

WILD IN THE STOUR VALLEY



FOXEARH MEADOWS NATURE RESERVE

~ QUIZ TRAIL ~

Welcome to the reserve. We hope you'll have a wild and wonderful time.
This Quiz Trail is challenging but will help you get more from your visit.



Photo: Jane Jowitt

1. Coming into the reserve from the car park:

There are three rights of way into the reserve, but this is the one most people use. Even if the car park is closed, you can still come in on foot as there is a footpath entrance next to the big entrance gate.

Just past the car park and noticeboard you'll see a small, green, wooden building. It's an 'eco toilet'. (If the car park is open, the toilet should be open for use).

Check out what makes it an 'eco toilet'.

Clues

(a) Where does the electricity come from?

(b) What happens to the 'waste'?

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2. To get into the reserve proper, you'll need to take a footpath along the outside of the reserve. The path starts with a short slope down on the left as you face the cattle gate. It goes alongside the edge of a meadow on the left and alongside the reserve on the right.

Some of the land on your left is used by our neighbours for looking after rescue animals. List all the different kinds of animals you can see:

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3. As you walk down the path, look across to the right towards a green shed. Between the path and the shed (and the other side of the fence) is a ditch which feeds the nearby 'Island Pond'. The ditch is slowed down to create more wet habitat and to reduce the amount of mud and silt washed into the pond. Describe what has been built to slow the stream down.

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4. Along the path there are several plants that like to grow in damp places. They include Water mint and Flag iris. See if you can spot them and put their names by these descriptions:

Strong minty scent from the leaves; pale purple, rounded flower heads in summer

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Large, bright yellow flowers above tall, thin, blade-like leaves

5. At the end of this path you enter the reserve over a little bridge on your right and through a metal kissing gate. On your left is a paddock area with a wooden fence (but this is for people, not animals!)

Take the path ahead of you through a thicket of Blackthorn. Blackthorn has lots of blossom in spring and fruit (rather like tiny plums) in autumn called sloes. Some of the blackthorn has been 'laid' to make the 'thicket' thicker at the bottom. Look at the bits which are 'laid' and describe what has been done to them.

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6. Keep a look out for birds and list any you see. We have recorded over 70 different species at Foxearth Meadows.

All through the year you might see: Swan, Greylag geese, Canada geese, Little egret, Mallard duck, Coot, Moorhen, Wood pigeon, Blackbird, Robin, Great tit, Blue tit, Marsh tit, Long-tailed tit, Thrush, Dunnock, Reed bunting, Grey wagtail, Goldfinch.

You might also see: Buzzard soaring high overhead; Kestrel hovering; Kingfisher fishing; Treecreeper; Bullfinch; Great spotted woodpecker; Green woodpecker (whose loud, laughing call is known as a 'yaffle').

There are a number of different warblers (Reed warbler, Sedge warbler, Cetti's warbler, Common whitethroat, Lesser whitethroat and maybe Garden warbler and Grasshopper warbler which arrive as summer visitors). Some of the warbler family like Chiffchaff and Blackcap now sometimes stay through the winter too.

There are other visitors you might see, like House martin, Swallow, Swift, Cuckoo and Hobby.

Some of these birds are hard to spot or are just seen occasionally so don't be disappointed if you don't see them. Instead feel pleased at any you do see!

List them all below:

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7. At the end of the blackthorn tunnel you come to an electric fence with a stile and lifting gate. Beyond the fence the meadow is grazed by some rare breed cattle. They are called Dexters and are very gentle. They can be curious about you, but it's important not to feed them or to pet them.

Count how many cattle you see and describe what they look like:

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Photo: Jane Jowitt

8. The cattle are here to help manage the land. By grazing and browsing they open up space for plants to germinate and grow which otherwise would be crowded out. How do you think Mark, the reserve manager, will know if the cattle have helped? (Clue: He'll be looking carefully at what plants grow each year).

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9. On your left (past the stile and sliding gate) an Ash tree trunk bends out over the River Stour, making a kind of table when the river isn't too high which otters like to use to eat their catch. **Please stay safe on the river bank** but, looking from a distance, you may be able to spot the remains of their meals, and their 'spraint' which is their poo. Their favourite food here seems to be Signal Crayfish.

You'd be very lucky indeed to actually spot an otter. Why do you think they are hard to see? (Clue: When do you think otters often hunt for their food?)

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10. As you continue on the riverside path, look out for dragonflies and damselflies. Some species are now beginning to emerge from the river and ponds. (Most of their life is spent underwater as a larva).

The 'dragons' and damsels that are most likely to appear here early in the season are Large red damselfly, Hairy dragonfly, Banded demoiselle, Azure blue and Common blue damselflies.

Dragonflies are usually bigger and their bodies more chunky. They usually sit with their wings straight out.

Damselflies are smaller. Their bodies are quite thin and they usually sit with their wings against their bodies.

Try and describe any you see:

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The body is in three parts:

Head (including eyes); Thorax (the middle section to which the legs and wings are attached); Abdomen (which is longer and thinner than the thorax).

At the end of the questions is a list of some of the dragonflies and damselflies you might spot.



Photo: David Chandler

11. There are lots of different plants growing in the river. You may be able to spot:

Watercress – bright green leaves with a white flower

Water Forget-Me-Not – bright green leaves and a blue flower with a yellow centre

Branched Bur-Reed – Tall, lighter green leaves growing straight from the water

Common Club-Rush – Tall, thin, more bluey-green leaves growing straight from the water

Reedmace – sometimes called ‘Bulrushes’ – with a smooth, dark brown, tube-shaped flower head

Can you think of any things any of these plants are used for, or have been used for in the past?

