

Bathampton Down

Take a walk with BathNats

Bath Natural History Society guide to nature around the city



North Road/Sham Castle-Bathampton Down Circular (with optional Bushy Norwood extension) compiled by Lucy Starling **Recommended OS Map Explorer 155 Bristol & Bath**

I am fortunate to live in **Bathwick**, very close to the Kennet and Avon canal and River Avon, where I explore as far as **Batheaston**. I am only some 0.5 miles from Sham Castle on the edge of Bathampton Down and that area is well worth exploring. While I like going further afield (one of my favourite places is the Avalon Marshes) I have rediscovered past joys of keeping local in particular at Spring migration time in April and May.

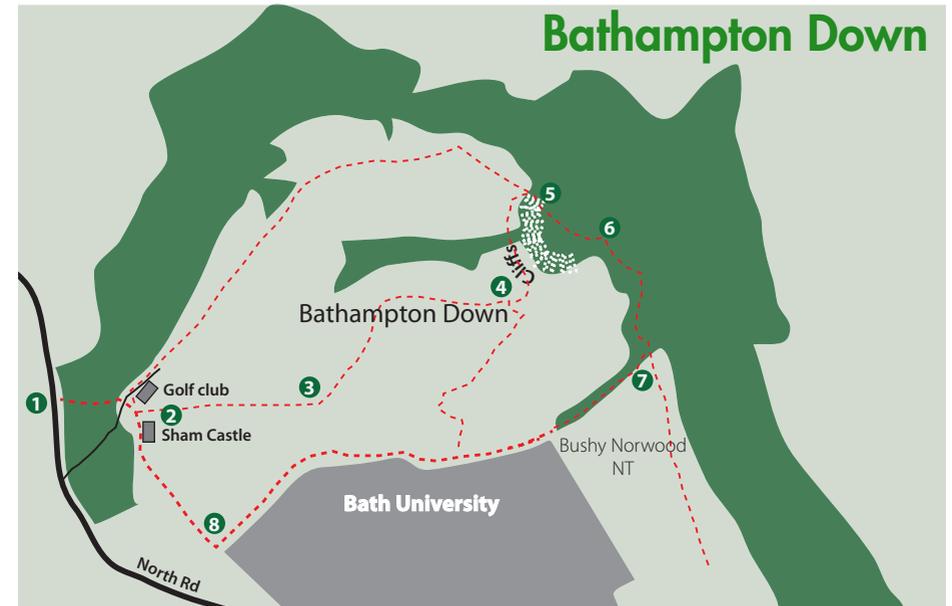
In January and February, I often walk along the canal towpath and riverside path in the city centre from Pulteney Bridge to Widcombe. Sightings of **Kingfisher, Moorhen, Grey Heron, Cormorant, Grey Wagtail** and of course **Peregrine** are fairly frequent. One sighting that is very rare is not a bird but a mammal – **Otter**. I have only had three encounters over some 15 years; the first at Batheaston, the next from Grosvenor Bridge and finally, in September 2018, near Pulteney Bridge. February and March are good months for watching the activity of **Grey Herons** at the small Heronry off Prior Park Road behind the Mitsubishi car sales. And, just up from there in the Bath Abbey Cemetery, a pair of **Raven** have been nesting for many years and it's well worth spending time there too. That species, like Grey Heron, is an early nester.

Here is a suggested circular walk to look for birds, butterflies, day-time flying moths and interesting flora from April through August/early September.

April/early May route

However you arrive, walk up the steps ascending to **Sham Castle** from **North Road**. Listen out for **Blackcap, Song Thrush** and **Blackbird** singing and the two-note coos of the **Stock Dove**. You may be lucky also to hear a **Treecreeper** as you ascend the steps and perhaps **Green** and **Great Spotted Woodpecker**. Take a break on the National Trust seat and admire the views over Bath before making your way up the short narrow track to Sham Castle; there will be plenty of Wild Garlic in flower at the end of April in this patch below the ash trees. Head up the stone/gravel path, with the golf club house on your left, following the footpath yellow markers. When you come to the first fairway, stop and look to your left in the rough grass for emerging **Cowslips** and on your right, among bramble close to the path edge/woodland, you should find a number of **Early Purple Orchids**. I found a good number in flower on 19 April 2020. Cross the fairway heading towards the drystone wall. You may hear **Mistle Thrush, Skylark** and **Linnet**, certainly **Blackcaps, Chiffchaff, Nuthatch, Stock Dove** and **Green Woodpecker**. This high ground is a good bet, in favourable weather, to find migrant birds dropping down on the way to their breeding grounds. Probably most commonly, **Common Whitethroat**; they favour the scrubby patches and dense bramble and do stay to breed. But, **Common Redstart**,

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Garden Warbler and **Northern or Greenland Wheatear** and **Lesser Whitethroat** will be just passing through. The best migrants I encountered here are **Willow Warbler, Sedge Warbler, Whinchat, Spotted Flycatcher, Yellow Wagtail** and, only once, a **Cuckoo**. I still dream of finding **Dotterel** or **Hoopoe**!

