

## Simon's Wood, Horseshoe Lake and Finchampstead

A varied walk with many lakes, woodland and countryside, especially good for bird life

I recommend starting at Simon's Wood car park off Wellingtonia Avenue (RG45 6AE), but there are other options, e.g. Horseshoe Lake, Moor Green Lakes and outside Finchampstead Church or the Royal Oak pub (with permission). Simons Wood, Heath Pond and nearby Finchampstead Ridges are owned by the National Trust to whom the lands were gifted by various parties for the public benefit.

Leaving Simon's Wood car park on foot return to the road and turn left along Wellingtonia Avenue, lined by the impressive Sequoia trees planted in 1863. You will soon see a track coming from your left and a sign Barn End across the road on your right with a track passing to the right of the property entrance. Follow this track along and up the slight incline and then, at the top, take the footpath to the left crossing a ditch. This path winds through woodland and drops down between two fields. Stay on this path all the way to where it meets Ambarrow Lane, passing open pastures, conifer plantation and finally, some nice wet woodland.

At the lane turn left, pass the driveway on the right and before the road bends sharply left take the first footpath through the gate on the right-hand side. This now drops downhill and can be a bit muddy after a lot of rain. At the bottom of the hill you meet a lane which you cross to the path immediately opposite and continue in the same direction as before. This takes you to Horseshoe Lake with a water sports centre, owned by Bracknell Forest Council and designated a SANGS. In winter there can be some interesting water birds here, often in the far corners you will be able to see Goosander, a sawbill duck that only visits in the winter. Wigeon, Tufted Duck, Gadwall and Egyptian Goose and many other may be seen here.

Pass the lake, loosely keeping to the right-hand side, and you then pass the car park on your left and pick up the path through the trees until you meet the River Blackwater. Turn right here. This is the River Blackwater long distance footpath and you will follow it for roughly 2 miles (3kms). The river will offer plenty of interest, many fallen trees are deliberately left in the water to slow down the flows in time of floods. The floodplain including all the lakes adjacent to the path will take the overflow if necessary. On your right you will soon pass Moor Green Lakes Nature Reserve, owned by CEMEX, the gravel company. After about a mile you will pass the Manor Farm complex in course of restoration. This will one day be a nature reserve of some value. The RSPB are interested in the whole area. Currently, it turns up some bird rarities, especially on migration. A Black-winged Stilt stayed for a few weeks in 2020, a Great White Egret was regular for several weeks in 2020 and 2021. Dragonflies and wildflowers are also to be found in season. Local Moor Green Lakes Group has a long series of wildlife records here.

After Manor Farm workings you angle right at the small sewage works (watch for pied and grey wagtails) and meet Longwater Road. Cross the road onto the footpath opposite, enter the gate and follow the path. Here you can turn right on the old Blackwater Valley Path or carry on along the new track to the river and skirt the reed-sided lake. Either route will take

you to the junction of the paths. Carrying on if you looped around via the lake, or exit the gate and turn right if you used the Blackwater Valley Path. Almost immediately, there is a track through the trees on the left and you should go through this gap and you have another choice. In the wettest of weather turn right along the left-hand side of the main hedgerow until you reach Fleet Copse, the old woodland in front of you and turn left. In dryer conditions, instead of heading for Fleet Copse go through the metal gate in front of you that follows a mature tree line but passes between several new lakes derived from gravel extraction. This will be rich in wildlife at all times of the year as the habitat develops. Reeds, sedges, dragonflies, birds will all be found here. Swans, coots, moorhens and duck species should be seen.

Whichever choice you made you will meet at a gate next to Fleet Copse and continue on the track towards Fleethill Farm and the equestrian centre there. Passing the farm you continue on the tarmac lane until it meets B3348 Fleet Hill. Cross very carefully to the other side and turn right along the grass road edge. After passing the posh gates to the properties beyond look for the footpath sign on your left and step up through the hedgerow. Follow this path which passes meadow on the left and a young planted mixed copse on the right, usually alive with bird song. This pleasant open walk takes you to a tarmac drive but cross directly over, through the next metal footpath gate and carry on. Although it's a bit enclosed at times this is a nice path with old hedgerows, a copse and fields to enjoy. This becomes a gentle climb until another path junction where you kink left and carry on in the same direction as before. More hedgerow and fields. At the top another tarmac drive crosses your path. Carry straight on up the last bit of hill and over the top to the Manor House and St James Church, Finchampstead. This 12<sup>th</sup> C church has a font older than the building itself. There's a lot of history here and a virtual tour is available from the Church website if you can't get in. This church is one of the declining number where you can see swifts in summer, they have installed swift nest boxes to try to attract more birds there.

Passing the church take the left-hand side of the triangle of roads in front of you, pass The Queen's Oak on your left heading down Church Lane and immediately after the farm entrance look for a footpath squeezed in the hedgerow on your left. Over the stile and cross the field to your right and the stile in the corner. Cross the next busy road with care and go left a few yards then over the next stile on your right. Up the field edge here and onto a narrower path until you meet Wick Hill Lane, a local private road. Turn right and follow the bridleway to the bottom where you meet a lane. Turn left and then after a short few steps turn right onto Heath Ride. There is always some light traffic along this road with individual properties, but sleeping policemen keep it nice and slow. About half a mile along the road, there is a road junction to the left and a wide Bridleway to the right. Take the bridleway and a short way in to the woodland you can see picturesque, naturally created Heath Pond to your right, worth a small diversion to see it closely. Goosander have been seen here in winter, Hobby in summer hawking for dragonflies and Crossbills in the trees.

Continuing on the same track with Heath Pond to your right, you will next see a cleared patch of interesting heathland on your right. You reach a path intersection where you turn left and follow the path up the slope and bending right. This leads you back to the start point where your car will be waiting!