

## ***Follow the yellow post road!***

**Featuring: butterflies, birds, heathland,  
and the Shotover Oak.**

**KEY:** L = left ; R = right ; SO = straight on  
T = 'T' junction ; Y = fork  
▽ = a triangle junction

☞ **Start with your back to the Notice Board near the entrance to the car park. Head R across the flat grass to the 1<sup>st</sup> ▣, then SO to the 2<sup>nd</sup> ▣ at the edge of the grass, just in front of a clump of bushes.**

It is thought that this level area of grass was once used to grow crops. Although this was before chemical fertilizers, the area still shows the signs of disturbance, with coarse grasses and little diversity in wild flowers. Bulbous Buttercup flourishes on this well-drained soil.

☞ **Bear L and go down the hill to the T at the bottom. ▣**

As you go down the slope you are surrounded by the heather and gorse of Shotover's heath (purple in September). This is a nationally important habitat, and a priority for conservation (see box below). The grasses here, some of which are quite rare in Oxfordshire (e.g. Heath Grass), differ greatly from those on the level area.

Look out for butterflies on warm days, e.g. Large Skipper, Small Copper, Common Blue and Gatekeeper.

**Lowland acid grassland and heath** is a scarce habitat in the UK and very different to the heather moors of the uplands. Lowland heaths occur on dry sandy soils and support many specialist flowers, insects and ground-nesting birds.

Shotover is too busy for such birds, but there are carpets of Heath Bedstraw in the summer and locally rare St John's Worts. Beetles, wasps and bees thrive in the sandy soils, including the Minotaur Beetle, the Two-banded Digger Wasp and the Girdled Mining Bee.

☞ **Turn L at the T (▣). The path goes SO to another (▣), then dips down and climbs up before reaching a multiple junction just past a large dead oak trunk on the left.**

The dip takes you down into 'Jurassic Park' and back out again: the path starts on sand, and passes down over Portland Limestone to the Jurassic Clay at the bottom. Here water draining from the heath reappears as spring water (visible on the right). The Ash trees on the left have grown up in the many years since grazing ceased in this field. There is still an old drinking trough in there!

☞ **Turn R at the ▣, go down the wide track to the T.**

Old boundaries are an interesting feature of the Yellow Trail. One of these is the bank to the right of this track - it appears on a map of 1790.

☞ **Turn L at the T (▣) and go SO down to the road.**

On your left is a young woodland that was sheep pasture only 60 years ago; nearly all of the trees have grown up since then. Also off to the left, just before the track goes steeply downhill, is the faint line of an old hedge. Beyond this hedge line you can see an open area, an expanse of acidic grassland habitat, rare in Oxfordshire.

Look out for butterflies along the woodland edge, especially Ringlet, Speckled Wood, Red Admiral and Purple Hairstreak.

☞ **Go SO up the road towards Westhill Farm gate, fork L at the ▣ to cut the corner, and continue up to the wide stony track.**

The pond on the left, at the bottom of the climb, is very old but too disturbed to have much pond life. On the edges, however, are damp-loving plants such as Ragged Robin, and sometimes Broad-Leaved Helleborine. Look out for Cuckoo Flower and its associated butterfly, Orange Tip.

☞ **Go L (▣) up the vehicle track to the next ▣.**

This is an old farm track with some fine old oaks on the left. Because of the mixture of woodland, buildings, scrub and fields, there is a rich variety of birdsong here during most of the year.

☞ **Turn sharp R back down to the T near Westhill Farm (▣).**

The Larch plantation on your left is good for a different range of breeding birds, including nesting Kestrel and Goldcrest. In the summer, Foxgloves are often to be seen in flower amongst the trees.

☞ **Turn L at the T and go down hill to Ben's Bridge.**

On the left is the Sunset Oak. During a fine autumn sunset the tree's name is marvellously fitting. Ben's Bridge was named after the Westhill Farm donkey!

Just before the bridge, the bank on the left marks the former boundary of the royal hunting forest of Shotover: it is over 700 years old. This is one of the few places where this boundary can be clearly seen.

**Butterflies** enjoy the woodland edges and open glades of Shotover, and in recent years over 30 species have been recorded. This includes rarities such as White Admiral, Black Hairstreak, Brown Hairstreak and Purple Emperor. One of the great sights of Shotover is the mass emergence of Marbled Whites on The Plain in June.

