

Mytchett, Canal and River walk

Easy walking along the Basingstoke Canal towpath and the Blackwater Valley Path. Two parks, lots of trees and waterside nature.

This walk can start at a number of places. I have suggested starting at the Carrington Recreation Ground behind Holly Lodge School (nearest postcode GU12 5QA) but it could equally be started from Frimley Lodge Park (nearest postcode GU16 6HY), Basingstoke Canal Centre (postcode GU16 6DD) or perhaps the Kingfisher on the Quay pub GU16 6DS (with permission).

At Carrington Recreation Ground where the road enters, take a walk around the edge of the open field. Some of the land has now been allowed to regenerate naturally so the longer grass, young scrub trees and damp areas can be inspected for birds and insects and butterflies in the summer. There is a long row of Lime trees at the back of the field with masses of mistletoe and you should find some mistle thrushes here with their dry rattling calls. Their song is a bit like a blackbird but with no flourish at the end. Following the path around there is a crude step across the ditch at the eastern end to the right of the utility compound as you go towards the exit track. Exit the park here.

At the end of the Carrington Lane turn left, cross the road and just before the Stratford Road junction but after the shop, take the footpath to the right. Follow this to the canal towpath and turn left. Go under the railway bridge and you can now follow this path for some time. You will pass Mytchett Lake and probably a few fishermen. The lake will have mute swans, black-headed gulls, moorhen and coot on the water most of the year. Grey herons will be standing around the edges. The gulls also use the posts to rest on. Black-headed gulls don't have a black head in winter just a dark spot behind the eye. In summer, when their heads are 'black' they are actually brown, named by a colour blind person I think!

Keep on the towpath, moorhens will be along the canal edges. Before too long you will reach the bridge at Mytchett Place Road. *(There is the short cut here if you think almost 5 miles may be too long. You can leave the canal up the steps onto the bridge and turn right down the hill to the Mytchett Road mini roundabouts. Cross over the roundabouts into Coleford Bridge Road opposite and rejoin our longer route when Hamesmoor Road appears on your right.)* Just a few yards further on the canal bank you will see a swing bridge usually open giving access to the Basingstoke Canal Centre and a café. A convenient place to stop but another appears soon anyway!

If you stopped, re-join the towpath turning right and look for paths on the left leaving the canal. Take any of these and follow them along the railway fenceline. This soon leads you into a field, often allowed to become a wild flower meadow in summer. Butterflies, flowers and beetles should be found here. Following the path across the field look for the small car park and fitness equipment in the edge of the trees and head for that. A path leads through the woodland, I found some nice fungus here in autumn. When you emerge on the other

side cross the road and follow the path forward in the same direction at the side of the sports pitches. You soon reach Frimley Lodge Park centre where there are toilets and a café.

From here follow the path left to the park entrance and car park. At the entrance turn left, go over the railway bridge and take the first right at the Miner's Arms, crossing very carefully. Follow Hamesmoor Road until it reaches Coleford Bridge Road and turn right, crossing to the other side when easy. Keep on this footpath crossing over the A331 all the way until the Blackwater Valley Path sign appears on your left. Go down the slope and join the path.

I like this section very much. Alders are amongst my favourite trees and there are many large, old specimens here. They are great for winter birds and the food plant for many moths like pebble hook-tip and blue-bordered carpet moth. The wet ground conditions in which Alder thrives are also good for specialist butterflies and even otters that often use the roots for their holt. Otters are rare on the River Blackwater but may be returning. Our more common bird species are here, song thrush, blackbird, dunnock, robin, all the tit family and nuthatches and treecreepers.

This path stretches for a long way. About three-quarters of a mile (1km) down the path after a couple of river bridges you will see a noticeboard on the right about Gerry's Copse and a footbridge across the river. Enter the copse here. On the right is a bench, it was overlooking a pond but natural progression has seen it filled by *Phragmites* reeds and now willow is drying it out. Following the winding path you will pass wildflowers like red campion in spring and a planted young alder woodland.

You emerge from Gerry's Copse by a footbridge back over the Blackwater and pass under the A331 bridge alongside the river. Follow the path across the river again by the footbridge and climb the ramp. This leads to a stretch alongside the A331, separated by a safety barrier but for a hundred meters, not very pleasant. You soon find the path winds through a bit of woodland before emerging again alongside Kebur the garden materials firm. On reaching the road turn left cross the next road into Trueman's End and under the subway. (This used to be the hub of the Trueman's coaches family business that was killed off by the COVID epidemic). Turn left here, cross the level crossing and follow the path on the left up the gentle slope. Carrington Recreation Ground is just across the road.