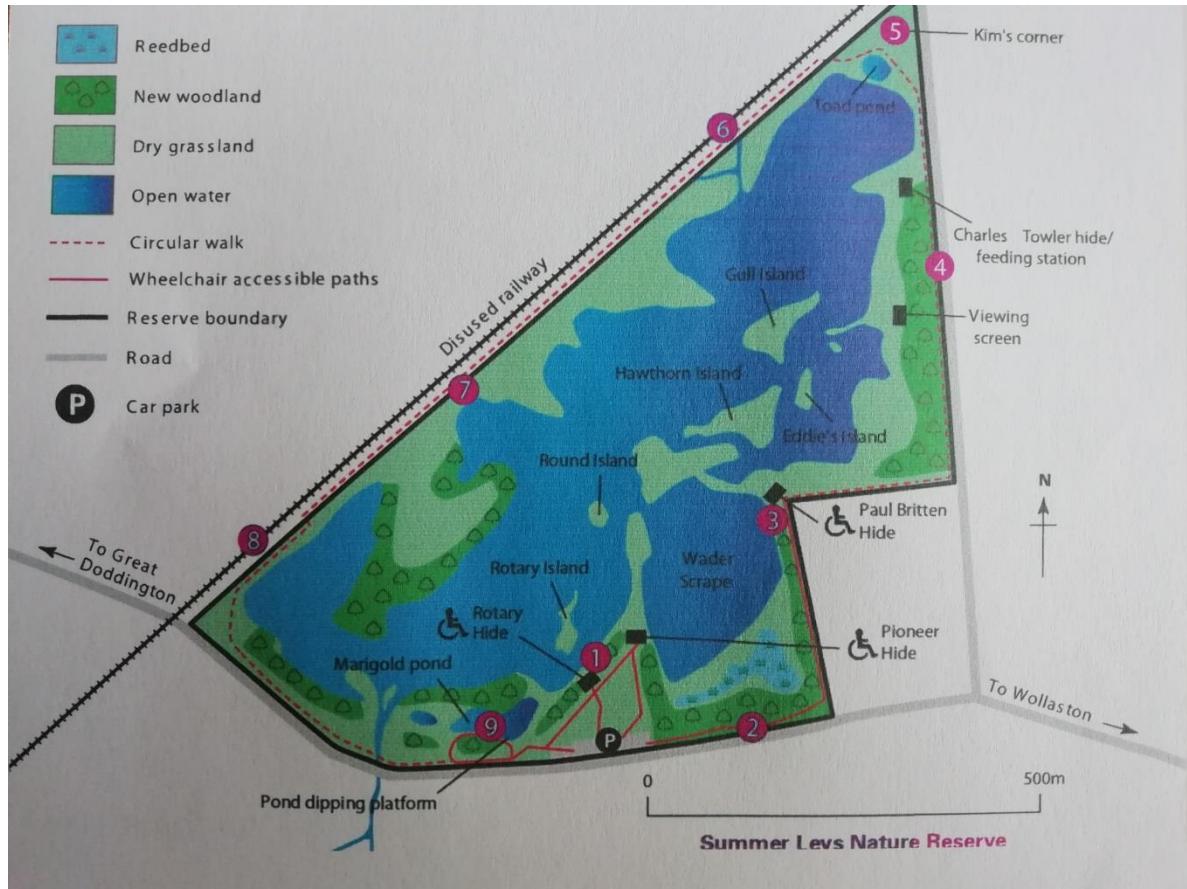


Location: Summer Leys Nature Reserve

Summer Leys Nature Reserve was scheduled in the original Summer Walks programme for Saturday 25th July. This walk description is based on notes made during visits soon after that date. You are strongly encouraged to access the BCNWT (Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire Wildlife Trust) website and download the leaflet about Summer Leys including a map of it before you visit (www.wildlifebcn.org/summer-leys). Social distancing offers no special issues. Entry to the hides is subject to the number limits posted on the doors. Allow at least 2.5 hours for your visit.



Map of Summer Leys: numbers refer to points of interest in the leaflet (downloaded from www.wildlifebcn.org/summer-leys)

Summer Leys is managed by BCNWT and covers 47 hectares of former gravel workings in the Nene Valley. It is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and a Special Protection Area (SPA). There is a large lake with several small islands and inlets with areas of reeds, planted trees, bushes, and rough grazing plus two ponds and one small area of preserved meadow. There is a mainly hardcore footpath around the Lake (about 3 km) which is wheelchair-friendly to three of the hides, as shown on the map. There are several bird hides and screens. There are no toilets.

Car Parking and Directions: The Reserve (grid reference SP 885 634) is about 5 km south of Wellingborough. Access from Milton Keynes is via Olney taking the A509 northwards as far as the roundabout on the outskirts of Wollaston, where you take a left turn which is signposted on a brown background to 'Summer Leys Nature Reserve' and to Great Doddington. The Reserve Car Park is about 1.5 km along this road on the right. You can also travel via Northampton and the A45.

