

Kennet & Avon Canal, Moatlands and Hosehill Lake

A nice varied walk with stopping places, great meadow views and interesting canal features. The canal, lakes and lakesides offer a rich diversity with the added bonus of possible Nightingales and Cetti's warblers.

The walk commences from the Picnic Area (free car park) at Sheffield Bottom Lock RG7 4AJ. Alternatively, you can join the walk at the Fox & Hounds pub car park RG7 4BE, with their permission, immediately across the road from Hosehill Lake. A further option is to join the walk at The Cunning Man pub, Burghfield Road, Reading RG30 3RB just a couple of hundred metres from the furthest point.

From the Sheffield Bottom picnic area join the wide towpath heading east (away from the road) and enjoy the lovely hedgerows and trees on both sides. You should already be finding birds in the hedgerow and maybe moorhen and mallard on the canal. After a while you will see gaps in the hedgerow on the right with views through the old willows to Theale Main Lake. It has several islands rich in birdlife and numerous winter wildfowl. You will soon reach Garston Lock, one of only two turf sided locks remaining in the country and some WWII pillboxes from when the canal was seen as a strategic invasion defence line! The information board is interesting. Butterflies and wildflowers love the lock edges. Immediately after the lock you can see where the river re-joins the canal and lovely open meadows, often grazed are opposite.

Continue along the path through some young woodland under the M4 bridge with plenty of birds and flowers to enjoy and you will soon meet a footbridge. **Cross at the footbridge and turn right along the canal bank the other side.** Now you have a lovely open view to your left and should see plenty of red kites and buzzards on your walk and green woodpeckers are often heard and seen in the fields. Most of the canal is lined with alder trees so goldfinches all year, siskins and lesser redpolls in winter, may be seen on the trees, along with great spotted woodpeckers and nuthatches. Canal side vegetation should have some flower and butterfly interest. The path is easy to follow keeping fairly close to the canal. After a while you will see the weir at Burghfield Mill, now converted into luxury homes. Around the weir expect grey wagtails somewhere around. Continue along the canal bank and soon you reach another lock, maybe a nice place to sit and rest awhile? The fields on the left become more interesting and can have many birds on them. Pigeons, stock doves, Canada geese, greylag geese, possibly little egrets in ditches, jackdaws, magpies, jays and carrion crows.

You will soon reach a footbridge where the towpath crosses the canal. Cross here and at the other side you have a choice. Go left a few hundred metres to the Cunning Man pub, with a large garden, or follow the footpath sign through the hedge past the reed-fringed pond. This is a good place for birds and particularly the Cetti's warbler, much more easily heard than seen. Listen also for nightingales in April and May. There is some nice wet woodland on your right.

NOTE: *If you are doing the combined 11.5 mile Fobney Island Walk continue on the towpath to the pub, stop if you like, then go under the bridge and follow instructions for the Fobney Island walk from the Cunning Man pub.*

Meeting the road cross straight into the narrow, quiet lane directly opposite. Continue down the lane, the hedgerow is well developed having been planted following gravel extraction. Butterflies and birds should be everywhere in spring. Behind the hedge on the right are wet woodland and ponds and lakes. On the left is a great 'rough' natural area beyond which is the M4 motorway services. **At the end of the lane a few cottages appear so turn right over the hump backed bridge and follow the track to your left.** There is a nice spot here to view Moatlands, a lake attractive to wildfowl in winter. In summer you may see terns or gulls perched on the buoys while water skiers zoom around the lake. Now the track skirts the lake with the M4 on your left and lots of woodland, a lot recently cut, on the other side. The track weaves around a little and eventually the view opens on the right at the water sports centre. Some good views of the lake here.

Continue along the track, maybe sneaking a look at another pond on your left, used like most of the waters locally by fishermen. **Very soon you now reach the footbridge you crossed earlier so turn left without crossing and return past Garston Lock.** You are now looking for a low-level metal barrier/gate through the hedgerow on your left some way after you can no longer see Theale Main lake through the trees but **before you reach the huge electricity pylons** where the canal kinks left. **Turn left going beneath the metal gate.** Immediately in front of you now is a large patch of bramble and scrub, go to the right and follow the edge of the grassland around the lake edge. Most of this, apart from a few fishermen's pegs, is dense scrub with summer warblers and the more common resident species. Nightingale is possible. In the middle of the land there could be whitethroats or blackcaps singing from the bramble patches, maybe skylark on the ground.

