

Wildlife in Gateshead



What's about? • When? • Where?

WILDLIFE IN GATESHEAD



Gateshead's Wildlife

Red Kites have really put Gateshead's countryside on the map. But don't think that they are all Gateshead has to offer!

This leaflet takes you month by month through the year, highlighting what you can see and where to go to have good opportunities of seeing the wildlife featured.

Although the leaflet is written as a calendar the wildlife featured each month can often be seen throughout that season and in some cases all year round.

So if you have ever wondered where there might be a chance of seeing an otter or where you can stroll through a wood carpeted with bluebells, then read on.

Gateshead has...

- 8 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)
- Over 100 Local Wildlife Sites (LWS)
- 9 Local Nature Reserves, including 6 urban sites in east Gateshead
- 1 UK Man and the Biosphere Urban Wildlife award winning site

The Council owns 4 SSSIs and 22% of the LWS



What We Do For Wildlife

To try and create the perfect place for wildlife, Gateshead Council looks after many countryside sites. Not only is wildlife encouraged to visit these sites but so are you!

When you are out and about you may come across countryside management in action such as –

- Tree felling
- Scrub cutting
- Grazing
- Hay cutting
- Pond clearing
- Hedge laying

Often the immediate effect is quite drastic but usually within one season the benefits to wildlife can be seen.

The Countryside Teams work to provide high quality habitat for wildlife along with providing access for members of the public.

There are 6 bird hides across Gateshead and keys can be bought from Thornley Woodlands Centre, Blaydon Leisure & Primary Care Centre or the Development and Enterprise reception on the 2nd floor, Civic Centre. There are two in the Derwent Walk Country Park, one at Shibdon Pond, one at Lamesley Pastures and two at Clara Vale Local Nature Reserve.



JANUARY

Otters



Only a few years ago otters were very rare in this country because rivers were often polluted or their bankside habitat had been destroyed. Otters are now making a comeback because rivers are better looked after so there is more food and more tree cover on banksides. New habitats, artificial holts and safer road crossings for otters have also been created as part of a major project which was undertaken by Gateshead Council. Otters are very secretive and often their presence is only detected by footprints, droppings or mudslides.

Otters are territorial and along a stretch of river, a male will look after more than one female and her cubs. Their ideal habitat is a tree-lined riverbank where they can make their home deep into the root system (the otter's holt). Winter is a good time to see otters because the lack of vegetation leaves them more out in the open.

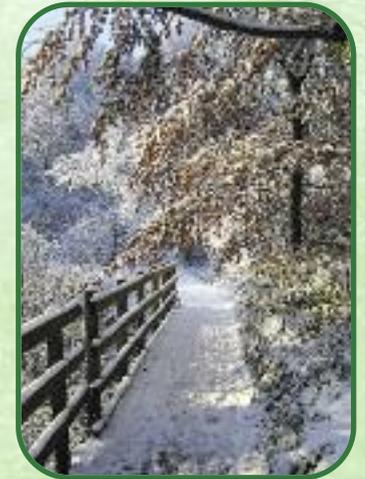
Good places to see otters in Gateshead are the River Derwent and Far Pasture Ponds in the Derwent Walk Country Park.



You can find wildlife at any time of the year – even January.

In January birds are searching for food and small birds, like tits and finches, do this in large flocks. Look out for them in Gateshead moving through mature hedgerows and in woodlands like Thornley Wood and along the Derwent Walk.

Visits to Far Pasture, Clara Vale and Lamesley Pastures may reward you with views of kingfishers which leave the rivers in favour of ponds when the water levels are high.



Cold snaps in other parts of Northern Europe drive wildfowl to the relative warmth of Britain. Look out for goldeneye, wigeon, tufted duck and teal at places like Shibdon Pond, Lamesley Pastures and the River Tyne at Dunston.

Did you know...

Otters can swim at speeds of 12km / hour underwater and can travel for up to 400m before surfacing for air. When they dive they close their nostrils and their ears.