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12. Invasive, non-native species (INNS) are plants or animals that have been introduced from other parts of the world and have spread and become a problem. In this area there are several, including:

- American Mink
- Signal Crayfish
- Himalayan Balsam
- Giant Hogweed

If you look carefully on the bottom of the shallow parts of the river you might spot a Signal Crayfish or two.

We try and remove any Giant Hogweed or Himalayan Balsam from the reserve, but there are patches of Himalayan Balsam on the opposite bank. (Their seed heads burst open like an explosion and scatter their seeds into the river to help them spread).

Have you spotted any INNS?

Research the reasons why these INNS are a problem:

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Extra question if you want to walk further

As you walk further along the river bank, you'll come to a part where the path crosses a very slight ditch which now covers a land drain (a black pipe) running to the river bank. Ahead and to the right there's a rough line of Alder trees following the line of the ditch. This ditch is the old course of the river and marks the county boundary between Essex and Suffolk. (Cross over the ditch and you've crossed over into Suffolk). If you carry on along the path, you'll eventually come to a gate and a stile, leading to the old railway track. This is your clue as to why the river now follows a different course. Have a go at answering this question:

Why has the river course changed?

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13. Walk back along the riverside path until you're nearly at the paddock area (with wooden fence) and past the Blackthorn tunnel. Turn sharp left and follow the footpath along the boardwalk. Look out for different plants, insects and birds. Note down any things you spot from the boardwalk:

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Photo: Jane Jowitt

14. Look out for log piles alongside the boardwalk. Common lizards sometimes use them to sun themselves. There is an important difference between mammals and reptiles, which is why reptiles sometimes need the warmth of the sun for energy. Do you know what it is?

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15. At the end of the boardwalk you arrive at a pond (called the 'Big Pond'!) Can you name the plant growing in the water with big flat leaves ('pads')?

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Later on in the year they produce yellow flowers and seed pods shaped like little green bottles.

In the summer months you may be able to see Red-eyed damselflies sitting on the flat leaves and maybe laying their eggs into the water.

16. From the 'Big Pond' walk with the boundary trees and fence on your left towards another pond called the 'Island Pond'.

(Note: If this path is very muddy, go back along the boardwalk and turn left at the end to take a different path to the Island Pond).

Spend a while looking out over the Island Pond and make a note of what you see and hear. (Otters and Grass Snake and Pike have been seen in this pond, though you'd be very lucky to spot them. As well as the fish, you're most likely to see different birds, including sometimes a Kingfisher, and different insects, including dragonflies and damselflies in the summer).

Make a note here of what you see:

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17. There's a comfortable bench overlooking the pond. It's in memory of the person who first had the idea of making this area into a nature reserve.

What was he called? (You'll find his name on the bench)

The bench is made from recycled plastic bottles. How many do you think were needed to make the bench? Tick the right one. [* Answer is at the end]

1,000

10,000

15,000

18. With the bench behind you, take the path to the left. It'll take you back towards the kissing gate where you entered the reserve. You can check the path on the interpretation board before you go.

Before you've gone very far along this path, you'll spot a scientific instrument sticking up on a pole on the other side of the fence on your left. Can you work out what this is to measure?

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19. Further along the path you'll cross a mini boardwalk with a muddy pond on your right. Willow tree branches have been cut off and cleared around the pond. Can you guess why? (Clue: dragonflies and damselflies need warmth from the sun to get energy to fly).

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20. There are lots of nettles on the reserve. We want to reduce their number, but we don't want to get rid of them altogether. Do you know any creatures that need nettles to feed on? (Clue: one of them turns into a butterfly).

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To get back to the car park, re-trace your steps through the metal kissing gate and across the bridge, turning left and walking along the footpath past the meadow.

Two extra questions:

21. You'll soon be leaving the reserve. Jot down what you liked most:

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22. Jot down one thing you've learned that you didn't know before:

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and one thing you'd like to research and find out more about:

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DRAGONFLIES AND DAMSELFLIES YOU MIGHT SPOT ON THE RESERVE

DRAGONFLIES

Common darter	Small for a dragonfly, with a reddish abdomen
Ruddy darter	Similar, but with a very rich red body
Brown hawk	Quite big with a brown body and light brown wings
Hairy dragonfly	A small 'hawker' type of dragonfly with blue eyes and yellowy-green thorax. The short hairs on its thorax may help to keep it warm.
Four-spotted chaser	These have spots on all four wings. There are eight spots when you add them all up.
Emperor	This is the biggest dragonfly you'll see and it has strong colours when you see it clearly: green on the thorax and blue on the abdomen.
Migrant hawk	You might see this in late summer. It's quite like the Emperor but not as big. The abdomen is black with green spots for a female and black with blue spots for a male.

DAMSELFLIES

Banded demoiselle	The males are dark shiny blue but with dark patches on their wings; the females are metallic green.
Large red	A red matchstick-like body.
Azure	Small and bright blue.
Common blue	<u>Very</u> similar to the Azure. You have to look very carefully to spot a different shaped black mark at the top of the abdomen. (Common blue: a blob on a stalk. Azure: a 'U' mark).
Red-eyed	The bodies are bright blue, but look carefully and you'll see the eyes are red.
Willow emerald	They have thin, straight, emerald green bodies and often hang from bushes with their wings spread in a 'V' shape.



Photo: Albert Butcher

Mark and Andy add:

You are welcome to contact us if you'd like to check any answers or ask any questions about the reserve.

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[*] The answer to Question 17 is: 15,000.