Proceed along the footpath admiring the views over Bath and outlying villages to your left and keeping a look out for **Kestrel, Buzzard** or **Red Kite**; being alert if the **Herring Gulls** that hang around the University make lots of “there’s a bird of prey about” racket. When you reach a gap in the hedgerow, you will see a stone path off to the left leading down to the lower part of the golf course and pasture below. You could take that route, through the metal gate, and head left above the woods, returning to the club house.

Alternatively, take a right and head over

another fairway as directed by yellow footpath markers to a path through trees close to an enclosed underground reservoir and you will reach the other side of the golf course by the woodland strip in front of University buildings. You can enter the woodland footpath at a couple of points and admire in mid-April, the **Bluebells** and **Wood Anemones**. Earlier in the year, you will find plenty of **Triquetrous Leek (Three-cornered Leek)**. Look and listen for **Song Thrush, Nuthatch, Treecreeper, Goldcrest, Stock Dove, Chaffinch** and a variety of tit species.

Follow the path until it opens onto a grass path above the road into the University complex and head to the bridge where you will see a stone stile in the wall on your right. Go over that and follow the path through the field back to Sham Castle. Alternatively, peel off to the right, through a rusty gate in the short

wall (there will be University buildings and seating on the grass on your left) and follow the path with the woodland on your left and you will slowly descend to the point where you encountered the cowslips and orchids and you can continue down to Sham Castle from there.

Mid May–early September route

As before, but as you head through the metal gate below the lower part of the golf course, proceed directly to the **right** towards woodland. You will very shortly see a narrow track leading into the wood through a wooden gate. Follow the track through the woodland, much of it is ash and hazel and take care as it can be slippery in wet conditions. Eventually, you the path bears to the right and you will see fence post which mark the entrance to a small “quarry” as depicted on an OS Map (Bathampton Camp enclosure). This is a good place to rest awhile and look for butterflies and admire many **Common Spotted** and **Pyramidal Orchids** and other flora. By now, on the first part of the walk, you should have found a number of butterfly species including Common Blue. The golf course rough area is covered in **Yellow Rattle**, and also Ox-eye Daisy and Knapweed. Yellow Rattle is the food plant of the **Grass Rivulet** moth, a daytime flyer, and this species emerges in May. The “quarry” is sheltered and in the past, I have seen **Dingy Skipper** butterfly here and only on a couple of occasions, **Wall Brown**. Look out in late summer for crickets and grasshoppers and more species of day-time flying moths. This limestone grassland site is host to many **Common Spotted** and **Pyramidal Orchids**, flowering from middle/end of May through until July. I have found a few Bee

Orchids in the “quarry” area too.

Leave the “quarry” by the way you entered and bear round to the right and continue through Bathampton Wood which runs high above the A36. Eventually, you will bear right by a prominent limestone outcrop and note to your left, a cave, one of many in the area. Ascend the path and the short flight of steep steps taking you back onto the golf course near Tee 12. Head left and you will reach a point where you could either continue left down a sloping path before bearing right and through a gate marking the boundary of **Bushy Norwood National Trust** fields (and part of the Bath Skyline route). Alternatively, having ascended the steps bear right along the edge of the golf course and take the path through the wooded path by the University buildings where you saw the bluebells earlier in the year. The most numerous butterfly species up here are Marbled White, Meadow Brown and Ringlet. I have recorded 26 species around Bathampton Down and Bushy Norwood, the rarest being White Letter Hairstreak. I occasionally see Dark Green and Silver Washed Fritillary. In past years, I have found Spotted flycatcher breeding on Bushy Norwood but sadly not for and many years. There were also reports of Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, but again not in recent times. However, it is good to keep visiting and looking – you never know?!

This walk could easily begin from The Avenue near the Cats and Dogs Home traversing Bushy Norwood first. You could also combine more of the Bath Skyline NT route for a much longer hike.

Lucy Starling