☞ **Go over the bridge and turn L at the + (▣) through the gap in the fallen trunk. Go SO all the way up, following the streamline, to the T at the top (▣).**

As you walk up the streamline, you can often make out the Shotover boundary bank on the other side of the stream. This remarkable bank is host to a great variety of interesting mosses.

The old streamline is fed by a spring near the top of the climb and, together with the boundary bank, makes a rich, damp woodland habitat. Marsh plants grow here, including Marsh Marigold and Remote Sedge, as well as ancient-woodland plants such as Moschatel and Wood Melick.

This path also goes up through an old mature plantation which is excellent for birds and birdsong. Look or listen out for Great Spotted Woodpecker, Nuthatch, Treecreeper and Sparrowhawk.

☞ **Turn L at the T (▣), go 20 yds to the ancient boundary bank (▣), turn R and go up to another T.**

This short path continues to follow the ancient forest boundary, on which there are some stately oaks and mature holly. Some of the holly bushes are very old.

☞ **Turn L at the T (📍), go down the dip to the 📍 and up again to the next 📍.**

On the right, where the path dips, there is a small three-trunked Wild Service Tree, also known as the Chequers Tree. These trees are not very common in the countryside but were once much valued for their wood and berries. The berries were used for flavouring beer before hops became dominant, and were grown in pub gardens: hence the pub name, the Chequers. (There are plenty of wild hops on Shotover too.)

☞ **Bear L at the 📍 and cross the open grass (with a view over south-east Oxford on the L) to the 📍.**

This area is acid grassland and, together with the heath, is the habitat that makes such an important contribution to county biodiversity. Rabbits are essential here in keeping the grasses and shrubs from becoming too dominant.

On the right, as you walk through the grassy area, there is a dense hedge of Blackthorn, a source of pollen, nectar and food for many insects. Over the past few years, this Blackthorn has supported egg laying for the rare Brown Hairstreak butterfly. Many other interesting butterflies can be seen here, including Purple Hairstreak up in the oak trees, Essex Skipper, Marbled White and Small Tortoiseshell.

**The Shotover Oak** is a fine veteran tree whose age we can only estimate. As you look up into the canopy the first thing to notice is the open and healthy spread of branches. Also of interest are the signs of past management. The tree has had all its upper branches removed (pollarded) at least once, perhaps as a source of timber. Not only does this increase the tree's longevity, it also hides its age. The Shotover Oak is about 400 years old, and is slowly hollowing, making it stronger! With care it could live on to become a truly ancient tree.

☞ **Go through the shady woodland to a grassy ∇(📍).**

Like many other areas of Shotover, this was an open field only 60 years ago. The field was particularly bare back then, as it was used for testing the military tanks built down the hill at Cowley.

☞ **Cross over the wide track to the Shotover Oak.**

(see text box)

☞ **Continue past the Shotover Oak and turn R immediately at the Y (📍) onto the upper path. Follow this path 300 yds to the next 📍, then 200 yds to the following 📍, with the Joseph Burt Davy memorial stone seat on your R.**

For the rest of the route you will be walking along the top of Johnson's Piece. This field has undergone little management for over 100 years, and was probably only used for rough grazing for long before that. The habitat structure is highly varied and little disturbed, and this is reflected in the great diversity of wildlife: birds, deer and small mammals, butterflies, wildflowers, mosses, ferns, fungi and many types of insect. A Nightingale sang here in 2008, the first time in six years that this species had been heard on Shotover.

Joseph Burt Davy was an eminent Oxford botanist and agricultural scientist.

☞ **Turn R towards the seat (📍), go through the boundary Oaks to The Plain, and turn L to return to the car park.**

We hope you have enjoyed these notes.  
Please contact us if you have any comments.

**Shotover Wildlife** is a voluntary organisation founded to research and communicate the importance of Shotover Hill for wildlife

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Oxford City Council maintains the Yellow Trail and the other two marked routes at Shotover Country Park.

**Time for walk: 45mins - 1¼ hours**

Distance: 1.6 miles (2.5 km)

Other useful leaflets to take with you: **Discovering Shotover  
Heathland Flowers  
Butterflies  
Habitats  
Birds**

# YELLOW TRAIL WILDLIFE (AND ROUTE GUIDE) on SHOTOVER



**SW**  
Shotover Wildlife