FEBRUARY

Red Kites



After a programme of re-introduction red kites are now living and successfully breeding in Gateshead. One of the best places to see these magnificent birds is the Derwent Walk Country Park and the Barlow Burn.

At this time of year they roost together in woodland, gathering as dusk falls and often providing us with a spectacular display. Roost sites may vary from year to year but since the first year of releases they have always gathered near Sherburn Towers at Rowlands Gill before roosting in Spen Burn woods.



Although February is often the coldest month it also heralds the first signs of spring.

Look out around Thornley Wood for hazel catkins. If ponds remain unfrozen you will see early frog spawn in the shallows, if you would like to see lots of frogs try the ponds at Strother Hills.

A visit to the Thornley Woodlands Centre feeding station may reward you with views of the normally secretive roe deer. The hides at Shibdon Pond and Far Pasture are good places to see water rail, snipe and its diminutive relative the jack snipe.

Traditionally this is a good time of year for seeing rare gulls on the River Tyne, try Stella and Dunston at low tide for species such as glaucous and Iceland gull.



Did you know...

Each catkin on a birch tree produces between 5 and 6 million grains of pollen!



MARCH

Dippers



The dipper is a scarce bird that can be found on most rivers in Gateshead, although it is most common on the River Derwent where as many as 13 pairs may nest between Swalwell and Blackhall Mill.

The dipper gets its name from the habit of 'dipping' its body up and down when perched. It feeds by diving in the shallows of fast running water and catching aquatic insects and larvae.

The Derwent Walk Country Park is one of the best places to look for dippers. Try downstream from the bridge at Swalwell Cricket Club or the river at Owlet Hill near the Nine Arches Viaduct.



Spring is well on the way, accompanied by the sound of drumming great spotted woodpeckers as they hammer with their beaks on dead trees in order to attract a mate and mark out their territory.

Their larger relative, the green woodpecker, doesn't drum but has a distinctive laughing call which has earned it the country name of the 'yaffle'.



Primrose is literally the first flower (prima = first, rosa = flower) of the season. After many years of decline primroses are making a comeback especially in areas of traditionally managed woodland, for example the Derwent Walk Country Park.

A good place to see banks of primroses is in the Derwent Walk Country Park.

Did you know...

Only male frogs croak!



APRIL

Swallows



One of the most evocative birds of the spring is the swallow. It is often thought of as a harbinger of the summer ahead. It travels from Africa to breed and can be seen in the more rural west of Gateshead where it breeds in open farm buildings and stables. These areas are favoured because of the large numbers of flying insects attracted by the animal dung and swallows can often be seen skimming low over fields in search of them. In a good summer it can raise three broods of young and it is often one of the last visitors to leave in autumn.



Other returning summer bird visitors to Gateshead include the willow warbler. You will hear its cascading song while walking through areas of scrub such as Stargate, Watergate and Derwenthaugh Park. At such places you may also see other visitors like common and lesser whitethroats and in the areas of more mature scrub and trees the chiffchaff can be heard singing its repetitive song of 'chiff chaff chiff chaf'.



A number of these summer migrants are in serious decline for reasons such as agricultural intensification and the lack of traditional woodland management. The Council's Countryside Teams manage the majority of sites traditionally to ensure we still continue to see these birds in the borough.

The primroses of March give way to carpets of wood anemone and celandine, the boardwalks around the Thornley Woodlands Centre allow easy access to excellent views of this display.

Also watch the skies for red kites displaying and carrying nesting material, especially in the Derwent Walk County Park.

Did you know...

There are 2500 beakfulls of mud in a house martin's nest!



MAY

Bluebells



May is the final month for enjoying spring flowers, and the bluebell provides one of the most spectacular shows of all. For bluebells to flourish they have to have the right balance between light and shade in a woodland. This is achieved by coppicing which is a traditional method of managing woodland. It is also necessary to remove some tree species which cast heavy shade such as sycamore and horse chestnut. These trees are not naturally occurring trees in British woodland and have very few benefits for our native flora and fauna.

