

Butterflying on the Chilterns escarpment – 1½ miles Watlington Hill

Discover an Oxfordshire dreamscape as you walk to the top of Watlington Hill, with fine views and fine wildlife, all year round. A mosaic of short rabbit turf, scrub and dense yew woodland, make it an especially good site for butterflies, with a large population of silver-spotted skipper flying here from late July to early September. This is also a super spot for picnics – just watch butterflies flutter and red kites soar overhead as you tuck in...

Start: Watlington Hill – NT car park – OS Landranger map 175 – grid ref: SU710935

Getting there and facilities...

By foot: one mile SE of Watlington on pavements, the Oxfordshire Way passes closeby.

By bus: regular service (101) from Oxford to Watlington.

By car: 5 miles S of junction 6, M40, take road towards Christmas Common off B4009.

WCs, shops and pubs can be found in Watlington.

Look out for...

Silver-spotted skipper

This is one of the hardest butterflies to watch, being small, very fast and low-flying. However, they alight regularly on flowers, such as ground thistle, and can be observed and approached (warily) then. Find it in large numbers at Watlington most summers – numbers tend to peak in mid August.

Other butterflies

Brown argus is quite easy to spot here, as is marbled white, common blue and green hairstreak. There are very small colonies of chalkhill blue (southwest corner and the south slope), and the occasional dingy skipper and grizzled skipper.

Plants

Chalk-loving plants are found on the open grassland, though rabbits prevent many from really flourishing. Look out for orchids and rock rose. Star finds would be Chiltern gentian and wild candytuft.

Birds and more...

On quiet days you may see muntjac and fallow deer foraging amongst the scrub, which is also a favoured habitat for many small birds. You would have to be very unlucky not to see a red kite or buzzard on your visit!



Watlington is one of the best sites for the rare silver-spotted skipper in England. It lays its eggs in tussocks of sheep's fescue grass, on the edge of the bare chalk.

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Watlington is grazed by rabbits which do a superb job of keeping the grassland habitat in good condition for the butterflies. Around rabbit burrows, look out for the lilac flowers of Chiltern gentian.

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If you're very lucky, you might see a dark green fritillaries are fairly common about Watlington Hill where they feed on violets. Wait for their wings to open and you'll see a very different colouring with deep orange and dark lines.

