

Four wildlife trails in the parish of Chardstock

WALK 4 – WOODS & PASTURE

This walk shows the high diversity of habitats in a small part of the parish.

Distance: 3.0km (1.8 miles); an hour and a quarter

Park at Cotley Wash (ST295062).

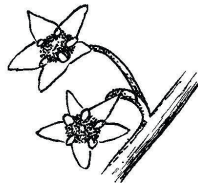
1. The River Kit enters Chardstock parish here, lined with alder trees. The wet pasture downstream of the bridge has lots of flag iris indicating very wet conditions. You may see dipper here.

Take the lane running up the valley bottom.

2. On the left at the start of the lane is a remnant of old woodland. It has a well developed structure, with a ground layer of plants such as ferns and brambles, a clear shrub layer of hazel, blackthorn and holly, and is topped by big oaks and ash. This is what a good wildlife wood should look like.

Just before a track uphill, where the lane becomes concrete again, take the signed footpath on the left into the wood across a small wooden bridge, cutting diagonally across the wood. The path is not clear but keep left of the middle fir (50m from the wood's top edge), then through scrubby woodland back to the lane.

3. This is a beech plantation and a fantastic bluebell wood in spring. Other woodland plants have been eliminated by the dense beech foliage and fallen leaf litter. Its structure is minimal, so apart from bluebells there is little ground cover and almost no shrubs. Further up are three huge silver firs growing close together which may be the tallest trees in the parish, visible from afar. By the open area with newly planted trees beyond, a solitary large alder buckthorn is in flower in June, resembling a crab apple at first sight.



Alder buckthorn

Walk uphill when you reach the lane.

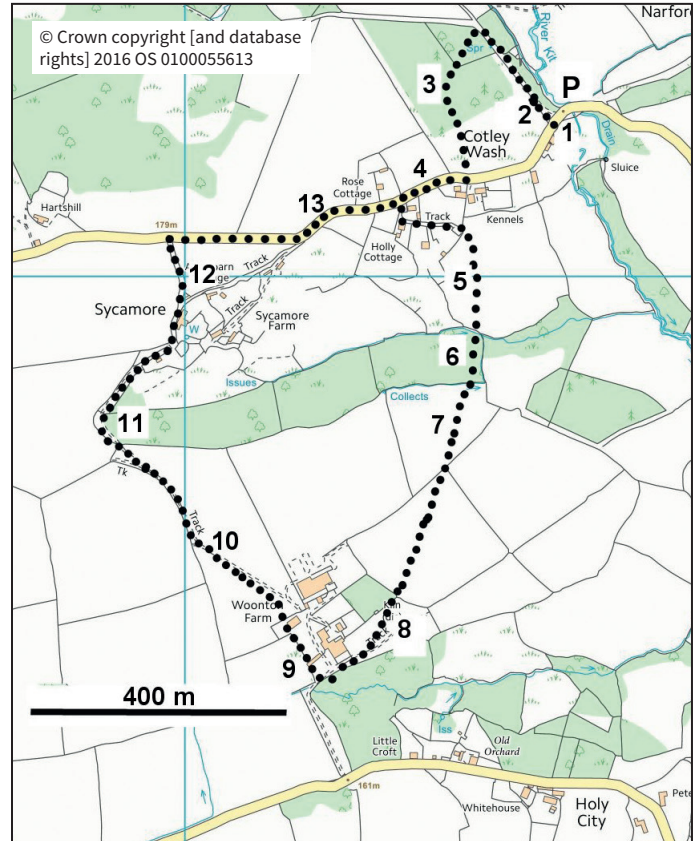
4. On the Devon bank on the right there's a Scots pine – long needles and pinkish bark – not a native to these parts.

Turn left at footpath signpost down a drive, then left in front of Holly Cottage and eventually into a field, bearing right and slightly diagonally across the field to the bottom near the right-hand corner.

5. The edge of this field is unkempt but the wide band of brambles and nettles provide food for butterflies and their caterpillars.

Cross the small stream.

6. The wet wood at the valley bottom is typical of recent woodland that has taken over when grazing stopped. The lolloping, self-layering willow is a good food-plant – pussy willows for bees in spring, and leaves for caterpillars. The sheltered glade is abuzz on a warm day. In summer, there's a large patch of hemlock water-dropwort – poisonous to animals



when it's cut, but insects love the big white flowers. Later in summer similar angelica attracts them.

Walk through the rough glade, across another small stream and into a field, aim diagonally slightly to the right and over the slope.

7. In midsummer, the field has a ginger hue due to sorrel flowers, and later the glaucous green of Yorkshire fog grass. It's typical countryside for various brown butterflies. The hedgerow is studded with white rough chervil early in summer, and later on yarrow is scattered through the grassland.

Go through the gate then diagonally uphill, aiming just left of the block of tall trees on the horizon, through another gate and to the house.

8. The farmhouse of Wootton Farm was built in about 1700. It sits on an outcrop of hard sandy limestone (foxmould); several big lumps can be seen. Fossil bivalves and calcite crystals can be seen in them; they are about 100 million years old, from the Upper Cretaceous period (when dinosaurs ruled). The hard stones in the track here are flints, not chert, a reminder that there's one of the few remnants of chalk nearby. There's a fine walnut tree by the rocks. The wood on your left is in a steep gully that stops abruptly at the farm's drive. It is the rapidly eroding source of one of the River Kit's tributaries, cutting deep into the soft greensand just under the layer of chalk and the sandy limestone.

Before the drive turns left, take the bridlepath right up a narrow path.

Four wildlife trails in the parish of Chardstock

WALK 4 – WOODS & PASTURE

9. This muddy path is no fun to walk, but its hedges give shelter to insects and birds that is not available on the exposed uphill side.

Go through the gate and straight across the field to the far pointed end.

10. As you cross this dull pasture, look back across the valley at the beautiful views and see just how many trees there are in the hedgerows, copses and the large wood (Brockfield Bottom) below in the same valley. It's this patchwork that makes the parish so interesting and valuable to wildlife. Just before you enter the wood, there's a bank on the left with bracken and bramble on top, just to show that a Devon hedge doesn't have to have the conventional shrubs. Almost anywhere in the parish – mostly on higher ground – you may see ravens, or hear their odd honks and croaks.

Enter the top of the wood.

11. This is another tributary source, arising where water percolating through the permeable greensand meets some clay – such as the layer that the path follows. In spring you may

hear the persistent *Great spotted woodpecker* squeak-squeak of great spotted woodpecker chicks in a rot-hole in one of the old trees. In spring there's a profusion of flowers in this wood.



12. Past the few houses, the hedgerow has lots of scramblers – bramble, dog rose, honeysuckle – which provide flowers for insects and fruits for birds. On sunny days you may see hummingbird hawkmoth at the honeysuckle. Stop at the road to note how arable farming occupies the higher plateau of better agricultural land, with pasture on the wetter slopes below.

Turn right down the lane back to the parking place.

13. The hedges in the lane are very old, as shown by the many tree and shrub species. As you go back down to the start of the walk, you should be able to spot ash, beech, blackthorn, cherry, elder, elm, hawthorn, hazel, holly, maple, oak, rowan, sycamore and, at the very bottom, willow. Even if you can't name them all, you'll notice many different leaf and twig shapes.