Where the management is right the woodland floor can be transformed into a carpet of blue and white from bluebells and wild garlic. Longacre Wood near Lamesley is one of the best places to see this fantastic natural canvas.



May is perhaps the busiest month of the year for wildlife. All the summer visitors have arrived and swell the dawn chorus which is at its peak during this month. If you would like to experience this why not join one of many dawn chorus events held throughout the region.

Many birds are breeding this month. The peak of feeding the young coincides with masses of moth caterpillars feeding on the new leaves. On a walk through the woods you will often find small caterpillars hanging by threads from the leaves.

This is the way that they try to escape being picked off by birds, when the danger has passed they climb up the thread and continue eating.



Did you know...

Swifts spend almost all their time in the air and can reach heights of up to 20,000 feet. They feed, drink, mate and sleep on the wing and only land to breed!



JUNE

Kittiwakes



The kittiwake is a small, attractive gull of the open sea. It gets its name from the loud and very distinctive call – kitt-i-waake, kitt-i-waake.

In summer adult birds have a rich yellow bill, short black legs and black tips to their wings. They nest in large noisy colonies on steep sided cliffs and locally on buildings and structures.

The Tyne Bridge and the Kittiwake Tower at Saltmeadows are two of the most inland colonies of kittiwakes in the world and are the best places to see them in Gateshead.



On a visit to Burdon Moor at this time of year you should hear the call of curlew, oystercatcher, skylark, yellowhammer and snipe. Young birds are starting to leave the nest in June and you may see the parents continuing to feed them

Grasslands reach their peak towards the end of the month and into July, flowers such as northern marsh orchid can be seen in damp pastures and woodland rides. Try Shibdon Pond, Clara Vale Nature Reserve or Longacre Wood.



While walking through grasslands on sunny days you may see a black moth with red spots, this is a burnet moth. A number of moths fly during the day and may be mistaken for butterflies.

Did you know...

A bee must tap 2 million flowers to make 1lb of honey and would have to fly 55,000 miles to get it!



JULY



Grassland Butterflies



Perhaps the most popular of the summer insects are the butterflies and July is probably the best time to see them as they reach the most colourful stage of their life cycle. Visit a meadow on a warm, still day and you will see a beautiful array of butterflies, including the common blue, small skipper and meadow brown.

Look closely for the tiny but vivid small copper. It will be basking with its wings held open and often shows a preference for yellow flowers when nectaring. If it flies by, you may catch a glimpse of the brilliant copper wings.

The Countryside Teams manage grasslands by the traditional methods of grazing with animals and hay cutting. In July grasslands such as those at Owlet Hill in Derwent Walk Country Park, Stargate and Cross Lane meadows are a riot of colour and attract huge numbers of insects, such as bumble bees, hoverflies, grasshoppers, beetles and ladybirds.

The first swifts leave for Africa towards the end of July. If you see waders such as green sandpiper, greenshank or ringed plover they are probably birds that for one reason or another have failed to breed.

The chance of seeing a live badger is very small because they are shy and nocturnal. However, at this time of year you may come across small holes in the ground where badgers have been digging for worms. Occasionally you may find a bee or wasp nest dug out as the grubs are one of its favourite food.



Did you know...

Caterpillars have over 4000 separate muscles - humans have only 792!



AUGUST

Dragonflies



Some of the most spectacular insects to be seen in the borough are the dragonflies. These large and brightly coloured insects are masters at aerobatics and their common names reflect this - hawkler, darter, chaser and skimmer. They have the largest eyes of all the insects enabling them to see forwards, to the side and behind at all times. They need warmth to fly and their wings act as solar panels. Although they are large insects they are completely harmless to humans and do not sting or bite. They feed on flying insects and the larger ones will even catch and eat the smaller damselflies and butterflies!

