



Butterfly Meadows Circular Walk (5.5 kilometres, 2 hours)



This circular walk follows maintained pathways and unmaintained tracks through Alice Holt Forest, visiting the Bentley Station Meadow Reserve (managed by Butterfly Conservation) and Blacknest Fields (a site for nature recovery managed by Binsted Parish Council). Both of these sites host numerous species of butterflies and moths and can be visited on this enjoyable circular walk, which also takes walkers along several of the biodiversity corridors maintained by Forestry England in the Alice Holt Forest.

Common Blue butterfly. Photo: Alex Potts.

Best time to enjoy the walk: on a sunny day between April and early August when the butterflies are most abundant and are at their most active.

Terrain: undulating forest paths with varying degrees of difficulty. Tracks can be muddy. Not suitable for buggies. Dogs must be kept on leads in both the Bentley Station Meadow Reserve and Blacknest Fields, to protect sensitive wildlife.

Facilities: there are no toilets or places to purchase refreshments on the route.

What to look out for: both the Bentley Station Meadow Reserve and Blacknest Fields are examples of important grassland and scrub habitat, directly adjacent to woodland. These are unique habitats which host high numbers of butterflies, both meadow-loving species and the woodland specialists which also use the rides and biodiversity corridors of Alice Holt to feed and breed.

Dependent on the time of year that you visit, you are likely to see several of the following species of butterfly on your walk: Brimstone, Brown Argus, Comma, Common Blue, Essex Skipper, Gatekeeper, Green-veined White, Holly Blue, Large Skipper, Large White, Marbled White, Meadow Brown, Orange-tip, Painted Lady, Peacock, Red Admiral, Ringlet, Silver-washed Fritillary, Small Tortoiseshell, Small Copper, Small Skipper, Small White, White Admiral and Speckled Wood. Some more elusive species are known to frequent the area and you might be lucky to catch a glimpse of include the Dark Green Fritillary, Brown Hairstreak, Purple Hairstreak and the rarely encountered beautiful Purple Emperor. for which Alice Holt is a stronghold in Hampshire.

Starting point: The walk begins at the small unmarked 'Gravel Hill Road car park' on the edge of Alice Holt Forest. If coming from the A325 you turn onto Gravel Hill Road, continue along the road and pass both the Alice Holt Research Centre and the Forestry England Ops Yard on your left. Continue along the road for a further approx. 500 metres and then turn L up the unmarked track and into the car parking area in front of a metal vehicle barrier. Free parking.

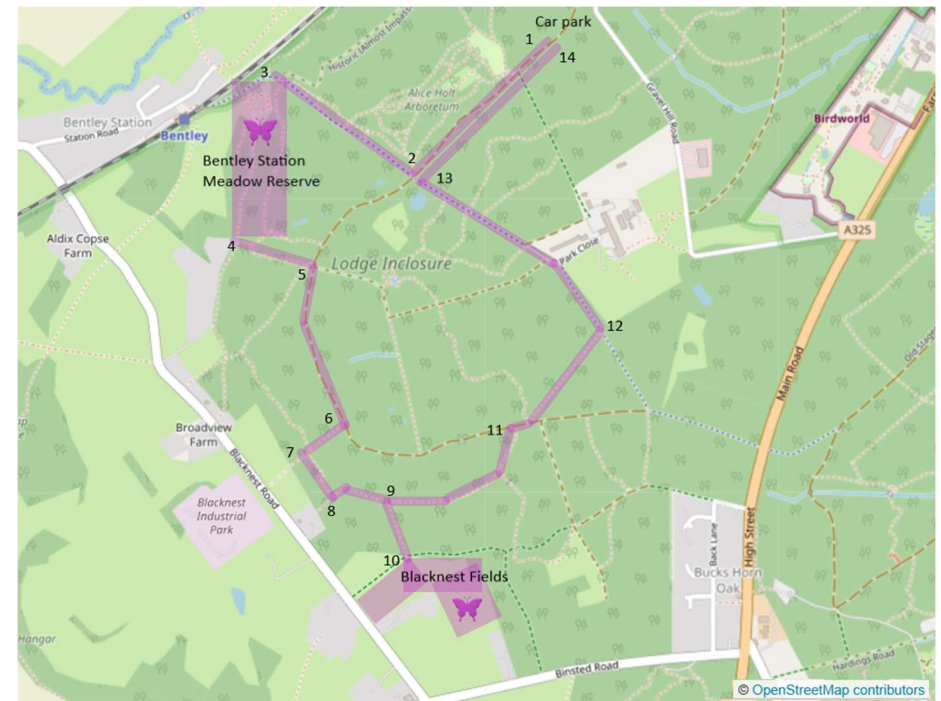
Grid reference: SU80204332

What3words: ambitions.animated.distorts.



