

My Wildlife along the Pennine Way

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Long-distance walkers who have completed the Pennine Way footpath from Edale in Derbyshire's Peak District to the wild Cheviot Hills, which straddle Northumberland and the Scottish Borders, usually associate this challenging adventure with some memorable events along the way. The route has incredible history nearby and diverse geology that supports wonderful landscapes, and you can add to this, of course, its specialised treasure of wildlife. It was the latter that compelled me to walk the entire 260 miles or so after taking early retirement in 2010.

So, as you will have realised, 'My Wildlife' is nothing to do with wild camping which, sadly, is only in my dreams. It is about the wild flowers, birds, and other nature that I saw, without binoculars, on my northbound day-walks along the Pennine Way. Sightings span over the years 2010–15, when I thoroughly enjoyed completing Britain's 50-year-old and, in my opinion, best national trail.

As a former Yorkshire Wildlife Trust nature reserve warden I had lots of practice at finding wildlife in the countryside. However, most hikers can recognise at least some of the birds and flowering plants nearby to them, and by walking at my pace, around two mph, there is a very good chance of seeing wildlife that has made the Way's habitats, often secluded, their home.

Most of my twenty walk sections were done between March and September, though none in August. Being flexible with dates allowed me to choose favourable weather conditions prior to booking accommodation and using public transport whenever possible, so I had more than my fair



Wheatear atop a cairn along the Baldersdale to Langdon Beck section on 15th September 2013.

share of fine walking days. This did not always work out as planned; Pennine weather has its nasty surprises, for example, my walk between Steel Rigg and Bellingham was blanketed in heavy mist for most of the day.

I walked the Pennine Way solo and navigated using a GPS unit equipped with OS 1:25000 mapping, with a Harvey 1:40000 map and compass, as advised, for backup and to appreciate the wider topography. The following wildlife was seen by

me from the Pennine Way itself; some additional species were identified at towns and villages at the start and finish of a day's walk where I overnighted at a B&B.

One of the most distinctive sounds of the upland moors and pastures is the bubbling call of the curlew and the Pennines had no shortage of these characteristic birds for me, with for example, over twenty between Hawes–Keld and over fourteen on the section to Dufton. Likewise, the lapwing's 'pee-wit' call will often be heard whilst walking the Pennine Way in springtime. A much smaller bird, the ubiquitous meadow pipit was never far away, often taking flight when startled by my approach. Another typical bird of the moorlands is gamekeepered red grouse, of which I saw lots of adults and three broods of young on the Edale–Torside section, and counted over thirty-five on the section to Standedge, and twenty between Keld and Baldersdale.

As well as curlews and lapwings, a number of species of less common wading birds nest on the high Pennine boggy moors. The repeated plaintive call of a golden plover can lead to a view of one of these beautiful summer-plumaged waders, but they can still be very elusive. I found good numbers of breeding territories along certain sections, including over twenty and a family party from Hawes to Keld; a favourite bird of mine. Likewise, black-bellied dunlins also nest and I was thrilled to find territories and see three of their young on the Hawes to Keld section. Another wader, snipe, can be heard 'drumming' overhead when in territory, one more special sound to enjoy when you are trudging across some of the upland bogs in springtime.

I have seen some of the butterflies and moths that typify the Pennine moors. Emperor moth, with its bold eye spots, is usually dashing about in daylight in June and I have seen their caterpillars on heather. The similarly sized northern eggar moth was also seen. Green hairstreak butterfly is a little gem flitting about (Pondon to Thornton section), as is small heath, another butterfly which I have found in a few places along the Pennine Way. More familiar and usually at lower elevations were peacock, painted lady, red admiral, green-veined white, small skipper, ringlet, meadow brown and small tortoiseshell, but missed a number of others.

As well as the widespread and regularly seen carrion crows and Jackdaws, the higher, craggy peaks between Kinder Scout, Laddow Rocks and Stoodly Pike held at least three pairs of ravens, which are much larger than their cousins. A distinctive honking call can give ravens away when they fly high above you. Peregrine falcon is something to look too, especially near Malham Cove.

Rivers and their banks offer a different range of species. The faster flowing ones with white-water flushing over rocks in the riverbed attract common sandpipers which I often watched flying upstream and downstream, with eight on the River Tees including one youngster. Another wading bird, oystercatcher, with its bold black and white plumage and a loud call were also seen frequently in the river valleys and wet pastures. I have watched grey wagtails flitting about on rocks in the river, but a more exciting find for me was four dippers along the Tees between

Baldersdale and Forest-in-Teesdale. The deep water reservoirs occasionally held wildfowl such as Canada goose and mallard, but were generally uninhabited. I had a short stay in the birdwatching hide at Blackton Reservoir on the Pennine Way next to televised Daleswoman Hannah Hauxwell's Low Birk Hat farmstead, where there were a few common waterfowl swimming around.

Mammals that I have seen include rabbits, but at Wessenden I came across a hillside warren of around twenty black ones. Surprisingly I only saw one roe deer on the whole journey and that was out on the moorland at Ravens Knowe, on the Scottish border, and was surprised not to find any in the Border Forests. The only smaller mammal I identified was a short-tailed vole, not counting a gibbet hung with dead moles on the way to Langdon Beck. Grey squirrels were seen at the southern end of the Pennine Way but became harder to find further north where there is a bounty on their heads in order to give our native red squirrels a better chance of survival.

