

Burton and Chingford Ponds

A microcosm of different habitats within one site – various woodland, carr, wet and dry heath, two large ponds and bogs

Just three miles south of Petworth an old water mill overlooks a tranquil 16th century hammer pond, where fishermen punt lazily across the water searching for carp, great crested grebes dive for roach and rudd, and kingfishers splash for the small fry.

The edges of the pond are fringed with reeds where reed warblers chatter, and here and there lurks the rare cowbane – an extremely poisonous member of the carrot family not found anywhere else in Sussex. Behind the reeds there is a beautifully mature wet woodland of alder, or ‘carr’, where the older trees occasionally fall over, opening up the ground to light, allowing sedges and marsh marigolds to flourish and beetles to dine on the rotting wood. The more observant visitor may sometimes catch a glimpse of a lesser spotted woodpecker hunting for the innumerable insects (including mosquitoes) that love this damp shady paradise.



Highlights

Pond edge and boggy plants such as southern marsh orchid, wildfowl, visiting migrants and numerous dragonflies.

great crested grebe



The nature trail winds through Newpiece, an area of much drier woodland — oak, birch and rowan indicate the acidic nature of the sandy soils found here. There are also clumps of Scots pine, relics of the landscaping carried out years ago when this area was still part of Burton Park, and some huge ancient sweet chestnuts, gradually falling into graceful decay, providing homes for birds and bats into the bargain. At the top of the hill there are planted areas of hornbeam and chestnut coppice. This type of woodland is more usually associated with East Sussex. At the bottom, towards Burton Pond, there is a tiny patch of wet heath, with sphagnum mosses, cranberry, and the moisture-loving pale pink cross-leaved heath.



southern marsh orchid

Arthur Hoare

The nature trail leads towards Burton Park, where a small development of houses has been blended in to the parkland landscape, passing by Snipe Bog. Here huge clumps of tussock sedge nudge the willows, and the wet meadow is filled in early summer with the bright crimson blooms of southern marsh orchids.

Further on the sound of running water signals the outfall of Chingford Pond, a much shallower lake surrounded by trees — another remnant of earlier landscaping. The muddy edges are perfect for visiting migrants, such as common and green sandpipers, but the pond may eventually be lost to the steady march of the reeds, unless the water



Clockwise emperor dragonfly, black hole bog, cranberry

levels are raised. The old outfall into Burton Pond once ran through a series of tunnels underneath the path, cascading out in waterfalls over the stonework. However, the fern-covered masonry now runs dry as the dam wall is not considered sufficiently strong to withstand the extra pressure. Continuing on past an outcrop of sandstone you arrive at the Warren, a developing oak woodland where creamy-yellow climbing corydalis trails over the clearings in late summer. The trail bears north to the edge of Burton Pond where the alder carr can be appreciated at its best. A boardwalk crosses the swampy depths of the Black Hole, an acid peat bog where the Trust has removed much of the invading alder, birch and willow, and as a result, plants such as bogbean, white sedge, yellow loosestrife and cranberry are thriving once again. This is one of the best areas to watch dragonflies — golden-ringed, scarce chaser, downy emerald, black-tailed skimmer and emperor are just a few of the many species that thrive in the intricate mix of pools and vegetation.



Hugh Clark



David Plummer



Mark Monk-Terry

Clockwise pipistrelle bat, bogbean, marsh marigold

Drier acid grassland lies above the bog, a good place to spot adders and lizards warming themselves in spring sunshine. Look out too for the small round burrows of dung beetles in the bare sandy patches created by rabbits. Many of the oak trees here and alongside the road, free of the gloom of the closed canopy forest, have their bark festooned with lichens.

The trail leaves the reserve proper to the north to take in some excellent oak and hazel woodland with a springtime ground flora of bluebells, anemones and primroses. It then runs back towards the mill alongside a woodland stream that feeds into the River Rother.

Burton and Chingford Ponds is a Local Nature Reserve and a Site of Special Scientific Interest, and is jointly managed by the Trust and West Sussex County Council.