



Melancholy thistle

South Tyne Valley Wildflower Walk Chimney sweeps and shaving brushes

Welcome to the South Tyne Valley within the North Pennines AONB and Global Geopark

The landscape here is dominated by livestock farming with an intricate mosaic of fields bounded by dry stone walls and scattered stone-built houses. Edged with shingle and fringed by wildflowers and woodland, the River South Tyne flows through the heart of the valley.

This circular walk from the small town of Alston will introduce you to some of the special plants of the North Pennines and the creatures that depend on them. Along the way you'll discover scented plants, day-flying moths, bright & exuberant flowers and web-spinning caterpillars.

Walk length:
4 miles (6.7km)

Start/finish:
Car park below Alston garage & Spar NY716 463

The summer months are the time to enjoy this walk at its best, with June to August being the prime time for wildflowers.

Terrain:
Public rights of way with gates and stiles and short stretches of minor road. This walk is mainly on paths and tracks through fields and beside the River South Tyne. The route is gently undulating with a few short, steeper ascents and descents. Walking boots or strong shoes are recommended. Please keep to paths, take your litter home and leave gates as you find them.

Ground-nesting birds are common here. Please keep dogs under close control.

Public transport:
For timetable information call Traveline on 0871 200 2233 (www.traveline.info).

Facilities:
There are public toilets and a range of pubs, cafes and shops in Alston. Alston Local Links information centre is in the Town Hall.

Useful maps:
Ordnance Survey 1:25,000 Explorer – OL31 North Pennines



The North Pennines is one of England's most special places – a peaceful, unspoilt landscape with a rich history and vibrant natural beauty. In recognition of this it is designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). The area is also a Global Geopark – an accolade endorsed by UNESCO.

A lovely 4 mile (6.7km) walk from Alston exploring the wonderful wildlife of wildflowers in the South Tyne Valley.

North Pennines AONB Partnership
www.northpennines.org.uk
+44 (0)1388 528801
info@northpenninesaonb.org.uk

The AONB Partnership has a Green Tourism award for its corporate office

Please ask us if you would like this document summarised in another format

info@northpenninesaonb.org.uk
01388 528801

Large Print
Audio
Braille

Image credits: Chimney sweeper, grey partridge © northeastwildlife.co.uk. All other images © North Pennines AONB Partnership/Rebecca Barrett.

Produced by the North Pennines AONB Partnership.

Supported by



Raspberry bushes on the road verge

Flowering plants, insects and birds have evolved alongside one another for millions of years and their lifecycles are tightly bound together. A fine example of this can be seen in the raspberry bushes along the roadside. Each raspberry flower provides a small amount of sugary nectar to attract insects like bumblebees. As the bee scrambles around the flower, drinking the nectar, pollen becomes attached to its furry body. Moving from flower to flower the bee then spreads the pollen and fertilises the plant. Each fertilised flower develops to produce a succulent and nutritious fruit. These berries are the plant's mechanism for spreading their offspring. Adored by birds (and people!), the raspberries are gobbled up and being mobile, the birds then leave their droppings, containing countless seeds, far away from the parent plant.

Berry-makers



Grey partridge

Though individually small, flower-rich verges, riversides and meadow margins link across the North Pennines landscape to form a network of habitats that are of vital importance to wildlife, from pollen- and nectar-feeding invertebrates to seed-eating birds. The persistence of this rich network helps to explain the vibrancy and diversity of wildlife still found in the North Pennines. Now sadly rare across much of the UK, water voles still flourish in the North Pennines and favour small streams that flow through flower-rich meadows. In late summer family groups of grey partridges feed in the flower-rich margins of verges or quiet roads. Like our own blood circulatory system, the network of flower-rich habitats keeps life in the landscape of the North Pennines.

A living network

Meadows at the margin

A number of common wild plants like meadow buttercup, red clover and yellow rattle are frequently found in North Pennines meadows and as they bloom in mid-summer, the fields blaze with pink-studded gold. A closer look at the edges of the meadows and along track-sides and verges, however, can reveal a much greater diversity of plants. Here, where fertilisers have not reached, a host of colourful flowers find refuge – wood crane's-bill, melancholy thistle, water avens, knapweed, meadowsweet and more. Once abundant and widespread, the plants in these miniature meadows hint at what we have lost but also at what could be restored. Through our project Nectarworks, the AONB Partnership harvests the seed from flower-rich banks and verges and spreads it on nearby meadows as part of a process of meadow restoration.



