

Lakeside, Hollybush and Camp Farm Step by Step

You can start anywhere on the route but there is free parking available at Lakeside Nature Reserve, Lakeside Road, Ash so that's where these instructions commence. Nearest postcode GU12 5AD. The gate to the Reserve is large, painted white but slightly narrow.

Walk through the children's play area heading to the right side (save the play until you return!). This path and all side paths eventually reach the Blackwater Valley tarmac path and either some ponds or the river which is very small here. Keep going and turn right along the path.

You will be approaching the road soon but follow the Blackwater Valley path sign and use the footbridge on the left. A short way along, after the railway bridge, cross the road and enter the Hollybush area via the gateway and join the tarmac track. You will soon find a measure of quiet and a nice wild area on both sides with plenty of blackberries in late summer to collect for pies or maybe some bramble Jelly! You will find Warblers here, Blackcaps, Garden Warblers, Chiffchaffs amongst them. In winter finches and Robins, Wrens and Dunnocks will call from the undergrowth and Blackbirds and thrushes will be in the trees.

You have a choice soon, follow the Blackwater Valley Path signposted to the left along the pleasant river side path or continue straight on, leaving the tarmac track, eventually leading into a wildflower meadow full of flowers, butterflies and bees. Following the track to the left once in the meadow you will soon enter a scrub area and follow the path sloping down to meet the Blackwater Valley Path close to the footbridge on your right.

Cross the footbridge and head straight up the hill onto Hollybush Hill. Here, if you're lucky, in June or July you may find bee orchids in flower. It's worth a search around the meadow on this small hill. I found them over to the right hand side. Following the original path over the hill takes you to a footbridge over the A331.

Crossing the bridge follow the main permissive path through some mixed woodland full of birdsong, keeping left at a clear split in the path and a few hundred metres later emerge into a car park for the Connaught Centre, a military service building. Turn left and after passing the end of the Centre building, turn left again eventually joining Alanbrooke Road.

Follow Alanbrooke Road until it becomes Camp Farm Road and soon, when the houses run out you will see a signboard on the left for Camp Farm SANGS. Enter here and follow the sign posts for the Sycamore trail (red colour) around the lake keeping to the left side of the lake. There's a short hill and then a nice path through the woodland. At the junction where a path joins from the right, turn right and drop gently downhill. At the bottom, there's a good place to stop for a break, a nice picnic area. Now you've walked over three-quarters of the way around Camp Farm.

Carry on and exit the Chalk Farm SANGS and return to the road, turn left and cross to the other side. Take the first opportunity on your right to step up onto the Canal towpath which runs parallel to the road, this is next to a very large Oak tree. Turn left and here the bullrushes

and waterside vegetation are interesting holding many butterflies and pollinating insects on a variety of flowers in summer.

Following the canal bank you soon pass Ash Lock where you can go down the steps to avoid having to cross the road. Continue along the canal towpath until the aqueduct which is the brightly painted A331 bridge then follow the signs to the left and down for the Blackwater Valley path. When you have descended the slope, turning right at the bottom you will see you have returned to Lakeside Nature Reserve. Take the first clear path on your right opposite a pond, follow this until you reach a T junction, turn left and soon you will emerge at the play area and car park.

If you still have some energy the Lakeside lake area is interesting with a phragmites reedbed that holds Reed Warblers in Summer, possibly Water Rail in winter. Dragonflies are here in good numbers.