



Leckhampton Natural History

Walk 3

The Lower Hill

(approx 1 hour)

1. For a map of this walk, have a look at Walk 3 in the Local History series. One of the differences between the natural history and local history walks, is the impact the season makes to what you will see, hear and smell. This walk is written at springtime, so your walk may feel different in another season.
2. Start at the small car park opposite St Peter's Church. Cross the road towards the lych gate. Noting the line of Lime trees that leads from the lych gate and on up the hill. Turn right, following the local Oolitic limestone wall and walk past the Glebe Cottages until you reach a gate into the field.

3. You will have heard and seen a number of common garden birds as you started the walk – Blackbird, Robin, Great and Blue Tit, Goldfinch, along with some less common ones – Green Woodpecker and Goldcrest perhaps. As you follow the footpath through the fields to the south, these garden birds are left behind. You are crossing the ancient fields of the old parish of Leckhampton. There are some wonderful Oak trees in the field. Here the birdlife is characterized by various gulls flying over, Carrion Crow and Raven overhead and you may hear a Common Pheasant calling from the woodland ahead.



[Great Tit]

4. Go through the gate into the field beyond and then begin to ascend through the fields, keeping the woodland known as Dog Kennel grove on your left. Once more you will hear familiar bird calls, but now in a much wilder setting than the gardens below. There will be Blackbird, Robin, Jackdaw and Carrion Crow, Great, Blue, Coal and Long-tailed Tits, Woodpigeon, Pheasant Green and Great-spotted Woodpeckers. The Grove contains a large pond, so if you hear duck and Coot, that will be the source. Look down at the field edge and you will

see the large buttercup-like Lesser Celandine. In spring the Blackthorn will be in bloom.

5. Pass into the field above and work round to the left. After a short distance, you will reach the excellent viewpoint of the Horse's Grave. You are now above the lower woodland, but still well below the woods and cliffs that encircle Leckhampton Hill. This is the highest point in this walk and an excellent place to stop, have a snack and see what wildlife appears. It is often said that the easiest way to see wildlife, is simply to stop and wait for 20 minutes, invariably something good will appear.
6. Looking up from here, you will see Jackdaws flying round their nest sites in the cliffs above. There will also be Raven about. You are more likely to hear the Raven before you see it. It has a loud and very deep *cronk-cronk* call, quite different to the more common Crow. Another thing that sets Raven apart, is their apparent sense of fun. They will often perform aerial acrobatics, and their often seems no other reason than their own enjoyment. There will be Buzzard nesting in the wood above you. You will often hear their *peeee-ew* cry before you see them. This is one of the better places in Cheltenham to see a Red Kite pass over. In spring, a Hobby may come soaring along the edge of the hill on its way north.



[Raven]

7. When you're ready, pack up your picnic and continue on downhill through Crow Park. You might choose to follow the edge of the wood, as you'll be sure to see more wildlife. Listen out for woodpecker. You may catch a glimpse of a Roe Deer bounding off. You'll start to notice small woodland birds again – any of the Tit family, Gold and Greenfinch and thrushes. Occasionally you'll hear a wonderful, loud, trilling call, but you may struggle to find the singer. Eventually you spot the tiny, mouse-like form of a Wren proclaiming its territory. Every year I forget just how amazing this song is from such a tiny form. If you do manage to spot it, you'll see its wings quivering with the energy involved. If you are doing this walk in winter, you will be certain to come across small flocks of Redwing and Fieldfare that have migrated to us from Scandinavia and Russia.



[Wren]

8. In spring and summer, you will be seeing butterflies all the way round. Some of these will have wintered as adults, and these species appear earliest, from late March and April. These will include Red Admiral, Peacock, Brimstone and Comma. As spring warms, you will start to see the species that have recently emerged from their chrysalis stage. These will include Orange-tip, which suddenly

seem to be everywhere for a couple of weeks and Speckled Wood.



[Orange-tip Butterfly]



[Speckled Wood]

9. As you pass into the next field, you may notice some 'scrapes' up on the hill above. These have been formed by livestock but allow the possibility to come across small fossils from time to time. As you look overhead, you will often see Lesser Black-backed and Herring Gulls following the line of the hills north or south.

10. Keep Leckhampton Court on your left and follow the field down to the houses below. In winter, look out for mixed feeding parties of small birds going along the hedge lines. These might include all the Tits, some finches, a Dunnock and a Nuthatch. And where there are small birds, there are always predators, so keep an eye out for a Sparrowhawk (always in flight), which nest near here every year.



[Sparrowhawk]

11. Follow the public footpath, down through the houses and turn left into Column End Rise. At the bottom of Column End Rise, turn to your left into Church Road. Carry on along Church Road and soon you will be back to where we started, opposite the lych gate to St.Peter's.
12. If you spot something of interest that you think we might want to add to this walk, please drop me a note to the email address copied below.

Produced by Paul McGowan
paulmcgowan@mac.com
 Leckhampton Local History Society
<http://leckhamptonlhs.weebly.com>