Water avens



Meadow with clovers, buttercups and hawkbits



Wood crane's-bill growing on the road verge



Wood anemone growing on a grassy bank

Melancholy thistle and wood crane's-bill in meadow margin

Bank rich in hawkbits



- 1 Parking is available at a small car park below the petrol station. The walk starts from here. From the car park, turn right and head out of Alston. Cross the bridge and take the narrow path immediately on your left.
- 2 Follow the path beside the river and over three stiles, the last one taking you into a meadow on your right.
- 3 Head up the left side of the field towards a gate in the wall at the top. Cross the stile and turn left along the road.
- 4 Turn left at the footpath sign into Scalebank Farm and walk diagonally across the meadow to cross a stile.
- 5 Go straight ahead through newly planted trees, cross a stream (which may have dried up) and cross the stile in the next wall. Bear diagonally right across the field to cross the next stile.
- 6 Bear left across the next field to cross the stile in the corner. With the wall on your left, cross the field to the stile in the corner then head towards the cream-coloured building and go through the gate.
- 7 Walk towards the farm buildings and go through the gate on the left. Walk in front of the farmhouse and through the farmyard.
- 8 Continue along the track until you reach some houses; turn left at the junction. After crossing the bridge take the public footpath on the left.
- 9 Continue by the river, through the trees and follow the path to cross a bridge.
- 10 Go up the hill directly in front of you and through the gate in the wall at the top. Continue up and turn left below the farm buildings to join the South Tyne Trail. Continue ahead to the stile.
- 11 Stay on the South Tyne Trail in the same direction through fields and over stiles. The path eventually turns into a track with the river on your left and wall on your right. Pass through woods by the cemetery and Alston Youth Hostel and then head back up the road and into Alston.



White-tailed bumblebee queen with large pollen baskets

Shaving brushes

Melancholy thistles can be seen in many places along this route. Spineless and with a dramatic deep pink flower, this plant is a magnet for bumblebees and was once commonly found in North Pennines hay meadows. Turn the spear-shaped leaves to see a dense white felt beneath.



Melancholy thistles

Welcome foreigners

Even though they are not native to this country, some introduced 'exotic' plants nonetheless provide a valuable source of pollen and nectar for bumblebees and other insects and in some places offer the only food available. The snowberry bushes along the riverside path are native to North America and when in flower buzz with feeding bumblebees.



Buff-tailed bumblebee feeding on snowberry

The white berries that follow are enjoyed by blackbirds in winter.

Lovely legumes

A range of flowering plants adorn the riverside path; look for wood crane's-bill, great burnet, knapweed, meadowsweet and yarrow. All provide food for specialist pollen- and nectar-feeding invertebrates but some flowers are more popular than others. Plants in the pea (legume) family, like clovers and vetches, are



Tufted vetch

particular favourites. These plants produce pollen which is especially rich in protein. Visible on their hind legs, bumblebees gather the pollen into 'pollen baskets' and then carry it back to their nest for the developing young to feed on.

Meadowsweet

Favouring damp places, meadowsweet is easily found on this route. Crush the leaves for a tangy scent or breathe in the honey-like aroma of the frothy white flowers. The name derives from an ancient tradition of using this plant to flavour mead.



Meadowsweet

Chimney sweepers

In the meadow at Scalebank Farm you may notice tiny white flowers growing in loose 'umbel' flower-heads with filigree foliage. These are the flowers of pignut, a plant found in woodland in the south of the country but here a common species of the meadows. On a sunny day you may also notice small, sooty black moths flitting amongst the flowers. With caterpillars that feed on the pignut plant, these are chimney sweeper moths. Their presence is a sure indication that pignut is growing somewhere near.



Chimney sweeper

A forgotten corner

Awkward corners and inaccessible areas are sometimes the best places to look for wildflowers. Where the Black Burn joins the River South Tyne a pocket of land has been left unfarmed and is awash with colourful plants. Here you can walk through an exuberant growth of melancholy thistle, wood crane's-bill, great burnet, knapweed, common spotted orchid and meadowsweet whilst blackcaps and willow warblers sing from the nearby alder trees.

Look up

Walking through fields of pasture on the South Tyne Trail there are few wildflowers to be seen but the views across the valley are fantastic. Where the path is fenced by the riverside, you will notice an abundance of wildflowers once more as here they are protected from grazing livestock.



Fenced footpath rich in wildflowers

Ghost trees

During the summer you may notice clumps of leafless trees veiled in ghost-like webs. These are bird-cherries that have been defoliated by the caterpillars of the bird-cherry ermine moth. By spinning web tents, the caterpillars protect themselves from predation and in large numbers may eat all the leaves on the tree.



Bird-cherry ermine moth web tents