

A self-guided botanical walk from Wilverley.

This self-guided walk is designed to explore a range of New Forest habitats that, within living memory, have experienced periods of intense change. The walk is a little under 5km (3 miles) which will take a minimum of 2 hours and much longer if you linger.

The walk keeps to well-worn tracks and paths as there are ground nesting birds in the bracken and heathers which deserve our respect.

You will need:

An Ordnance Survey map, ideally a recent edition of the 1:25000 Explorer OL22.

A reasonable sense of direction, if not, then a compass and the ability to use it.

A hand lens - today your wildflowers are all rather small.

A field guide. I have given page numbers (*in parentheses and italics*) for the updated version (2006) of Francis Rose's Wildflower Key. NB: This volume does not include sedges or ferns.

There are notes on health and safety below.

The route

We start at the main car park at Wilverley, at the point that is furthest from the road SU 253 010. If you stand with your back to the plantations of Wilverley Inclosure you are looking across a large flat grassy landscape; this is Wilverley Plain. Look to the north and you will see a tall dead pine on the far side of the plain. Keep this as your destination and walk across the plain.

Having arrived at the dead pine at SU 252 015 you will see a wide grassy path entering tall heather heathland. Take this path which crosses the heath in a north-westerly direction. After a hundred metres or so there is a junction of minor paths but you keep left on the main path and continue for about five hundred metres. By now you will see the fenceline of Markway Inclosure. Those of you with older editions of the OS may be confused by the lack of trees in this inclosure.

When you reach the fence, you are looking for a gate; this will be to your left at SU 245 019 (or straight ahead - it depends where you pop out on the path which is braided at this point). You are now on an engineered forestry road and the land within the fence is Markway Inclosure. After a short while there is a T junction, where you go left. After a hundred metres or so there is a forestry road to your right which takes you down to the foot of the valley; this is a splendid diversion to a pond and bog, from which you need to turn around and retrace your steps. When back at the junction where you made this diversion, turn right and follow the road to the inclosure gate by the noisy A35. As soon as you pass through the gate you are on a grassy habitat which is one of the Verderers' strips SU 242 022.

Turn left and walk with the A35 to your right and the enclosure fence to your left. The fence will turn a corner; don't follow it but carry on straight ahead towards Wilverley Post SU 242 019 which is where the treeline of Wilverley Inclosure meets the main road.

Now turn left so that the plantations are on your right. The next section is where you are most likely to lose my suggested route but don't worry - if you keep to main paths with the trees of the

plantation on your right, then you'll end up in the right place. The suggested route is that you'll see a modest gravel track along the edge of the plantations and also a broad grassy path into the bracken and gorse which starts at another sentinel dead pine (SU 242 018). Take this path which will bring you out at a little grassy lawn (SU 244 017), next to an inclosure gate. If you stand with your back to the gate you will see a very well-worn/eroded path in front of you which is heading north-east; follow that path. After a short while our path meets an even bigger path (SU 245 017), where we turn right and follow that path and all the way through the bracken heath to SU 250 013, which is marked by a line of tall hawthorns.

At the hawthorns, the character of the vegetation changes again as we are back on the same plain as where we started. Keep the plantation on your right and wander over the open grasslands until you see the car park and the route is completed.

What to look out for.

Wilverley Plain is an area of former dry heath that, in the Second World War, was fenced out of the open Forest and ploughed, and presumably also limed and fertilised, to grow arable crops. Cropping ceased in the late 1940s /early 1950s when the fences were removed and Forest livestock had access to the former tillage. Forest species were able to colonise the closely-grazed bare ground at their own pace. Look out for Eyebrights (*p.405 but Francis does not go into detail of this difficult group of species and hybrids*), Yellow Composites (*p.473 onwards*) and mats of Thyme. It's always worth checking the Thyme because both Large Thyme and Wild Thyme are on the Forest (*p.371*). Damper hollows have Chamomile (*p.455*) and as you get close to your destination pine then do look out for the persil-white blooms of Knotted Pearlwort (*p.158*). In late summer the plain supports genuinely huge populations of Autumn Ladies Tresses (*p.530*) and Field Gentians (*p.350*); indeed, don't be surprised to find any of the Forest specialists of species-rich seasonally parched grasslands. NB: the following introduction to the Verderers' strips can also apply to Wilverley Plain.

