

Fobney, Searles Lane and Kennet and Avon Canal

This walk includes a lovely new nature reserve, the Kennet and Avon Canal and many of the nature rich former gravel pits south of Reading with birdlife galore!

Start at the small free car park, about ten spaces, at Fobney Lock, Island Road, Reading RG2 0RP or at the Cunning Man pub, Burghfield Bridge, Reading RG30 3RB (phone for permission 0118 959 8067).

Starting from Fobney car park walk up to the lock and turn left on the canal towpath. This is a very pleasant walk, on your return you can walk across Fobney Island on the left for a closer view of the nature reserve. The canal is straight and has lovely meadows beyond the trees on the opposite bank. In winter a lot of the area floods and rarer bird species appear like great white egret but there will be herons, little egrets and duck species around any wet areas in the distance. On the canal banks you may well hear the loud Cetti's warbler, once very rare but climate change has brought them into our country now and the Kennet has a great share of them. Goldfinches and many other resident species will be heard and seen. At the end of Fobney Island the towpath bridge crosses the weir and just before is a covered fish ladder to help get them upstream.

Keep going on the towpath which has a nice mixed hedgerow and pass under the Reading to Basingstoke railway line bridge. From here it begins to feel even more natural with scrub mature trees lining the towpath and meadows beyond them. You soon reach a footbridge crossing the canal to the right. **Don't cross, look left here and see a fishing sign R&DAA. Behind the sign is a gap in the hedgerow. Go through this into the meadow.** There's a wide path mainly due to people trying to avoid soggy ground. I've found, contrary to wisdom, keeping right, close to the longest sedges provided the best route when the ground is wet. This area should have dragonflies and butterflies in abundance in summer.

Pass through this and another field, the hawthorn and mixed hedgerows will be full of bird and insect life. Listen for whitethroats, skylarks and look for buzzards, sparrowhawks, kestrels and red kites, they can all be found here. **After the second hedgerow turn right** onto the path that follows the hedgerow towards the side of the field and **go into but not fully through the gap and then turn left along a wide but partly overgrown path.** This gets narrower crosses a wooden footbridge and leads into a fishermen's car park area. On the left you will see a gate and a pedestrian exit to the rough unsurfaced lane. **Exit here onto the lane turning right.**

This next section is not entirely pretty having been a fly tippers delight along an old access road called Cottage Lane but it should have wildflowers and insects, especially butterflies and hedgerow birds along the whole of it as it passes the major power installation on the left. Continue all the way past a metal gate (with a pedestrian side gate) to a T junction. **Turn right into the lane.** Pass the cottages and **turn right onto the footpath at the side of the last house.** You are now entering a very popular fishing venue. **Turn left at the back of the house** onto the obvious path. Sadly, over the years the fishermen have partly denuded

much of the rich undergrowth that used to line the lakes, this used to be home to many birds including nightingales. Nightingales can still be found here so do listen for them in April and May. Apart from nightingales, blackcaps, whitethroats, chiffchaffs, willow warblers (mainly on passage) can be found.

Following this path you have a couple of options where the path splits. **Take the left-hand option in both cases.** The first is an optimum spot for nightingales. It takes you around a smaller pond but the view over the water sports lake offers good water bird watching, maybe common terns, great crested grebes, certainly gulls and many duck species, especially in winter – **rejoin the path heading left now. Take the next left turn option.** In the past this path has been full of singing birds in spring and nightingales often sang from the bushes. This rougher path is the strict public footpath. At the end you meet a gate with an exit for walkers. If by accident you take the wrong path you meet a gate involving a steep climb over a pile of soil to reach the lane. **When you get onto the lane turn left.** This continues to be a good area for birds and the lake to the right is good for duck, cormorants, greylag and Canada geese and great crested grebes. **Walk along the lane to the road.**

Turn right along Berry's Lane. A short way along Berry's Lane there are three bungalows, pass them and **turn right into a blocked off lane called Pingewood Road North.** Walk along the initially quiet lane but soon you will find a short stretch where there may be a bit more traffic to the haulage and waste businesses there. Keep going until you emerge almost at Burghfield Bridge. Opposite you will see the Cunning Man pub (an option to start the walk from). Stop for refreshments if you like but cross the road carefully.

- 1. If you started from The Cunning Man or have stopped for refreshments take the gate out of the back of the pub garden and turn right onto the towpath.**
- 2. *If you're combining this walk with the Kennet & Avon, Moatlands and Hosehill Lake walk - 11.5 miles turn left out of the pub garden gate and follow that walk instructions.***
- 3. If you're half way round and haven't stopped at the pub, don't cross the main road and take the track to the right of the bridge onto the Kennet and Avon canal bank and turn right.**

You are now opposite the Burghfield Island Boat Club where many narrow boats are moored. Following the towpath you will soon reach a weir, lots of rushing water and a good place to watch for grey wagtails. **Turn right a few yards before the weir leaving the towpath. The path then quickly splits, go left passing left of a fishing sign 'MAIN LAKE'.** This quiet path now meanders with the river through wet woodland. It is bird, flower and insect rich and largely undisturbed. Expect to find herons and ducks on the river.

After a few hundred metres the path splits at a white fishermen's sign (words the opposite side to you) and I recommend you **keep left following the river.** Carry on here reaching another fishing sign and keep left by the river again. Eventually you meet an obstacle – a large fallen tree, if you're short go under it, if you're tall climb over it or tackle the undergrowth to the side of it! The path then goes through an old kiss gate and you need to **keep left** through a more open area. After the open area keep following the river bank and a bridge appears on your left – don't cross it but continue along and you are now back on the towpath and will pass the R&DAA sign on your right that you saw earlier in the walk.

Carry on under the railway, crossing the weir by the bridge and continue along the towpath. **Very quickly an option is to take a short path through a gate on the right** to visit a viewing screen over a part of the new Fobney Island nature reserve that is deliberately kept undisturbed. There is limited information so far on what can be seen on the reserve but noticeboards offer help and guidance on the more common species. **Return on the short path or via the obvious 'unofficial route' to the towpath through the scrub, turning right again on the towpath.**

A short way along you will see another gate and sign onto the main island reserve where **you leave the towpath**. There is another viewing screen here. Going left of this beyond the hedging the area is open and inviting with water bodies that dry out a lot in summer. There will normally be birds like gadwall, mallard, mute swans, coot and moorhen. There is a grass path around the largest lake to the right allowing you to visit the river the other side. Kingfishers, barn owls and mandarin duck have all been seen here. Butterflies and moths including the day flying burnet companion will be found. Pyramidal orchids are present, cowslips, oxeye daisies, birdsfoot trefoil, knapweed and much more.

At the end of the island you reach Fobney Lock and you can return to your car. (If you started at The Cunning Man start at the beginning of these instructions by going up to the canal bank and turning left.) I hope you enjoyed the walk!