As you work around the edge you will see the sailing centre and need to follow the fence edge right and then left. **Keep going in the same direction, cross the lane to the water's edge.** This is Theale Main a massive lake which has spectacular gatherings of gulls in late summer. In winter wildfowl are abundant and occasional rarities appear. The large pylon is worth searching for peregrine falcon and raven, other raptors and crows. Cormorants may be perched on the island. Buzzards and red kites can be seen anywhere. Looking at the lake from here is a good place to listen for nightingale.

Turn right along the lake edge and follow the narrow grass path keeping close to the edge following it as it turns left. This should be full of butterflies and insect life in the summer months. *(There is a short optional diversion on the left along a wooded spit to get closer to the island where water birds may be nesting).* Keep going all the way and some houses will appear on your right but keep going left. As you follow the path you will see a sharp right turn on a track between bramble bushes but, before you take it, a short walk to the end of this spit again may show you views over the lake, water birds and another sight of the island. Yet again listen for nightingales. Further out in the middle of the large lake there is an island full of breeding gulls and terns in the summer months.

Return to the track with the bramble turn left and follow it until you almost get to the road gate. Turn left on the grass path and it opens up a little with a rich meadow where flowers and butterflies will be seen. Keeping left you will see some gaps in the dense scrub and lovely weeping willows for fishermen's pegs giving you a chance to look at the lake. Great crested grebes will be present all year with young on their backs from as early as April. You may hear Cetti's warbler here. Following the path as far as you can it turns away

from the lake and towards the roadside hedgerow. **The path then turns left passing a bit of fence and then follow it as it bends left.** Follow this path as far as you can, including down and up an easy ditch where the path bends right and stops under a massive electricity pylon. This is a good place to look for butterflies and listen for birds including nightingales. This was the best place in 2020. Enjoy some moments here and then **return all the way past the meadow to the road gate.**

Now, cross the road carefully through the hole in the hedge. In front of you is Hosehill Lake. If you have not heard a Cetti's warbler yet, this is the place! They are loud and obvious and stick to the reedy areas and dense scrub on the waterside. **Turn right** and take the chance to view the lake at the various points available. *(If you hear nightingales on the other side of the lake, there is a circular path all the way around – feel free to explore it.)* Otherwise, keep the houses on your right. On the big island may be oystercatchers, geese and ducks nesting or just loafing. On the rafts there will be mainly black-headed gulls but they are usually joined by a few brave common terns in April. Cormorants will often perch there as well. Mute swans are numerous and duck species such as tufted, gadwall, shoveler and pochard may be seen. In winter they will be joined by wigeon and quite a few rarities turn up here. Looking across the lake you may see a sand martin wall built by the local volunteers. This is not consistently used. Some years anything from 30 to 90 birds have been present, in others none. Swallows, sand martins and house martins are likely to appear during the day to feed.

Following the lake around on the defined path with various reed patches and scrub you near the sand martin bank and see a notice board. Here ponds and shallows have been created by the volunteers. They have occasionally had bitterns here in winter and you can expect reed warblers anywhere around the lake in summer. **Shortly after the noticeboard in the same direction there is a final chance to look at the lake from a gap on the edge and then step up to the gate to the road.**

Turn left at the road and then turn right into Bottom Lane (signposted Sulhampstead). Follow this lovely quiet lane past mature woodland on the left carpeted with dog's mercury in spring, and nice hedgerows on the right beyond which is more angling on the lake. At the end of the lane is a cottage and a sharp left bend. **Turn right here onto the marked footpath and an extravagant sign THEALE 2.** This lovely walk through the woods and hedgerow offers a lot of interest including many ivy covered stumps. Birds will be singing all the way in spring. Expect nuthatches in the trees here and maybe a treecreeper, much harder to see!

You reach the canal and turn right. Canal banks come into their own in summer with many flowers and dragonflies. Cuckooflower can be found in spring. This is a lovely walk back to the swing bridge passing the mill in the trees opposite. **Cross carefully here** with the traffic lights changing quickly. **Continue past the cottage and on your right will be the car park where you started.**