has two styles per flower where the common hawthorn has one. An easier way is to pick ten or so fruits and, squashing them between your fingers, count the number of seeds in each fruit. A pure midland

hawthorn will have two seeds per fruit; a pure common hawthorn will have one. Hybrids are common and will have a seed per fruit average between 1 and 2.

**Post 14:** Here we cross one of the ancient hedge lines. The oak to the left is about 250 years old, and a line of similarly large oaks can be seen behind it standing on a raised earth bank. The tree on the right is a hornbeam *Carpinus betulus*.

**Post 15:** This clearing is all that remains of Upper Blue Pond Field. The gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) bush growing here reveals that the soil is stony and acid, supporting a different population of plants to those growing in 6 Acre Field and Spring Meadow to the west.

**Post 16:** The area to the left was cleared of birch woodland in the winter of 2012-2013 to connect Upper Blue Pond and John Hall's Fields. As you climb the low bank just ahead, note the rounded pebbles of the Stanmore Beds. It is these pebbles that create the fast draining, acid soils of Upper Blue Pond and John Hall's Fields.

**Post 17:** Here we meet an old trackway that descended from Bushey on the left towards Stanmore and beyond to the right. For many years the route has been blocked by the private land of Wood Farm to the north, but now one can follow the route through Wood Farm up to Wood Lane on the top of the hill.

**Post 18:** This clearing is all that remains of John Hall's Field. The soil here is quick draining and acid, as in Upper Blue Pond Field, and there is a profusion of gorse together with other plants of unimproved grassland. Beside the post is a hummock in the grass: this is an ant hill occupied by the yellow meadow-ant *Lasius flavus*, there are many more in the glade ahead. The ants are the main food for green woodpeckers, which are common in the Park. In May through August look on top of the ant hill for the pale yellow dandelion-like flowers of the mouse-ear hawkweed *Pilosella officinarum*. The undersides of the simple oval leaves are covered in a felt of white hairs, suggesting mouse ears. In March 2016 contractors cleared a lot of encroaching birch scrub.

**Post 19:** This ride is a good place to see Ringlet butterflies, which are active in late June and early July. We believe the hawthorn bush here to be a pure common hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna* – see the notes on post 13 and see if you agree with us!

**Post 20:** Coming through the kissing gate you leave the fast draining Stanmore and Claygate beds for the heavy London Clay which supports a lush grass community. Ahead is 40 Acre Field, the largest of the open grassland areas in Stanmore Country Park. In summer, look for ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*) with its yellow daisy-like flowers. In July and August you should be able to find caterpillars of the cinnabar moth, which eat ragwort and accumulate toxin from the plant in their tissues; their pattern of yellow and black stripes warns birds not to eat them.

**Post 21:** In the summer, 40 Acre Field is a sea of yellow meadow buttercup *Ranunculus acris*. From this point we have a good view over London. Wembley Stadium is clear on the right, but can you find the Shard, the BT Tower and the London Eye? Flowers to see in the grassland in spring and summer include creeping buttercup *Ranunculus repens*, cuckoo flower *Cardamine pratensis*, common vetch *Vicia sativa* and greater stitchwort *Stellaria holostea*.

**Post 22:** Up to 2017 40 Acre Field was kept open by yearly mowing, but in that year a small herd of cattle was introduced. Since cattle graze unevenly, taking some clumps down to the ground and leaving others standing tall, the complexity of the grassland structure is increased resulting in improved biodiversity.

**Post 23:** From this point the trail runs along a loose hedge. In early spring look out for the lovely white blossom of blackthorn *Prunus spinosa*, borne on bare twigs protected by vicious spines. Fertilized flowers then form small plum-like fruits called sloes which are too bitter to eat but which are used to flavour gin. Later in spring the hawthorn blooms, along with elder (*Sambucus nigra*) and a small apple tree (*Malus pumila*). In June dog rose *Rosa canina*, which clambers over the bushes, has its all too brief flowering, and later bears red hips. From here the trail heads towards a 5 bar gate out of 40 Acre Field, then turns right along the wide path.

**Post 24:** At this point we bear left off the main north-south path and enter a small area of woodland that has masses of bluebells *Hyacinthoides non-scripta* in early summer.

**Post 25:** Although oak dominates the woods on Stanmore Country Park, many other tree species are found. Here are young examples of two trees that are often confused: hornbeam on the left, and beech *Fagus sylvatica* on the right. Side by side, it is obvious that the leaves of beech are glossier. In winter, beech is readily identified by its long, pointed buds.

15 metres up the path, turn left onto a cross path.

**Post 26:** Just down the slope to the left of the path are three trees with obvious horizontal banding. These are the wild cherry or gean *Prunus avium*. In March and April look up into the crowns to make out the blossom. The large depression at the bottom of the slope is what remains of Blue Pond, a reservoir created in 1720 to hold water for supply to Cannons, a house built by James Brydges, First Duke of Chandos.

**Post 27:** Here we re-emerge into 6 Acre Field, with the car park just ahead. In early summer look out for the blue pagoda-like spikes of bugle *Ajuga reptans* in the grass. Later in the summer, look for the purple flowers of common knapweed *Centaurea nigra* which are a favourite with butterflies.

You've come to the end of the nature trail - we hope you have enjoyed it. Please send any comments, photographs, and notes about interesting species seen to [admin@harroyncf.org](mailto:admin@harroyncf.org).