Some of the best places to see these summer jewels are Shibdon Pond, Bowes Valley Nature Reserve, Far Pasture and Sled Lane Pond. To give yourself the best chance of seeing them pick a warm sunny day with not too much wind.



Although bats have been feeding all summer, in August you have a better chance of seeing them. Dusk now comes earlier, females have left the nursery and juveniles are also flying. As they flit about they are searching for insects which they detect using their unique 'radar'.

To have a chance of seeing them visit wetlands such as Shibdon Pond, River Derwent and the River Tyne.

Important insects in a bat's diet are night flying moths. There is a very large number of species with a wide variety of colours and markings which are best seen by joining an organised moth watch event.



Perhaps the most elusive animal living in the North East can be found in the Derwent Valley. The grass snake is non poisonous and if you were lucky enough to see one at this time of year they would be basking in the open on warm sunny days. Because they are so rare and endangered a lot of habitat work is being done to encourage them.

Did you know...

Dragonflies travel at 30mph - the fastest insects in the UK. Dragonflies have almost 360 degree vision!



SEPTEMBER

Waders



A visit to Shibdon Pond or The River Tyne at Costco on a low tide could reward you with views of a variety of wading birds. Species like lapwing, golden plover, redshank and curlew are the most likely to be seen, but these may be joined by less common visitors such as black-tailed godwit, curlew, common sandpiper and spotted redshank.

Most of these birds will be in the duller juvenile and winter plumage but some may still show remnants of their summer finery. The more common species will have spent the summer in the uplands of Great Britain where they breed but many of the rarer waders will have bred in Scandinavia and Iceland and will spend the winter in Southern Europe and Africa.



September is the month when many of our summer visitors will be leaving us and the young of our resident birds will be dispersing throughout the countryside, an example being the kingfisher. The increase in numbers means there is more chance of seeing one, if you are extra lucky they may even visit your garden pond.

This is the peak month for finding wild fruits in the countryside. Many of these fruits can be used to make wines or jellies but they are best left for the birds especially migrant birds to build up their fat reserves for their long journey.



Most woodlands contain a wide range of berry bearing plants at this time of year.

Did you know...

A roost of 100 pipistrelle bats will eat over 1.5 million gnats in a month!



OCTOBER



Fungi



With the right conditions of cool and damp, a walk through an October wood will reveal a wide range of mushrooms and toadstools. What you see are the fruiting bodies that produce spores that are the 'seeds' of the fungus. The main plant is hidden underground helping to break down dead leaves, twigs etc.

Surprisingly out of the hundreds of different species to be found at this time of year only a handful are deadly poisonous with many being good to eat, but we wouldn't recommend you collect or try without the advice of an expert. A small woodland that has in good years, large numbers of fungi is Washingwell Wood, part of Watergate Forest Park.

In the previous month migrant birds were feeding on soft fruits. In October the later ripening fruits, such as holly and hawthorn, can be found and these provide much needed food for the winter visiting thrushes such as redwings and fieldfares. Fieldfares also love windfalls such as apples and can be seen in orchards.

Ryton Willows is a good place to visit to observe thrushes travelling up the Tyne Valley as they move further west after their long journey.

The Tyne Valley is also a good place to spot various geese flying in formation heading for their wintering grounds on the Solway Firth, you often hear their honking calls before you see them.

The first signs of autumn colours are creeping into the woodlands. Thornley Wood is well worth a visit during this season.



Did you know...

A snail can sleep for 3 years!



NOVEMBER

Conkers



This is the time to look for conkers. The number of nuts produced each year varies, some years there are masses and other years very few. Conkers are the fruits of the horse chestnut tree which, although now common in Britain, was only introduced from the Balkans in the late 16th century. It either gets its name from its old use as a horse stimulant or from the horseshoe-shaped leaf scars on the winter twigs.

The game of conkers was originally played using snail shells ('conch'). It was not until the 20th century that the horse chestnut was used.

