

NATURE WATCHING IN THE UK

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This short paper describes a range of approaches to watching wildlife in the UK, with links to providers' websites, including:

- Birds
- Red squirrels
- Deer Badgers
- Otters
- Deer
- Bats
- Flora
- Fungi
- Geology
- Night sky

Watching Birds

Birds are probably the most commonly watched group. There are a number of different approaches that have been adopted to suit the location of the birds being watched. Examples include:

- Nature reserves with hides
- Cruises – to cliff nesting colonies and to view pelagic birds
- Hides and telescopes set up to observe raptor nests
- Remote viewing by camera
- Providing information to enable people to 'self-guide' around good bird habitat
- Watching common birds

Nature Reserves with Hides

There are widespread examples of this approach. In north east England, Saltholme has a state-of-the-art, environmentally-friendly visitor centre with catering, retail, education and meeting facilities, plus a network of routes and hides, together with CCTV feeds to plasma screens in the visitor centre. It is a good example of up-to-date thinking on this approach (see www.rspb.org.uk/reserves/guide/s/saltholme).



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In Scotland the Scottish Seabird Centre at North Berwick is the market leader in the UK (see www.seabird.org). In addition to visitor facilities which are similar in quality to Saltholme, the centre offers live CCTV feeds from seabird colonies and other sites on nearby islands and on the mainland, offers boat trips, and has recently become involved with cetacean watching, including experimenting with live audio feeds from remote hydrophones.

Inland Cruises and Self-Guided Boat Tours

Many businesses and NGOs operate cruises to watch birds and other wildlife. Most are coastal, however, examples of inland cruises include tours by electric boat the 'Helen of Ranworth' which runs 45 min, guided boat trips at Ranworth Broad in Norfolk, linking to the Norfolk Wildlife Trust visitor centre (see www.broads-authority.gov.uk). Overseas, there are guided birding boat trips in many inland locations, for example the Danube Delta. There are also self-guided canoe trips along rivers which are good for wildlife watching – for example in various parts of North America, Finland, etc.

Hides & Telescopes set up to observe Raptor Nests

The RSPB, Forestry Commission and others have established viewing hides and telescopes with staff and/or volunteers on hand to talk to visitors at nest sites of various raptors, including osprey, hen harrier, golden eagle and peregrine falcon.

Viewing arrangements for the breeding Ospreys at Bassenthwaite Lake (www.ospreywatch.co.uk/viewpoint.html) are a fine example (there are now over a dozen osprey watch schemes in the UK); in the region of 100,000 people visit each year. The facilities are:

- A staffed observation post with telescopes and volunteers from which visitors can look across Bassenthwaite Lake to the nest site
- The viewing point is serviced from an existing Forestry Commission car park with toilets where there is also a franchised catering operation
- CCTV live feed beamed into Whinlatter Forest Visitor Centre, with additional interpretation including panels and a reconstruction of an osprey nest

Remote Viewing by Camera

This technique has been used at a number of sites for many years now. One of the first was to view cliff nesting birds at South Stack RSPB reserve near Holyhead. CCTV is now frequently used to enhance a viewing opportunity for example at RSPB Saltholme, the Scottish Seabird Centre, Manx Shearwater nests on the Island of Skomer (Pembrokeshire) and the Bassenthwaite Ospreys.



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Providing Information to Enable People to “Self-guide”

The main problem for novice birdwatchers is finding information on when to visit particular sites and what they might expect to find there, since much of the available information is targeted at experts and tends to omit key facts which are general knowledge to the expert. The Birds of the Humber project addressed this by publishing a bird watching pack containing the following:

Booklet guide to bird watching in the area containing information on:

- A summary of bird movements in the area through the year
- Some basic information about how to watch birds (equipment, identification basics, etc)
- Managed and informal places to watch birds – what habitats are there and the kinds of birds that might be found there at different times of the year
- An identification list of birds which can be seen around the estuary, with a guide to rarity (common, scarce, rare)
- A series of 12 self-guided ‘bird walks’, with a recommended season(s) and notes on what birds visitors might expect to see in different habitats on the way

Birdwatching booklets published by the Northumberland Coast, North Pennines and Solway Coast AONBs provide this information in North East England. Trails, e.g. the Mid-Wales and Galloway Red Kite Trails (www.gallowaykitetrail.com) are effective ways of attracting and managing visitors around a destination.

Watching Common Birds

Opportunities to see relatively common birds can be a big attraction. Examples are:

- During the 1990s, the National Trust established a hide and feeding station for greater spotted woodpeckers at Clumber Park in north Nottinghamshire; demand from visitors took site managers by surprise
- At Wyre Forest in Shropshire the Forestry Commission has a ‘bird wall’ in its education centre. One wall has a number of bird hide style windows with one way reflecting glass. Outside are shelves and feeders which are stocked with food. Users of the education centre can see woodland birds literally inches away
- Dawn chorus walks are popular. Such walks organised at Kielder and Allenbanks include an introductory talk and a post dawn walk followed by a cooked breakfast



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Watching Animals

There are numerous opportunities to watch animals in the UK, including red squirrel, deer, badger, otter, seal and cetacea (whales and dolphins). Some examples are summarised here:

Red Squirrels

The National Trust has a number of sites at which it encourages visitors to watch red squirrels, including its Wallington estate in Northumberland. Here there is a hide overlooking a feeding station and a short circular walk through woodland where red squirrels are present (see www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-red_squirrel_walk-wallington.pdf).

