

Extreme butterflying! 1½ miles

Bin Combe, Exmoor

This one is tough, very tough. The habitat is tall, dense bracken on steep slopes where there are no paths, but this is by far the best place to go in pursuit of the rare heath fritillary butterfly. Welcome to the world of extreme butterflying near Dunkery Beacon in the north of the Exmoor National Park!

Start: Dunkery Beacon car park – OS Landranger 181, Explorer 9 – grid ref: SS905410

Getting there and facilities...

By foot: 2½ mile uphill walk, NW from Wheddon Cross, on hilly countryside paths

By bus: 398 Tiverton to Minehead service, alight at Wheddon Cross

By car: turn off the B3224 at the Blagdon Cross junction, take the minor road across Dunkery Hill towards Luccombe and park near the summit of the road.

WC at Wheddon Cross, tea rooms in Horner village.

Look out for...

Heath fritillary

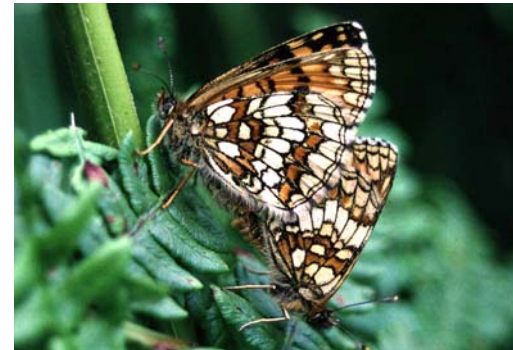
This rare orange and brown butterfly flies here from late May to early July. The best time to see it is mid June. It is also most visible in sunny, warm weather. They fly throughout the combe though tend to be scarcer in the upper reaches. There are few other butterflies, but you may see a green hairstreak, small heath, or the occasional small pearl-bordered fritillary along the stream.

Dunkery Beacon

Once you've had your butterfly fix at Bin Combe, explore the surrounding moorland, much of which is cared for by the National Trust. From Dunkery Beacon, the highest point on Exmoor, there are superb views across to Wales on a clear day. You may spot birds of prey like Merlin or hobby hunting over the heather. Also, keep watch for Dartford warblers and enjoy the song of skylarks whirling up above.

Exmoor ponies

This hardy breed has roamed Exmoor since ancient times. Its stocky build and tough coat enable the ponies to graze on the moors throughout the year, though they are herded annually and the foals are branded. Today there are thought to be just a few thousand of these ponies worldwide.



The heath fritillary was first discovered on Exmoor in 1982. It has strongholds in the combes, or steep valleys, radiating off Dunkery Beacon. The best is Bin Combe, but you could also try Hanny, Aller and Sweetworthy Combes.

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Lower Bin Combe. This is the core area for heath fritillary at this site. As livestock grazing has declined, we keep bracken growth in check by burning it off in February. This encourages plants like cow-wheat (a parasitic plant on bilberry), upon which the butterflies breed.



During the Second World War, these moors became a military training ground. Few Exmoor ponies survived this. Locals later came to the rescue and helped re-establish the breed.

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In partnership with the Butterfly Conservation Society, the National Trust has done a massive amount of work to conserve the heath fritillary on Exmoor. The secret is in robust bracken management.