Although not really British wild animals, I wanted to find some feral goats on one of the sections they inhabit. I was excited when eventually I got a look at four of them high on Beefstand Hill in the remote Cheviots. Another animal I wanted to see was the black fell ponies that graze wild at High Cup. These were easier to find with over ten grazing on the plain.



Feral goats on the remote Cheviot moors near Beefstand Hill on 6th June 2013.

I had hoped to see an adders but the only reptile I found was a single common lizard on the Slaggyford to Greenhead moorland section. Returning to the birds. The forested uplands, usually dominated by vast conifer plantations, have their own specialist birds. Finches including redpoll and the little yellow-and-green-plumaged siskin are often seen in the stands of spruce trees. Another species of finch that I especially wanted to see, crossbill, was found at a couple of places along the trail, namely, Wark Forest and Redesdale Forest (20), where they nest. The tiny goldcrest, also a fir tree inhabitant was common in places and I counted over 30 of them on my walk between Steel Rigg and Bellingham, mostly in Wark Forest where coal tit was also present. Not all conifers along the Pennine Way are alien introductions. The juniper forest near High Force is a good example of this indigenous conifer growing in England. Broad-leaved deciduous trees are more often growing in the valleys and foothills, where mature English oak and ash provide shelter

for birds like spotted flycatcher, redstart and nuthatch, all of which I saw on a number of occasions, including all three species on the Thornton to Malham section of path.

In rock-strewn places and on craggy outcrops wheatears (25+ Malham to Horton, and such places as Falcon Clints), as well as ring ouzel or mountain blackbird (Hawes to Keld, and an adult male at Cauldron Snout) are superb upland nesting birds to find. They are both migrants that arrive each spring and have usually moved south by the autumn equinox.

Twite, sometimes called Pennine finch, is an inconspicuous bird with restricted distribution in Britain, but in the South Pennines an area known as the 'twite triangle' is a good place to look for them. The Pennine Way traverses this area, though I was not lucky enough to find any on my walk.

Other birds that I saw from the Way include grey heron, mute swan, coot, moorhen, pheasant, grey partridge, buzzard, little owl, redshank, woodpigeon, cuckoo, house martin, swallow, green woodpecker, great spotted woodpecker, skylark (including one singing above Cross Fell plateaux at 893 metres), pied wagtail, song thrush, mistle thrush, treecreeper, blackcap, willow warbler, chiffchaff, linnet, bullfinch, house sparrow and reed bunting. Not forgetting our commoner birds like robin, wren, dunnoek, starling, blue tit and great tit.

A tawny owl was heard calling at night at Alston, where a memorable sighting involved a formation of hundreds of swifts all screeching as they aerial-fed between buildings in this cobbled-street market town. The same species was moving west in numbers whilst I was ascending Cross Fell. Another pleasing sighting was a late brood of Stonechats beside the Way near Stonehaugh forest village. The rare Black Grouse was a coveted species for me and I was lucky to see two of them on the Hawes–Keld section, as well as watching a displaying lek just off trail at Langdon Beck.

Wild flowers are beautiful to look at and there are some special ones along stretches of the Pennine Way. I should have spent more time identifying what I saw, but it is not possible to keep stopping for that purpose so I made casual observations on the move. Mountain pansy (at Teesdale), northern marsh orchid (disused Walltown Quarry), marsh marigold (Moor House NNR), bilberry, foxglove, bluebell, gorse, cotton-grass, wild garlic, harebell, primrose, meadow cranesbill, bell heather, ling, herb robert, mossy saxifrage and devil's-bit scabious are just some of the plants that took my eye in the waysides, woods and moors. Growing on Hadrian's Wall in July was a colourful combination of purple wild thyme and yellow lady's bedstraw. I would have been delighted to find the resplendent blue spring gentian which flowers in May on Widdybank Fell, but walked that section too late in the season. The latter area of Upper Teesdale is famous among botanists for its variety of rare arctic-alpine flora.

Seasonality of the walk has a big influence on what you can discover; winter may have less to see but it would be quite different in comparison to what I found in spring and summer. Mountain

hare, for example, is easier to spot in its white winter pelage. Because I did none of the Pennine Way in August I missed out on the spectacular carpets of purple heather and ling, although there was still some in flower in September when I went across Sleightholme Moor.

Not a plant as such but lichen can often be found on rocks and dry-stone walls. I found some vibrant specimens on the dressed stones along Hadrian's Wall. Mosses can also be quite attractive, and are plentiful along the Way. The only mineral that caught my eye was a lustrous piece of purple fluorite on a byway section of the Way near a deserted mine between Dufton and Garrigill. A good introduction to the geology and wildlife of the Pennine Way can be found in an ID chart produced by the Field Studies Council called 'Features of the Pennine Way'.

The long list of conservation designations from Sites of Special Scientific Interest to National Nature Reserves and National Parks shows what a precious landscape embraces the Pennine Way. I very much hope that statutory protection will ensure this upland trail's character remains intact and its wildest countryside continues to give spiritual renewal to future generations of hill walkers.



Marsh marigold (top left) at Moor House national nature reserve on 26th June 2013. Northern marsh orchid at the disused Walltown quarry on 8th July 2013 (right), and mossy saxifrage and herb robert growing among scree near Keld on 13th June 2012.