If you want to visit the woods when they are at their most atmospheric with rich autumn colours and falling leaves then this is the month to go!

The changing colour and leaf fall are both a means of ridding the tree of waste products accumulated during the summer. After the leaf fall the tree goes into dormancy.

For many trees the final action of the year is to produce its seed, which is often in the form of nuts.

You don't even need to go to the countryside to see fantastic wildlife at this time of year. One of our most exotic looking birds is a winter visitor and often favours urban areas. Waxwing numbers vary from year to year, if food is plentiful in their Baltic breeding grounds they remain there, if not they head west and may arrive in Gateshead. Places to look for them are supermarket car parks and other places where there are trees with berries.



Did you know...

You can tell if a squirrel is left or right handed by the way it chews a pinecone!



DECEMBER

Roe Deer



Seven species of deer live wild in Britain but only two of them, red deer and roe deer are native. The red deer is restricted to mountains and moorlands but the much smaller roe deer (65cm) is at home in woodlands.

Woodlands provide cover for deer whose brown coats are perfectly camouflaged in the dappled shade. However, when disturbed they have a distinctive white rump which serves as an alarm signal when they run. Roe deer feed on a range of plant material including the young leaves of trees. They are not seen in herds but only as individuals or small family parties. Their antlers grow each year during the winter, can have as many as 3 points and are up to 25cm long.

Roe deer are widespread across many woodlands in Gateshead but their secretive nature makes them hard to see. However, they are regularly seen from the Thornley Wood hide where they often stand out in the open.



December isn't an obvious month to visit the countryside so why not look for wildlife nearer home – or when doing the shopping! Shopping centres generate a lot of heat and are ideal for flocks of roosting birds. Look out for roosting pied wagtails at the MetroCentre.

Foxes are now thought to be more common in built up areas than the countryside and have been seen around the MetroCentre when the crowds have gone home. If you don't see them you may hear them 'barking' - a high pitched yelp. At the same time tawny owls are starting to call with their familiar 'hoot' and again this is not confined to the countryside since tawny owls are the most common urban owl.

The 'must visit' place in the countryside at this time of year is the Thornley Woods Feeding Station where a wide range of woodland birds can be seen feeding at close quarters. Regular birds seen are bullfinch, nuthatch, yellowhammer, great spotted woodpecker, long-tailed tit, jay, pheasant and many more.



Did you know...

Only tawny owls hoot,
only mallard ducks quack!



Further Reading

Useful websites:

- www.gateshead.gov.uk/countryside** - has information about Gateshead's Countryside Sites.
- www.gatesheadbirders.co.uk** - full of very local and up-to-date information on birds and other wildlife.
- www.whentowatchwildlife.org** - information on wildlife broken down into months.
- www.naturescalendar.org.uk** - home of 'Springwatch', the Nature Detectives part of the site is full of useful information and activities.
- www.naturenet.net** - countryside management, careers and the law are just some of the subjects covered.
- www.friendsofredkites.org.uk** - website for the Friends of Red Kites.
- www.durhamwt.co.uk** - Durham Wildlife Trust site.

Guides:

The Field Studies Council produce a wide range of identification guides that are very easy to take out and about with you. See www.field-studies-council.org for a full list.

Books:

- Collins Complete British Wildlife** by Paul Sterry.
- Collins Bird Guide: The Most Complete Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe** by Lars Svensson, Peter J. Grant, Killian Mullarney, and Dan Zetterstrom.
- Collins Field Guide to Insects of Britain and Northern Europe** by Michael Chinnery.
- Mushrooms** by Roger Phillips.
- The Wild Flower Key** (Revised Edition) - How to identify wild plants, trees and shrubs in Britain and Ireland by Francis Rose.

Get involved:

If you enjoy your countryside visits, why not make a difference? Join Gateshead Countryside Volunteer Rangers today! For further information call 0191 433 3524 or visit www.gateshead.gov.uk/countryside.

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