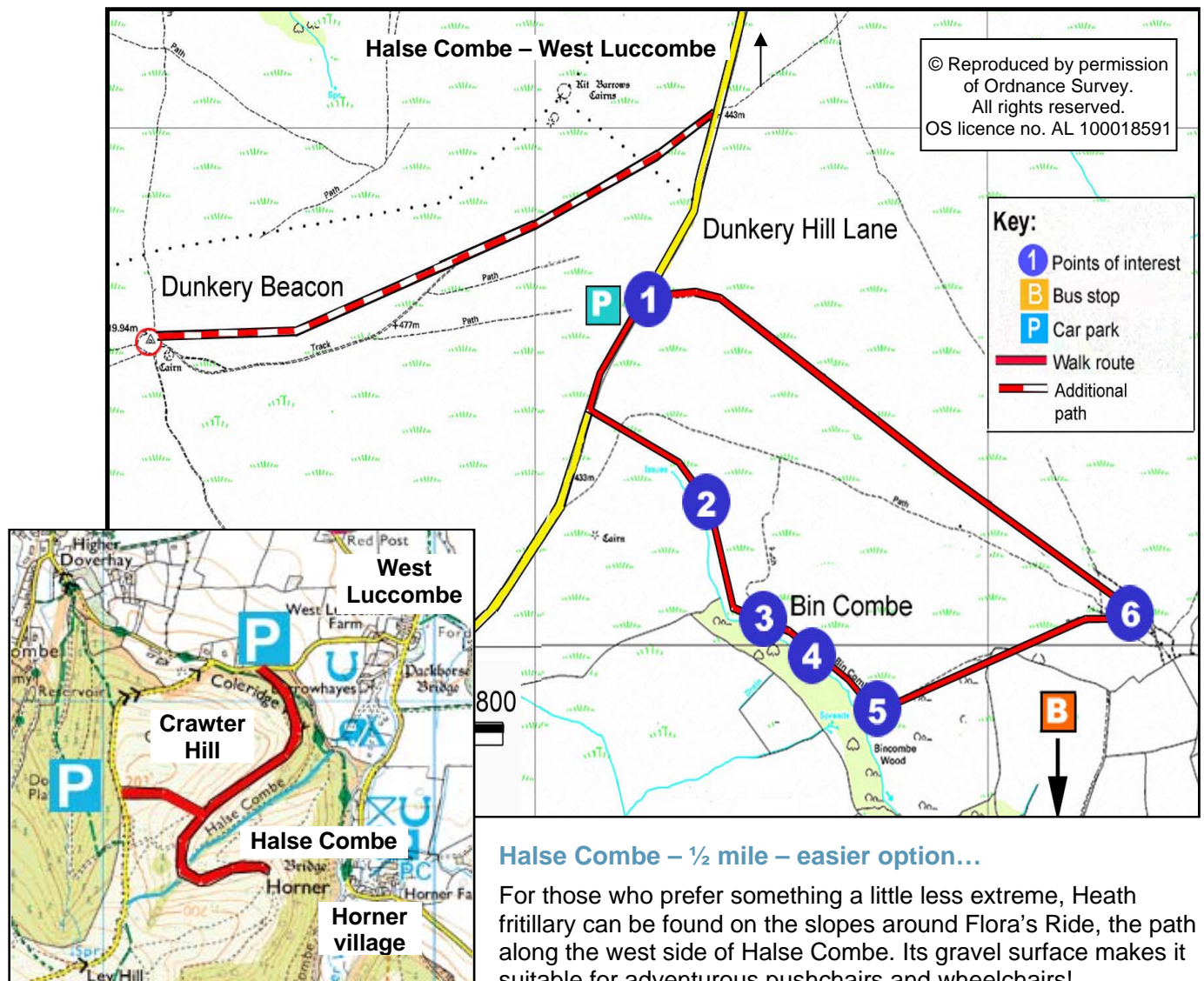
Route and directions...

1. From the car park, head left along Dunkery Hill lane. Go past the vehicle barrier, near a twisted moorland hawthorn bush and cross rough heather on your left to reach the little valley of Bin Combe.
2. Follow the east side of the stream at the top of the combe and walk downhill. Stay on this east side throughout your walk. You will hopefully begin to see heath fritillaries about 250m into the combe. Also, keep a look out for adders here.
3. There is a vague path at first but once you pass a rock outcrop, near the start of the woodland, the path vanishes. Don't worry, this is normal for Bin Combe, just stick to the lower slopes and continue downwards.
4. Heath fritillaries tend to be best sighted in the lower combe, but vary in location from year to year. They also live in gorse glades. Note the yellow-lipped flowers of common cow-wheat around you. The heath fritillary breeds on the plant, so it is essential for the butterfly's survival.
5. Turn left on to a clear but rough track towards the bottom of the combe, near a stream crossing. Follow this path northeast. You may see dark-green and small pear-bordered fritillaries here. Also, check the tops of gorse bushes for little Dartford warblers.
6. At a crossroad of paths, take the rough stone track back uphill to the twisted hawthorn and the road. Keep an eye out for Exmoor ponies and red deer grazing the open moorland.

On the opposite side of Dunkery Hill lane the moorland rises up to Dunkery Beacon. It is about a ¼ mile walk from the car park, via a good path.

Terrain and safety...

1½ mile circular route. Challenging walking conditions not always on paths, some moderate to steep slopes, some loose scree surfaces. The area is heavily infested by ticks, so take precautions, like wearing long trousers tucked into socks and carefully checking yourself immediately after visit.



Halse Combe – ½ mile – easier option...

For those who prefer something a little less extreme, Heath fritillary can be found on the slopes around Flora's Ride, the path along the west side of Halse Combe. Its gravel surface makes it suitable for adventurous pushchairs and wheelchairs!

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