Verderers' Strips. The Verderers' strips date from the late 1960s when they were created by ploughing, liming and reseeding the open heath. Depending on the edition of your OS map you'll see this feature illustrated as encircling Markway Inclosure. These strips of 'improved' grassland were created by the Forestry Commission to compensate commoners for the loss of grazing arising from the fencing and planting of the inclosure. The strips are therefore different from Wilverley Plain in being more recent, with the wildflowers needing to colonise an established agricultural sward, rather than ex-arable. Look out for muddy hollows just outside the gate by the A35. These have strong stands of Coral Necklace (*p.158*), once a great rarity but now widely distributed across the south of the Forest. On the way to Wilverley Post there is ground that has been recently disturbed by swiping old heathers. The inadvertently scuffed ground is ideal for germinating violets (*p.185 onwards*) including the Pale Dog-Violet. This area is also worth exploring for Eyebrights. The simplest one to name with confidence is the endemic English Sticky Eyebright *Euphrasia officinalis* subsp *anglica* which is quite a stocky little plant with almost white flowers and an abundance of hairs with sticky glandular tips. Your hand lens is essential to see the tips of the hairs. Do also look for bright pink Centaureas which are members of the gentian family. Both Lesser and Common Centaury are here (*p.350*).

Markway Inclosure was created in the late 1960s by fencing, ploughing and planting an area of dry heath and bog. When I first knew Markway in the 1980s the dense conifer cover excluded virtually everything else. There was a small area of amenity broadleaves planted in the south of the inclosure

which has been retained. Over the last 20 years the conifers have been removed and the inclosure is open to Forest livestock. Do stand by the fence on the eastern side of the inclosure to compare the stands of dry heath on either side of the wire. If you take the diversion down to the bog, do look at how the road cuts through the seepage line that separates the dry heath from wet heath and bog. Sundews have colonised these ditches and, sooner-or-later, I hope to see Marsh Clubmoss colonise as it grows near to Markway and has moved into other inclosures undergoing restoration. The bog ponds at the foot of the valley are splendid - look for the apple green grass-like fronds of the Pillwort fern which grows around the outlet pipe on the 'uphill' side of the track. The richness and completeness of these restored wetland habitats is remarkable since only a couple of decades ago they were in complete darkness. The lesson is simple - remove the trees and let the livestock back in; the net result is a rapid re-emergence of the Forest's characteristic vegetation.

The undisturbed areas of **Dry Heath** and **Bracken** are also of interest but not the main focus of the walk. Dry Heaths that are dominated by tall heather stands are botanically simple, at least in terms of flowering plants; their biological diversity rests elsewhere. The bracken stands at Wilverley are an object lesson of the potential richness of bracken, which is a much demonised feature of heathland. Look out for where there are grassy glades in the open bracken, particularly places with Hawthorn, Honeysuckle and fine grasses. These are indicative of reasonably fertile soils. Once you start seeing herbaceous species such as Sawwort (*p.468*) then it is worth slowing your pace. Lesser Butterfly Orchid abounds in this habitat (*p.540*). Less flashy is the Soft Leaved Sedge *Carex montana*. Superficially the leaves of this sedge look like Pill Sedge *Carex pilulifera* with both species showing up as low circular (sometimes hollow) tufts of bright green sedge about the size of a saucer, with some tufts running into each other to make a 'mat'. The two sedges do have slightly different colours which can be learnt and Pill Sedge tends to form individual clumps. You know you have *C. montana* if the base of a bundle of leaves is fibrous and flushed with a winey red hue. Another characteristic is that if you bend the leaf over your finger and hold it to the light you can see sparse hairs on the top surface (hand lens needed).

Health and safety. This is a popular, heavily used part of the Forest due to its ready accessibility and lack of hazards. Do be aware of rampaging dogs (I've been knocked down here whilst botanising) and the local abundance of faeces, particularly around the car park. In taller vegetation, such as the bracken, there is the risk of tick bites and infection by Lyme disease. There are Forest livestock throughout whose presence is generally benign unless they have been disturbed by people petting and feeding them or allowing dogs to run amongst them. As always, when out walking on your own, you'll need to assess the risks and take whatever action is needed.

CC

HIWWT Flora Group
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