

The Sowe Valley Footpath

The Sowe Valley is a wonderful, continuous riverside green space stretching 8½ miles from Halesbury Junction Conservation Area in the north of Coventry to Whitley Grove Wood in the south of the City with many special sites to discover and enjoy along its length.

The Sowe Valley Footpath is a way-marked, riverside stroll along the 8½ mile green space, allowing you to explore the valley on foot and experience the changing character along the way.

This leaflet is designed to help you discover and explore the Sowe Valley and includes history hotspots, fun facts, ideas for games and information on the wide variety of creatures that call the valley home from the fluffy to the scaly. It also includes some non way-marked circular walks off the Sowe Valley Footpath.

The Sowe Valley offers a very valuable link for both people and wildlife in the city to the countryside. It offers a safe green corridor for others to fish, for anglers to call home and for people to love. Please help us to look after it.

The wildlife of the valley asks you to please follow the Countryside Code:

1. Guarding against all risk of fire
2. Fastening all gates
3. Keeping dogs under close control
4. Keeping to public paths across farmland
5. Using gates and stiles to cross fences and hedges
6. Leaving livestock, crops and machinery alone
7. Taking your litter home
8. Helping to keep all water clean
9. Protecting wildlife, plants and trees
10. Not to feed the birds too much while bread them in a dog waste bin
11. Cleaning up any dog mess and taking the bags home with you or putting them in a dog waste bin
12. Not picking the flowers, leave some for the bees and other insects

If you spot anything along the footpath which could be dangerous or stop people from enjoying the valley, please let Coventry City Council know by calling 0500 834 333.

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Valley Wide

1. Wyken Slough Local Nature Reserve and Nature Park

History hotspot: The large pool is believed to have been formed around 1860 when the ground subsided as a result of coal mining in the area.

Wildlife watch: This site is great for wetland birds. The large pool attracts a regular flock of mute swans and the reedbed offers great coverage for reed bunting and Jack snipe. Dragonflies and damselflies breed in the pool – look out for them hovering over the water in summer. The park also has a large grassland area with hedgerows offering a great space to explore and a home to lots of grassland insects, notably noisy grasshoppers during the summer.

Fun fact: The pool here is the largest expanse of water in Coventry!

Games galore: This site is great for bird spotting – bring along binoculars and take a closer look at the birds on the pool, peer into the reedbed and check out the grassland more closely. It's good for minibeast hunting – bring along a magnifying glass and creep up on some creepy crawlies!

2. Purcell Road Meadow

This is slightly off the Sowe Valley Footpath but it is well worth stopping off at. It feels like a little piece of countryside in the city.

Wildlife watch: This site is a valuable floodplain meadow and is often wet after heavy rainfall. During spring and summer it is covered in yellow buttercups, turning the green field a vibrant yellow. There are plenty of other meadow flowers to identify, so bring your ID book and see what you can find. Fish like the river here too, take some time to sit quietly and see which ones you spot!

3. Wyken Croft Nature Park

History hotspot: This site was a former coal mining area. In the 1980s the derelict site was given a new lease of life when it was reclaimed and landscaped to offer a new nature park for wildlife and people to enjoy.

Wildlife watch: Hawthorn bushes provide a great restaurant: blossoms in the spring provide nectar for bees and other insects and in the autumn and winter months the berries (Haws) offer valuable food for birds and small mammals such as bank voles or wood mice. The park is home to a great array of insects including grasshoppers and crickets – in the summer listen out for their constant chirping and see if you can spot them in the long grass.

Games galore: This site is great for minibeast hunting – bring along a magnifying glass and see what you can spot. There's a good Pooh Stick bridge here too.

4. Dorchester Brookstray

Wildlife watch: This site is a valuable, large expanse of rough grassland. In the spring look out for wild violets amongst the trees along the rivers banks. Many other wild flowers can be seen across the site in the summer. There is also a wealth of fruit here in the autumn including apple trees and blackberries. Be sure to leave some of the fruit to feed the birds!

Games galore: All that rough grass makes this another great site for hunting those minibests! There is an oak tree which is about 325 years old along this stretch – can you find it and imagine what it has seen over the years?

Fun fact: Like many places along the river, willow trees can be seen growing here. Once upon a time people would chew on sticks of willow for pain relief as the tree contains a natural form of aspirin. In fact it's where scientists got it from!

6. Stoke Floods Local Nature Reserve

History hotspot: This pool was formed when the Binley coal works caused the land to subside.

Wildlife watch: This site offers a home to 242 species of beetle and over 90 species of birds including grebes and reed warblers. It also offers a winter stop off for many migrating birds such as shoveler and snipe. Listen out for the sound of the nocturnal Water rail bird which makes a 'piglet-squealing' noise often around dusk. They are quite difficult to see as they often skulk around the reedbeds.