Walk Route

The suggested route is anti-clockwise around the Lake. There are two hides within 50 metres of the car park (numbered ① on the map) and they are a good place to start. July is not the best month for wetland birds with many resident species having lost their breeding plumage and it being early for passage migrants. The left-hand of the hides is the Rotary Hide and this gives a good view across the main lake. Large numbers of Black Headed Gulls and Common Terns which are both important breeding species here were flying back and forth in numbers and making a lot of noise. Mute Swan, Canada and Greylag Geese, Grey Heron, Little Egret, Cormorant, Great Crested Grebe, Mallard, Tufted Duck, and Lapwing were showing well either on the water or on the far side water edge. As you leave this hide turn left on the path for a short walk to the Pioneer Hide. This offers another broader view of the main lake and one of the islands but also of the extensive Wader Scrape to the side. Coots and Moorhens dominated on this shallower water but Great Egret, Redshank (a pair) and Snipe added interest.

As you leave this hide you will need to return to the car park to pick up the path to the left (again anti-clockwise round the lake). But before heading off, pause for five to ten minutes looking at this area of rough meadow and bushes where Angelica, Teasel, Great Burnet, Great Willow Herb, Common Fleabane, Tufted Vetch and Common Centaury were in flower, attracting in turn Gate Keeper, Meadow Brown, Large White, Brimstone, Common Blue, Brown Argus, Small Copper and Peacock butterflies together with many species of cricket and grasshopper, hoverfly and bee. I was also lucky enough to have a Field Vole scurry across the path in front of me.



Teasel with bumble bee



Fleabane

You leave the car park through a metal gate and immediately follow through a strip of semi mature woodland ② looking out for Speckled Wood. Follow the path for about 250 metres where it turns sharp left into a more open route – a good spot for fruit-bearing Wild Plum, Guelder Rose, Bramble and many Red Admirals. Walk on for a further 300 metres and you will come to the two storey Paul Britten Hide ③ where Green Woodpecker is likely to be seen and heard. From the hide look back across grazed areas to the Wader Scrape with Flowering Rush growing at the water's edge in the foreground.

From the hide continue along the path. On your left you will look over rough grassland and flowering plants to the lake where two Great Egrets were spotted together with a large flock of wheeling Lapwings. The path turns sharp left again and after another 400 metres through a tunnel of semi mature trees ④ you will come to the Charles Fowler open hide where bird feeders are replenished daily. This a great spot for viewing hedgerow and woodland birds at close quarters: Great, Blue and

Long-Tailed Tits; Bullfinch (a family of four), Chaffinch, Greenfinch, and Goldfinch; plus Blackbird, Robin, House Sparrow, Dunnock and Pheasant. According to the BCN leaflet you may also spot a Tree Sparrow in this section of the reserve but alas I didn't.

Another 150 metres brings you to Kim's Corner (5) a fragment of neutral grassland which predates the gravel extraction where Great Burnet, Lady's Bedstraw, Black Knapweed, Vervain, and Bird's Foot Trefoil were in flower. The pond between the meadow and the lake is good for dragonflies and I was able to identify Common Darter and Common Blue Damselfly but there were others unidentified. And for an unusual sighting, look out for a Slider Turtle sunning itself as it sits motionless on a log in the pond – apparently released here by a person unknown a few years back.



Slider turtle

Half Way Point

You are now at the North corner of the Reserve and about halfway round: decide here if you want to make the full circuit or retrace your route back to the car park the way you came perhaps stopping off to recheck the hides since there are none on the second half of the route. If you continue you will exit the meadow via a metal gate and join a long straight section of former railway track (6)-(7). This is a raised more open area overlooking the grazed flood plain meadows of the River Nene to the right and glimpses of the lake through bushes and other scrub to the left. Sand Martins nest at the concrete structure about halfway along this stretch and were busy feeding as I walked by. After about 1 km, look out for a turning to the left off the former railway track (8) then go through another metal gate back into the reserve (straight on will take you to the Great Doddington road). I added Willow Warbler, Song Thrush and Wren to the bird sightings in this section.

Whichever of the two routes you follow you should make a point of visiting the Marigold Pond (9). This is situated off the main path about 50 metres from the car park on the opposite side to the start point. There is a wooden platform extending over the edge of the water. Among the reeds at the side of the platform, with its roots in the water, Greater Spearwort was in flower. A Brown Hawker was hunting back and forth, and on the edge of a lily leaf a female Emperor was ovipositing – a good finale to the walk.

When to visit

Summer Leys is about 25 miles (40km) north of central Milton Keynes so is best planned as a full morning or middle of the day trip. It is a very rewarding reserve to visit. A late July/early August visit has the advantage of many flowering plants, butterflies, dragonflies, and other insects. But if birds are your main interest it may be better to defer your visit to September or October when there should be more wetland birds on the move or taking up winter residence.

Finally, I should like to acknowledge the help of two total strangers who were visiting at the same time as me. One helped me with dragonfly identification and the other led me to two butterfly species I had missed. This experience, not uncommon among those with wildlife interests, reminded me that one of the many pleasures of our normal summer walks programme is the shared expertise of our members.

Joe Clinch, Walk Leader

August 2020