

Tour of Eelmoor Marsh

On a glorious June morning, 11 fortunate members joined guide Betty Hansell for a tour of Eelmoor Marsh, 76 hectares of diverse habitats, which is owned by QinetiQ and managed in partnership with Marwell Wildlife. We were all impressed by the beauty and richness of this little-known treasure, right beside the airport, yet surprisingly tranquil and full of surprises.

The site, which consists of wet and dry heath, grassland, bog, scrub and secondary woodland, has three levels of conservation designation: local-SINC, Site of Importance for Nature Conservation; national-SSSI, Site of Special Scientific Interest; European-SPA, Special Protection Area. The variety of habitats is home to a wide range of plants and animals, many rare and threatened. Management includes year-round grazing, as well as pine and scrub clearance, turf scraping and pool creation in the winter months.

Our route took us around the perimeter of the site, along roads that were formerly part of RAE, but even before we entered the secure area, Betty showed us a colony of common spotted orchids thriving on a dry patch of waste ground. Later, in much damper conditions, she showed us the heath spotted orchid.

Less familiar plants that Betty pointed out included restharrow, yellow-wort, heath bedstraw, fairy flax, lousewort, pale butterwort, bog pimpernel, milkwort, cotton grass and marsh helleborine. Some, such as restharrow and yellow-wort are chalk-lovers and should not grow locally because of our acidic, sandy soil but decomposing concrete structures from RAE provide perfect conditions for them. Nature is being left to reclaim the Brownfield sites and appears to be doing it very effectively.

In the boggy area, Betty showed us two types of sundew, round-leaved and oblong- or long-leaved, and pale butterwort, both insectivorous species, and explained how readily they re-colonise after turf scraping. Also in the boggy area, was bog myrtle, regionally rare but abundant in Eelmoor Marsh.

Some drainage ditches are gradually being filled in to restore the marsh, but must be handled delicately because the ditches have themselves become valuable eco-systems, home to specific, adapted species. Natural England is overseeing this important work.

Of the site's fauna, we saw a kestrel and a lapwing in flight, as well as various butterflies, dragonflies, damselflies and bees. Betty told us that she has conducted evening bat walks in addition to daytime walks for QinetiQ colleagues and local groups and showed us a photo of a tiny long-eared bat taken there. In all, there are 92 species of birds, 17 mammals, eight reptiles and amphibians, 39 butterflies, 419 moths, 27 dragonflies and countless other invertebrates.

During our visit, scientists were conducting a survey of spiders, which takes place every five years. 134 species are found at the site, 15 of which are important nationally. Also, this year, a survey of small mammals will be carried out. Each summer, insect surveys are carried out, monitoring butterflies, dragonflies, bees, etc. In addition, graduate students conduct research on the site.

Grazing is necessary to maintain healthy heathland and Eelmoor Marsh is home to six endangered Przewalski's horses, bred at Marwell Wildlife, and 10 highland cattle that obligingly came to investigate us. Eelmoor Marsh provides a semi-wild environment that allows zoologists to study the ecology of the horses, the last truly wild horses in the world, and consider their re-introduction into their native Mongolia. The highland cattle are extremely hardy and ideally suited to an open, exposed environment. Nor are they easily disturbed, even by the Farnborough Air Show.

Having visited only the outer edge of Eelmoor Marsh, a great deal more remains for TFS to discover, and we hope to arrange a return visit next year to explore the centre of this unique place. QinetiQ and Marwell Wildlife have achieved something truly remarkable right here in Farnborough.