

WHAT MAKES NETTLETON PARISH SO SPECIAL FOR NATURE?

Situated in the beautiful landscape of Wiltshire's southern Cotswolds, the land within the parish boundary is exceptionally rich in wildlife. This is because of the intimate mosaic of habitats present, some of which will be explored during our walk.

The **By Brook and its tributaries** formed the landscape of interlocking valleys after the retreat of shallow seas under which the fossil-rich oolitic limestone was formed. The clean and clear water supports fish such as brown trout and the diminutive bullhead, the only freshwater fish known to echolocate. Male bullheads are highly territorial and guard their eggs carefully to keep them safe from predators and infection. Sadly, the number of nesting dippers (the only British bird that can walk under water) has declined in recent years and the majority of native crayfish populations have been lost due to introduced signal crayfish and the fungal infection they carry. Heron and kingfisher are still a fairly common sight, while numbers of little egrets are increasing. The Bristol Avon Rivers Trust works to protect the rivers for people and wildlife <https://bristolavonriverstrust.org/>

Much of the employment and wealth in this part of Wiltshire came from the woollen industry – the By Brook once powered 15 mills, cleaning the fleeces prior to being spun and woven into cloth. Most people were employed as shepherds and weavers, or worked on farms and in the woodlands.

Many of the **woodlands** are tiny remnants of the wildwood which clothed the land before being cleared for agriculture. Continuously wooded since the last Ice Age, ancient woodlands are indicated by the presence of spring flowers such as bluebells (a globally rare species) and the pure white wood anemone, both flowering early before the tree canopy closes over. Woodlands were carefully managed in mediaeval times – oak and ash trees were periodically thinned to provide material for building houses and making tool handles; the hazel shrub layer was coppiced to provide kindling for bread ovens, thin pliable poles for making hurdles to control sheep, and the lath and plaster walls in buildings.

The **limestone grasslands** were created through centuries of sheep grazing and are rich in different species of wildflowers which in turn support many butterflies. Regular grazing is essential to remove nutrients and prevent the more vigorous grasses from becoming dominant. More than 97% of our ancient flower-rich grasslands were converted during the main period of agricultural intensification - many Wildlife Trusts are trying to re-create them and working with landowners keen to restore them. Ancient grassland hay is of much greater nutritional value for animals, and can be spread on arable land or intensively managed pasture to re-introduce species such as yellow rattle, known as "the meadow maker" because it reduces the vigour of grasses. Regularly mown road verges and garden lawns can be enhanced with wildflowers - see <https://meadows.plantlife.org.uk/> for guidance on how to create and manage species rich grasslands.

Ancient hedgerows and stone walls date back to the enclosure period when much common land was lost to private ownership. The age of a hedgerow can be estimated by counting the number of trees and shrubs found within a 100 foot length and multiplying this by 100 to get a rough estimate. For example, a hedge with an average of 5 woody species might be tentatively dated to the C16th. Old maps, local history and the study of field patterns can also help to understand their age. Guidance on how to survey and manage hedges can be found at <https://hedgerowsurvey.ptes.org/>

Dry stone walls are an important part of the cultural landscape, providing shelter for insects and lizards, whilst lichens, liverworts and mosses colonise the bare rocks. The linear nature of hedges and walls allows species to move through the landscape, vitally important given the scale of habitat losses over the last 100 years. Information on can be found at <https://farmwildlife.info/how-to-do-it-5/field-boundaries/dry-stone-walls/> and <https://www.dswa.org.uk/>

Almost every field would also have had a **pond**, vital for watering livestock before mains water supply and providing a wonderful habitat for newts, frogs, toads and dragonflies. Many have now been filled in, but could very easily be restored. Guidance on how to survey, create and manage ponds can be found at <https://freshwaterhabitats.org.uk/>

The Parish is an important hotspot for biodiversity and everyone lucky enough to live there can help wildlife by creating ponds and enriching their lawns with wildflowers; putting up swift, house martin and barn owl boxes; creating swallow nesting sites and encouraging bats and hedgehogs in their gardens.

The RSPB has lots of advice on how to make your garden better for birds - <https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/advice/how-you-can-help-birds/>

Swifts, hedgehogs and bats need a little more help – see <https://swift-conservation.org/>
<https://www.britishhedgehogs.org.uk/>
<https://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/wildlife/animals/hedgehogs/garden>
and <https://www.bats.org.uk/>

Join your local County Wildlife Trust and see their web site <https://www.wiltshirewildlife.org/> for more information and ideas on how you can help.