Small copper butterfly. Photo: Alex Potts

Alternative starting point: For those travelling by train, the walk can also be started from Bentley train station which is situated on the Alton Line between Farnham and Alton. The station is a 2 minute walk from Bentley Station Meadow Reserve, as shown on the map below. Carefully cross the tracks using the designated pedestrian crossing at the end of the platform.



The walk

1. From the parking area head past the vehicle barrier and follow the gravelled vehicle track straight ahead (south-westwards), passing the sign-posted entrance to the Alice Holt Arboretum on your R and heading straight across the first junction in the path here. After 500m you will reach a large cross junction with a wooden 'Alice Holt Arboretum' sign on your R and a bench ahead of you.

2. At the cross junction turn R on to the concrete path which takes you downhill towards Bentley Train Station.

This section of the walk takes you along part of the 'Shipwrights Way'. This 50 mile route starts in Alice Holt forest and links villages and towns in East Hampshire through some beautiful countryside. It ends at the Portsmouth Historic Dockyard.



Marbled White butterfly. Photo: Alex Potts.

Both Bentley Station Meadow Reserve and Blacknest Fields host many of the grassland species of butterflies including Marbled Whites, Meadow Browns, Gatekeepers, Large Skippers, Small Skippers and Essex Skippers. You are likely to see many of these on a walk around the meadows in the summer months.

3. Before you reach the railway track, the entrance to the Bentley Station Meadow Reserve can be found on your L hand side, marked with a butterfly sculpture. Enter the meadow here via the wooden kissing gate and enjoy some time exploring.

4. Once you have finished exploring, take the main footpath through the meadow which runs from north to south and which dips and then climbs up to the furthest and most southerly point of the Meadow inclosure where a building can be seen through the scrub. Exit the inclosure using the wooden kissing gate and track immediately back on yourself to the L and onto a small and unmaintained path which heads into the forest in an easterly direction uphill and to the R.

Bentley Station Meadow Reserve



Holly Blue butterfly. Photo: Alex Potts.

The main part of the Bentley Station Meadow Reserve forms part of a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) which has been owned and managed by Butterfly Conservation since 1992. At the entrance is an area of open meadow, fringed with mature blackthorn that help to create the warm sheltered environment that butterflies love.

Old natural damp meadows are rare. This one is in a superb location and provides a diverse mixture of habitats with conditions suitable for both woodland and meadow butterflies.

The reserve consists primarily of a strip of herb-rich ancient meadow with small areas of open woodland, a willow-lined stream and an eastern boundary of woodland edge. Many regionally-scarce and local species breed and feed within the site, in particular hoverflies and butterflies. A total of 22 species of butterfly are known to breed at the site, including the Purple Emperor. Brown Hairstreak eggs have also been found at the site in recent years.

The reserve is important as a nectaring spot and breeding place for woodland butterflies, such as the White Admiral and the Silver-washed Fritillary. In the 1980s and early 1990s the Pearl Bordered Fritillary had a precarious existence at Bentley Station Meadow. It hasn't been seen for many years but there are good areas of violets in the meadow and it shouldn't therefore be discounted – you may be lucky enough to spot one!

A path runs through the middle of the reserve from north to south. Cattle are used to graze the site at certain times of the year to keep the scrub under control and their efforts are supported by a team of volunteers who help to maintain the site.

To find out more about volunteering email: volunteering@butterfly-conservation.org who will be able to put you in contact with the team who help to manage the site.



(4. continued ...) After continuing along the small forest path uphill and to the right (due south east) for a few hundred metres you will come out on to a gravelled vehicle track running from left to right at:

What3words: spots.solution.intersect

Grid reference: SU7954642675

5. Turn R along the gravelled track and head downhill south-westwards.

This section of the walk takes you along one of the biodiversity corridors which are maintained by Forestry England in the forest. Corridors such as this are maintained as rides, where sunlight can penetrate to the forest floor, creating warm sheltered spots in the forest which are enjoyed by butterflies. The sunlight also enables a greater variety of nectar-rich plants to thrive in the corridors which are vital to sustaining these woodland butterflies.

Whilst passing along the track keep an eye out for patches of mauve water mint and bright yellow fleabane (which flowers towards the end of the summer) – both are much loved by butterflies and are often great places to spot them.

6. Continue ahead until you reach a large, gravelled area to the right hand side of the track where you can take a right hand turn off on to a small path which leads downhill towards a five bar gate in the distance.



*A Silver-washed Fritillary enjoying water mint in Alice Holt Forest, July 2022.
Photo: Sarah Womersley*

7. About 25m before the five-bar gate, take the small forest path which leads off to the L. The path winds its way through the forest for a few hundred metres and then meets a small T junction.