Fun fact: Stoke Floods is the second largest expanse of water in Coventry.

Games galore: See if you can spot the old, twisted sweet chestnut tree in the woodland. Use your imagination to make up a story about this wonderful old tree!

8. Whitley Grove Wood

History hotspot: Sandstone was quarried here for the original Coventry Cathedral, hence the undulating shape of the wood with its various dells. There are also the remains of an old 'ice house' on the edge of the wood, used to store ice for the old Whitley Abbey.

Wildlife watch: In spring the woodland is carpeted with beautiful bluebells. Please remember that it is illegal to pick them or dig them up. There are many birds to spot including nuthatches and tiny wrens and goldcrests. There are a few dead trees which woodpeckers love – look out for the telltale holes in the trunks where they have been searching for grubs to eat.

Games galore: This wood is quite magical. Can you pretend you're in a new fairytale world with its own characters and animals? Or imagine you're one of the quarry workers taking stone for the cathedral?

Fun fact: There are two ponds in the wood which are fed by natural springs. Can you find them?

9. Stonebridge Meadows Local Nature Reserve

This site is currently not accessible via the Sowe Valley Footpath, but it is well worth a trip! The reserve is managed by Warwickshire Wildlife Trust to help manage and maintain the wonderful grassland and marsh.

History hotspot: During the 1850s alder trees were planted at the site for the local clog industry.

Wildlife watch: During spring, vibrant yellow marsh marigolds can be seen in the wetter areas of the site whilst summer sees the locally uncommon pretty harebell growing in the grassland and lots of butterflies. The dense hawthorn, gorse and broom on the western edge of the reserve offers great habitat for lots of lovely song birds.

Be aware: Please be mindful that this site is grazed by cattle all year round to manage the grassland areas.

The Sowe Valley will offer something new and exciting with every visit all year round! Some of the species worth looking out for along the whole valley are:

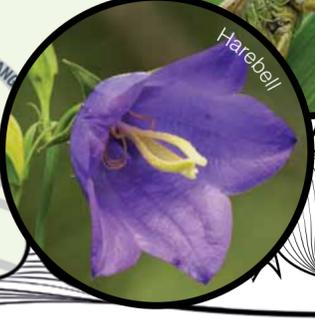
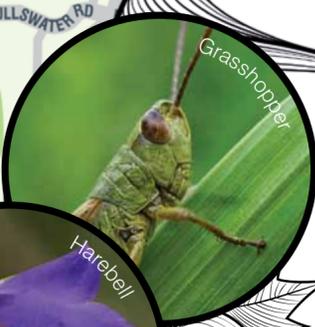
Bats – these nocturnal mammals enjoy the wealth of flying insects the Sowe Valley has to offer them, each feeding on 3000 small insects a night! During May to September keep your eyes open around dusk and the first few hours of darkness and you may well catch a glimpse of them flying over the river. Species include Pipistrelles, noctules, brown long eared bats and Daubenton's.

Otters – these mammals enjoy eating fish and crayfish. They mainly move about our rivers at night, but signs of their activity can be spotted along the Sowe if you keep your eyes peeled and your nose ready! Otter spraint (poo) is used by otters to mark their territory and is often found under bridges. It is identifiable as it is usually a small pile of black, tar like poo with a pleasant fish and green tea smell and may include some fish bones or scales from their last dinner!

Kingfishers – offer a flash of azure blue as they fly-by on their fishing trips up and down the river. These colourful birds, which are not much bigger than a sparrow, may also be spotted perching on branches over the river as they hunt for small fish. Their call is a distinctive high pitched whistle (sounds like a 'peep') so you may hear them before you see them!

Fish – can be spotted the entire length of the river. Species found in the Sowe include sticklebacks, minnows, chub and roach.

Birds of prey – enjoy hunting for small prey along the valley. Look up and you may spot large buzzards and smaller kestrels and sparrowhawks. At Whitley Grove Wood you may also be lucky enough to hear the 'kewick' and 'hu-hoooo' of tawny owls who can often be heard in the evening but also occasionally during the day.



7. Willenhall Brookstray

Wildlife watch: There is so much blackthorn here! The blossom is great in the spring for bees and the sloe berries provide food for birds in the winter! Keep your nose peeled for the sweet smell of meadow sweet in the summer months as it blossoms from June to September – as a member of the rose family its scent is beautiful.

Games galore: Lots of rough grass and other plants makes this another great minibeast hunting site. There is a good Pooh Sticks bridge too.