

Wildlife Walk – 2 miles

Harting Down, South Downs

One of the largest areas of ancient chalk downland in National Trust care, Harting Down in West Sussex is a renowned nature reserve and Site of Special Scientific Interest. Sheep grazing helps conserve this grassland environment where rare wildlife thrives. This walk offers panoramic views over the Weald to the North Downs, before descending into secluded valleys of natural and historic interest.

Getting there

Bike: there is a traffic-free route under a mile away. See www.sustrans.org.uk

Bus: bus stop in South Harting (1 ml away). No.54 (Petersfield-Chichester), no.91 (Petersfield-Midhurst) and the X72 (Alton-Midhurst)

Foot: South Harting is on the South Downs Way path

Rail: Petersfield  is 5 miles away

Road: 5½ miles south east of Petersfield and 1 ml south of South Harting, off the B2141

Map & grid ref: OS Landranger 197: SU791180

Facilities and contact

Car park (free to NT members), picnic area, refreshments and toilet at nearby Uppark (NT house and garden) or South Harting village. Self-guided walks pack, 'Stroll the South Downs', available (call 01243 814554). NT Head Warden tel: 01730 816638

Points of interest

- **Insects:** the hillsides are strewn with countless yellow meadow anthills. The mounds retain heat from the sun which keeps the colonies warm. Strangely, the ants help care for the caterpillars of the common blue butterfly, in return for a sugary secretion that they produce. Lots of other invertebrates enjoy the downland including the Duke of Burgundy fritillary and grizzled skipper butterflies, blue carpenter bee and the rare cheese snail. On dark summer nights, take a look on Round Down for glow worms.
- **Plant life:** the grassland could support 30-40 plant species such as cowslips and the pyramidal and fragrant orchids. Bird's-foot trefoil, with its yellow flowers, is food for the caterpillars of the common blue butterfly. Harting Down provides one of Britain's best places for juniper, whose fragrant black berries are used in gin-making.
- **Pond life:** the dew pond in the valley bottom was recreated in the 1990s on the site of a 17th-century pond. There are several across Harting Down that originally used to supply water to grazing animals. Now they are inhabited by frogs and dragonflies.
- **Birds, mammals and reptiles:** if you are really lucky, you may see the rare sight of male adders 'dancing' (wrestling) for territory. However, there's more chance of seeing fallow deer bucks putting on a show in the October rut when they call loudly and lock antlers in attempt to secure access to the does. See them near 'Granny's Bottom'. Also, listen for the nightingale on summer afternoons and evenings.

NT places nearby

Uppark, Hinton Ampner, Petworth, Cissbury Ring, Woolbeding Common & Wood



Fallow deer grazing in the evening light. The rut in October is a tense and active time for the deer when the bucks fight and display their strength

NTPL/Jonathan Player



A large number of butterflies are seen on Harting Down including the common blue

NTPL/Peter Mulhy



Common frogs are found in damp areas alongside other amphibians and butterflies and dragonflies

NTPL/Joe Cornish

'You really do feel like you're walking Kipling's 'blunt, bow-headed, whale-backed Downs' when you do this walk. You'll see plenty of flowers and butterflies, serenaded by skylarks and nightingales'

Simon Humphreys, NT Nature Conservation Adviser, south east

Distance, terrain and accessibility

2ml (3km) on grassy paths with several hills and rather steep ascents and descents. It can be muddy in places after wet weather and in winter. Shorter walks are listed in a walks pack.

Route and directions

1. Start in Harting Down NT car park, with a fantastic view across the flat plain of the Weald towards the Hog's Back ridge and North Downs. Walk through a gate and cross Harting Hill.
2. Go over the undulating 'cross ridge dykes'. These parallel mounds date back to the Iron Age, and may have been boundary markers or a 'checkpoint' across the ridgeway.
3. Follow the right-hand track up Round Down hill, keeping a hedge on your left. You'll see a huge variety of plants here all year round. Just over the top of the hill, turn left and go through a gate, before walking down into the next valley. After another gate at the bottom, walk across to the base of Beacon Hill.

Catch a whiff of the berries which grow on the female juniper bush and in springtime, enjoy a buttery-yellow carpet of cowslips, often used to make potent local wine.

4. Here is the ridge of an Iron Age Hill Fort, probably created as an animal enclosure and symbol of status, rather than a defensive stronghold. Either climb up to the summit of Beacon Hill or turn right and skirt across its lower slopes.
5. If you do walk over the top, turn right at a cross-roads of paths on the other side and skirt back round the lower slopes of Beacon Hill until you meet the short cut route again.
6. At a signpost turn away from Beacon Hill on a path down to a dew pond and a little hill, 'Granny's Bottom', on your right.
7. Pass the pond and cross into a yew wood, known as 'the darkest place on the downs'. It's cold in here, even on a hot day! Yew trees are home to birds like wren, thrush and finch.
8. Climb up through the shade back onto Harting Hill. Follow the path until you emerge through an opening (not gate) on the right. Stay on a grassy path back to the car park.



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