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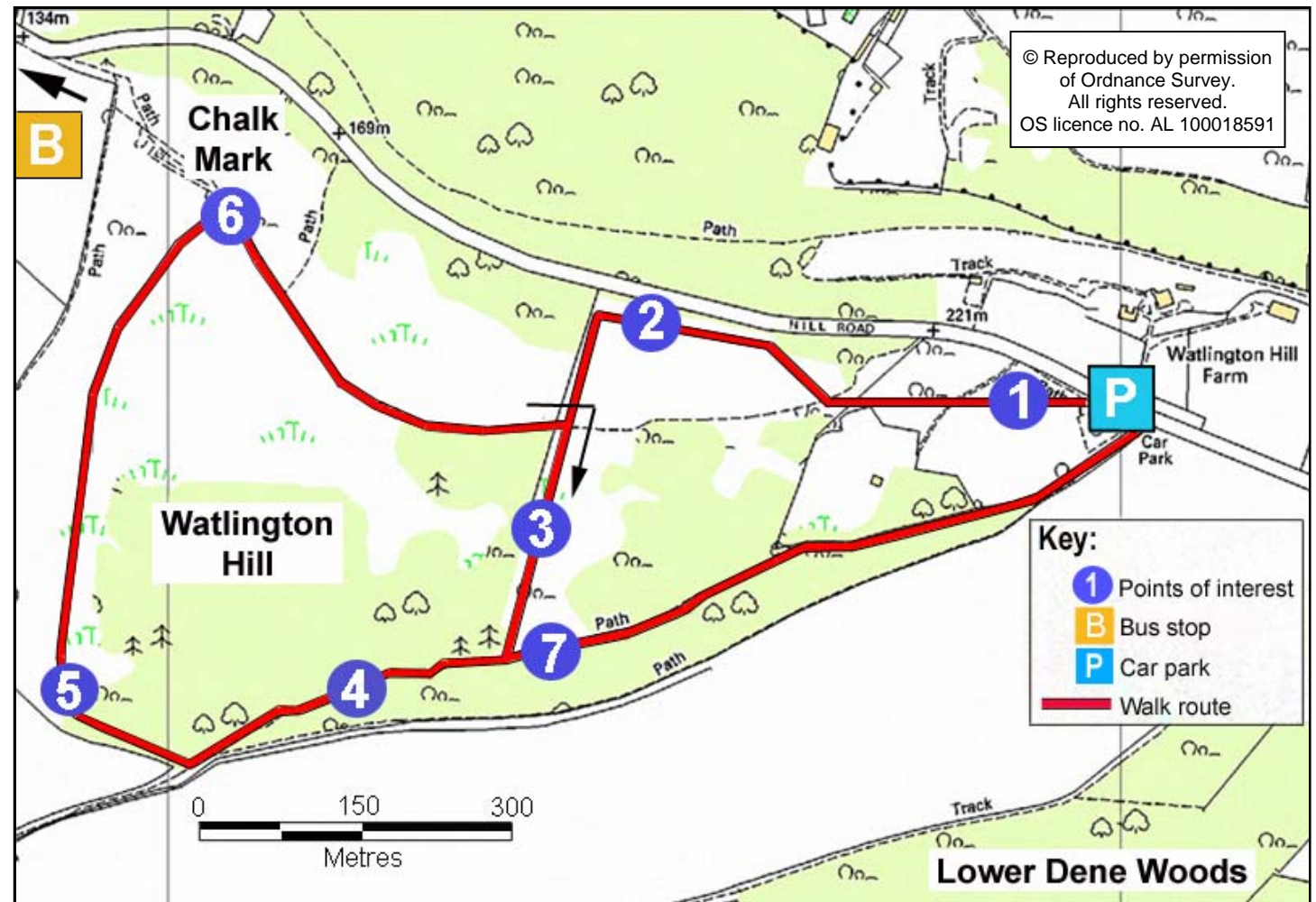
The Trust's butterfly expert, Matthew Oates, has butterflyed at Watlington almost annually since 1967 and saw his first silver-spotted skippers here...

Route and directions...

1. Leave the NT car park by the main exit on to the hill. Head along the main path through larch trees and out on to open slopes.
2. The north-facing slope is generally the best place for silver-spotted skipper. Common blue also breeds here well.
3. Look for skippers and brown argus on the south-facing slope. Across the valley is Lower Deans Wood – an ancient beech woodland in the care of the Trust.
4. The grassland strip below the yew wood is a good area, especially for green hairstreak, brown argus, common blue and marbled white. Follow the path along the edge of the yew wood, listening for the squeak of goldcrests as you walk, then turn right and up the steps.
5. Along the west-facing slope, look out for chalkhill blue and, in high summer, candytuft. Head towards the Chalk Mark (an 18th century spire cut into the chalk hillside) and enjoy vast views over the Vale.
6. Turn right and eastwards, over the summit of the hill. Drop down the steep south-facing slope again, as in point three. The scrub along this stretch is rich in birdlife. Listen for warblers. It is also the best area for dark green fritillary.
7. At the foot of the slope, turn left and explore the scrub for brimstones which are seen about basil and marjoram flowers in August. Return to the car park by following the bottom path.

Terrain and accessibility...

1½ miles circular walk. Gentle to moderate slopes. Short turf and chalky paths. Suitable for children.



National Trust places nearby...

Greys Court, West Wycombe Park, Hughenden Manor, Maidenhead and Cookham Commons.

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