Red Squirrels in South Scotland is an area based red squirrel conservation project in the Borders and Dumfries & Galloway Regions, which is similar to the Save Our Squirrels project co-ordinated by the Northumberland Wildlife Trust in North East England (saveoursquirrels.org). However, this project has been established for longer and has added promotion of squirrel watching sites to its activities. Its website lists and describes 20 locations where people can watch red squirrels in southern Scotland, including nature reserves, private estates and guided experiences.

Deer

The Forestry Commission has created a short circular walk to a deer observation platform at Bolderwood in the New Forest. The observation platform is raised and overlooks an area regularly used by Fallow Deer for grazing. The Atholl Estate in Scotland offers a variety of tours to watch deer, including:

- Land Rover safaris
- Walks with a gamekeeper
- Guided pony treks

Badgers

There are several badger watching operations around the country. Some are temporary and consist simply of a guided walk to a badger sett, but others are more sophisticated and have facilities to support the experience.

Devon Badger Watch, located near Tiverton is a good example (see www.devonbadgerwatch.co.uk/). Visitors pay £10 (adults) and £7 (children 7 – 15yrs) for an evening's badger watching, which consists of:

- Welcome, information and introductory talk at the visitor centre



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- 450m walk through woodland to a specially constructed sunken hide
- 1½ hours watching badgers with guide and taped commentary
- Live CCTV feed into the hide from a nearby Tawny Owl nest
- Return to visitor centre with opportunity to talk more with guide, buy souvenirs, etc

Bats

Dusk and evening bat events are held at Kielder Forest. They are led by rangers and start with a talk in Kielder Castle. Participants then take a guided walk and use ultrasound detection equipment to listen to and identify different species of bat; visit (<http://www.forestry.gov.uk/>)

Otters

The Otter Trust has now closed its reserves at Bungay and Bowes Moor as it struggled to attract sufficient numbers of visitors to justify opening to the public.

Wildlife tour operators have had more success in providing guided otter watching experiences and some do this in North East England. Though visitors on guided otter walks often don't see otter, they do find evidence of the creatures and in these cases, the perceived rarity of otters appears to overcome any sense of disappointment. The guided tour approach appears to be a better financial model than the otter visitor centre.

Marine Wildlife

Coastal cruises to see wildlife operate all around the UK coast; some interesting examples are highlighted here:

- Seaprobe Atlantis is a semi-submersible, glass-bottomed boat operating in the Kyle of Lochalsh, Western Scotland (www.seaprobeatlantis.com/)
- Ecoventures uses a high-speed RIB (rigid inflatable boat) to see dolphins, porpoise, Minke Wales, seals and seabirds in the Cromarty Firth (www.ecoventures.co.uk)
- The RSPB operates seabird cruises from Bridlington, East Yorkshire to see nesting birds at Bempton Cliffs in the spring and 12 miles out to sea to see pelagic (sea-going) birds in Autumn (<http://www.rspb.org.uk/datewithnature/sites/shearwatercruise/index.asp>)
- Gairloch Marine Life Centre takes passengers on its daily marine wildlife survey cruises. A marine biologist gives information to visitors (www.porpoise-gairloch.co.uk)



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Flora

Self-guided or guided walks are the most common methods of showing people flowers, and tree trails perform the same job in woodlands. More imaginative methods include:

- Tree top walks – Salcey Forest Treetop Walk in Northamptonshire is a good example – 300m long and 2m wide, wheelchair access is possible and gives visitors a different perspective on trees and woodland, plus the opportunity to see rare treetop living butterflies (www.rnrp.org/default.asp?PageID=93)
- The annual 'Flora of the Fells' festival, run by the Friends of the Lake District consists of a programme of spring flower walks and events and attracts over 2,000 participants on 160+ events (www.floraofthefells.com/)

Geological Features

A variety of methods have been used to interpret geological features and heritage. Some examples of good practice are as follows:

- Knochan Crag, Scotland – imaginative outdoor visitor centre with interactive interpretation, wider 'Rock Trail' with use of outdoor sculpture to house interpretation (<http://www.knockan-crag.co.uk/trails>)
- The North Pennines AONB Partnership has recently invested in a 'Georium' - portable boxes filled with sand and containing casts of fossils for use by children
- Also in the North Pennines the 'Northern Rocks Festival' is a programme of 30 geology events over two weeks (www.northpennines.org.uk) in May each year
- The Tees Valley RIGS Group has recently produced downloadable self-guided walk information for geological sites, including Roseberry Topping (www.tvrigns.org.uk/geo-trails/roseberry-topping)

Night Sky

Astro Adventures of North Devon is an example of a self-catering lodge operator using dark skies to attract business. The operator, located near Bradworth on Exmoor (one of CPRE's darkest places), has installed powerful, reflecting telescopes for guests to use, provides information on astronomy in the lodges and offers training course in astronomy. Prices for the lodges are from £230 to £550 per week. Promotion is via a website (www.astroadventures.co.uk/) and public relations activity which has achieved national media exposure.



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Bowles Green Limited has experience of nature watching from throughout the UK and overseas.

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