8. Take a L at the T junction and continue to follow the path through the forest. Keep an eye on the bracken and ferns for resting butterflies.

9. You need to turn R when you reach two clumps of sedge in the middle of the path (which are pictured below). The right turn is at the following location:

What3words: owes.brotherly.bystander.

Grid reference: SU7975 4205

To the right of the sedge you will see a very small (unmanaged) 'desire line' path leading south through the forest. Take this path. It will lead you through an area of forest where the smaller shrubs and saplings are all covered at the bases in distinctive feathered mosses.

The path veers to the left and after approximately a hundred metres you will pass over a fallen tree and then out onto a bridleway. At this point you will see (ahead of you) an owl sculpture which marks the entrance to Blacknest Fields.

Take note of where you exit the forest onto the bridleway here, as you will re-enter using the same path after your visit to Blacknest Fields.



Left: the distinctive clumps of sedge in the middle of the pathway – look to the right here to spot a narrow pathway heading south through the forest.

Right: the owl sculpture that welcomes you to Blacknest Fields.





Blacknest Fields

Blacknest Fields is a relatively new greenspace, which Binsted Parish Council opened to the public in April 2022, for the first time in many years. It is managed as a space for nature recovery and quiet public enjoyment.

The site is made up of 8 acres of mixed habitat. It includes unimproved grassland and a deciduous copse that is adjacent to Alice Holt forest. The site's habitat is like that at the Bentley Station Meadow Reserve. In time, it is hoped that Blacknest Fields will similarly be recognised as a site of significant local importance for butterflies and moths.

22 species of butterflies were recorded using the meadows and copse of Blacknest Fields in 2022, including the White Admiral and Dark Green Fritillary, both species regarded as 'high priority' for conservation efforts by Butterfly Conservation. The meadows also host large numbers of Marbled Whites, Small Whites, Meadow Browns, Ringlets, Gatekeepers, Small Skippers, Large Skippers, Essex Skippers and the day-flying moth the Six Spot Burnet. Keep an eye out for the large and powerful Silver-washed Fritillary, which flies at speed along the edge of the Oak trees bordering the north side of the meadows. They will often settle on the large patches of Common Knapweed found in the meadows, before heading off again.



The ancient Oak trees that fringe the entrance and north-west of the meadows typically host a good number of Purple Hairstreaks, which can often be seen in the later summer months down at almost head height.

Watch out for movement in the leaves – the butterflies are often flushed out by song birds.

Purple Hairstreak on Oak, Blacknest Fields June 2022. Photo: Sarah Womersley

To find out more about events run at, or volunteering at, Blacknest Fields email: BNF@binstedparishcouncil.org.uk or check out the fields' community page:



'Blacknest Fields Community Page'

10. After enjoying Blacknest Fields, leave the site using the main metal kissing gate and re-enter the forest using the exit where you left it:

What3words: blotting.retain.compiled.

Grid reference: SU7980041927

Use the 'desire line' path to retrace your steps and head north back to the clumps of sedge (point 9.). When you exit the desire line track back onto the main track with the sedge, turn R along the path and continue uphill along it until you come out onto a gravelled vehicle track.

11. Turn R onto the gravelled track for 20 metres and then turn L off the track and onto a forest path through a young plantation of silver birch and oaks. Continue north along this path until you emerge from the forest at a T junction.

12. Take a L at the T junction and continue along this path with the Alice Holt Research Centre on your right. Pass a wooden gate and continue straight along the path, passing some houses on your right. Pass another wooden gate and keep straight along the concrete path. You will pass a pond on your left and eventually return to the bench and 'Alice Holt Arboretum' sign seen earlier.

13. At the 'Alice Holt Arboretum' sign either (i) turn R and continue straight down the vehicle track to the car park (14.) or (ii) continue straight for Bentley Train St.

Acknowledgements: This circular walk was conceived by Steve Luckett, the former Butterfly Conservation volunteer warden at Bentley Station Meadow Reserve. The walk has been compiled by the 'Friends of Blacknest Fields' in collaboration with Steve Luckett, Binsted Parish Council, Binsted Eco Network and Butterfly Conservation. Thanks go to Steve Luckett, Alex Potts, Alison Melvin and Sarah Womersley for sharing their knowledge and photographs, as well as the following helpful online resources:

<https://butterfly-conservation.org/our-work/reserves/bentley-station-meadow-hampshire>

<https://www.forestryengland.uk/forest-planning/alice-holt-forest-plan>

<https://binstedparishcouncil.org.uk/parish-council/blacknest-fields>

<https://ukbutterflies.co.uk>

<https://www.purple-emperor.co.uk/alice-holt>