

Minley

A beautiful varied walk through many habitats with spectacular woodland trees and open meadows.

This is MoD land open for public use. There may be rare occasions when access is limited so please respect any restrictions you may encounter on your visit. Generally, the Army will let you walk around them, if not, areas are taped off.

Start at the small parking area off the roundabout on the A327 and B3013 south of Yateley Common. This is easily approached from the M3 J4A via the A327 to Reading and is the roundabout after passing the Crown and Cushion Pub and Hawley Lake turnoff. From the A30 heading west (towards Blackbushe), turn left at the roundabout signposted Minley and Cove and it's the next roundabout.

Enter via the gate and take the first path or track to the right (they meet). Here you have forest to your left and a grassed area to your right with horse jumps (or obstacles for the troops!) This pleasant track leads past one wide track down through the trees but continue until the next and turn left under the power lines. This then has a nice open feel with heathland edges as you drop down steeply past some Douglas Firs and enter the meadow between a sweet chestnut tree and an oak. Now cross the meadow via the path. Part way across, as the ground begins rising, take the path to the right which then curves left up the hill. I saw a family of stonechats on the scrub here in August.

A little further up the hill there is a hedgerow to the right and a narrow path through it (not the track into the field). Take this and enjoy the large trees and scrub with birds, insects and plants. You will pass a substantial ash tree with a broken bow hanging over the path. Ash are the last major trees to come into leaf in the summer. This track leads up into woodland with the lovely smooth bark of beech trees very prominent. Take the first path off to the right into the trees and keep right close to the woodland edge. Listen for woodpeckers here all year. As you keep close to the edge look for a big tree stump and exit the woodland down past it onto the meadow and turn left.

Take the path along the woodland edge and through the next hedgerow with impressive oaks, following the path across the next meadow to the right-hand edge of the woodland. Here I found nuthatches and treecreepers on a February visit, like woodpeckers they should be here all year. Keep to the path on the right-hand edge of the woodland. Keep this woodland edge in view all the way sometimes passing through the rampant rhododendron that should provide some lovely colour in spring. If you keep tight to the edge, it turns right at one point follow it and you will pass the stables and soon reach a deep trench, possibly once a farm track. Drop down here (there's a steep way down and a more gentle way to the right) at the bottom turn left. This lovely tunnel, my favourite spot, is through impressive beech trees and is beautiful colours in spring, summer and autumn.

Walk along the trench and at the end angle left a little in front of the rhododendron and you will see a path heading right through the pine trees. Here the pines become dominant on the left and beech on the right, beyond the beech is a meadow. This woodland has many

birds of the tit family and coal tits can be heard in much of the year. This meandering path soon meets a lane. Continue down this in the same direction. In October 2020 the number of fly agaric mushrooms was truly impressive along the sides.

When the lane bends sharply left you may be able to see the impressive double-hipped roofline and bell of Minley Lodge (very difficult to see in summer). Follow the lane left here and at the end of the rhododendron look right and see 4 concrete posts in the ground. Pass the posts and about 25 yards/metres on the right is a path. Take this and very soon it will plunge you into a shady rhododendron pathway stretching away to your left. Join the path and head left for a while. Quite a few sweet chestnut trees can make this a worthwhile autumn visit if you like roasting them. Roughly 200 yards/metres along there is a crosspath with a clear gap to the left into broad daylight! Exit here and you will see an old compound on your left. (This was once a sewage farm!). To the right is a patch of scrub after a ditch and lots of sedge grasses and rushes. This needs a bit of exploring, I looked around in winter hoping to find snipe in the wet parts without luck on that occasion but I would expect day flying moths, butterflies and possibly ground nesting birds in spring and summer. If you decide not to explore carry on past the compound and turn right along the wide track onto a slight mound with a better view of the scrub area. I expect this to be a good viewpoint over the meadow in the summer months.

This track peels off to the left into the woodland so follow it but turn right as soon as you get into the trees. The path is not obvious but keeping to the right-hand edge of the treeline, circling fallen trees etc it will soon lead you to another wide made-up track crossing your path. Turn right here and then left. I really love this section. On the right is wet woodland with a winter stream, lots of rotting wood before open fields. On the left is more wet meadow again likely to hold snipe in winter. There is a small stream along the edge adjacent to the path and I suspect animals are grazed here at times of the year. Further along this track there are some lovely big trees providing summer shade. The left-hand side soon has an impressive display of gorse and bog myrtle looking dark red in winter as the new buds form before becoming catkins.

Keep going on this track and on your right there will be two cut tree stumps making a great place to stop and rest in a pleasant location. I saw a crossbill here that had dropped down to the stream to drink and happily sat in the tree for a while. Green woodpeckers called from across the bog. After these stumps look for the gate on your left. Go through the gate and follow the path past the bog and towards the woodland, then go through the next gate, turn right and you will quickly see the path across the meadow. Follow this and half way across where the remains of a dead tree lie you can look across and see Minley Manor in the distance. This grassland should be full of crickets or grasshoppers and other insects. The former are crepuscular, i.e. creatures of the twilight (like woodcock) but grasshoppers are diurnal so active in the daytime.

At the mature woodland the other side of the meadow turn left and follow the grass track along and up to the laneway. Turn left here and for a while there is an impressive line of horse chestnut trees full of blossom in spring. The best appear just after some MoD storage facilities on the left making an impressive display when they flower in spring. Just after these storage facilities, having seen the avenue ahead, turn right across the field towards

the left hand end of the woodland the other side of the grassland. Pass the end of the trees now on your right and reach a track going up a hill. Follow this pleasant tarmac track all the way back to your car.