

## Theale, Kennet & Avon Canal and Hosehill Lake

If you love birds I cannot recommend this walk too much! The canal, lakes and lakesides offer a rich diversity with the added bonus of Nightingales and Cetti's warblers.

The walk commences from the Picnic Area (free car park) at Sheffield Bottom Lock RG7 4AJ. Alternatively, you can join the walk at the Fox & Hounds pub car park RG7 4BE, with their permission, immediately across the road from Hosehill Lake.

**From the picnic area join the wide towpath heading east** (away from the road) and enjoy the lovely hedgerows and trees on both sides. You should already be finding birds in the hedgerow and maybe moorhen and mallard on the canal. Several gaps in the hedge on the right will appear. **Keep watching for them and go through the one with the low head-high metal gate.** *(If you are interested you could continue along the canal a short way to Garston Lock, this is one of only two turf sided locks in the country and hence is of historical importance – there is an information board there - then just retrace your steps to the metal gate now on your left).* Immediately in front of you now is a large patch of bramble and scrub, go to the right and follow the edge of the grassland around the lake edge. Most of this, apart from a few fishermen's pegs, is dense scrub with summer warblers and the more common resident species. Nightingale is possible. In the middle of the land there could be whitethroats or blackcaps singing from the bramble patches, maybe skylark on the ground.

As you work around the edge you will see the sailing centre and need to follow the fence edge right and then left. **Keep going in the same direction, cross the lane to the water's edge.** This is Theale Main a massive lake which has spectacular gatherings of gulls in late summer. In winter wildfowl are abundant and occasional rarities appear. The large pylon is worth searching for peregrine falcon and raven, other raptors and crows. Cormorants may be perched on the island. Buzzards and red kites can be seen anywhere. Looking at the lake from here is a good place to listen for nightingale.

**Turn right along the lake edge** and follow the narrow grass path keeping close to the edge following it as it turns left. This should be full of butterflies and insect life in the summer months. *(There is a short optional diversion on the left along a wooded spit to get closer to the island where water birds may be nesting).* Keep going all the way and some houses will appear on your right but keep going left. As you follow the path you will see a sharp right turn on a track between bramble bushes but, before you take it, a short walk to the end of this spit again may show you views over the lake, water birds and another sight of the island. Yet again listen for nightingales. Further out in the middle of the large lake there is an island full of breeding gulls and terns in the summer months.

**Return to the track with the bramble turn left and follow it until you almost get to the road gate. Turn left on the grass path** and it opens up a little with a rich meadow where flowers and butterflies will be seen. Keeping left you will see some gaps in the dense scrub and lovely weeping willows for fishermen's pegs giving you a chance to look at the lake. Great crested grebes will be present all year with young on their backs from as early as

April. You may hear Cetti's warbler here. Following the path as far as you can it turns away from the lake and towards the roadside hedgerow. **The path then turns left passing a bit of fence and then follow it as it bends left.** Follow this path as far as you can, including down and up an easy ditch where the path bends right and stops under a massive electricity pylon. This is a good place to look for butterflies and listen for birds including nightingales. This was the best place in 2020. Enjoy some moments here and then **return all the way past the meadow to the road gate.**

**Now, cross the road carefully through the hole in the hedge.** In front of you is Hosehill Lake. If you have not heard a Cetti's warbler yet, this is the place! They are loud and obvious and stick to the reedy areas and dense scrub on the waterside. **Turn right** and take the chance to view the lake at the various points available. *(If you hear nightingales on the other side of the lake, there is a circular path all the way around – feel free to explore it.)* Otherwise, keep the houses on your right. On the big island may be oystercatchers, geese and ducks nesting or just loafing. On the rafts there will be mainly black-headed gulls but they are usually joined by a few brave common terns in April. Cormorants will often perch there as well. Mute swans are numerous and duck species such as tufted, gadwall, shoveler and pochard may be seen. In winter they will be joined by wigeon and quite a few rarities turn up here. Looking across the lake you may see a sand martin wall built by the local volunteers. This is not consistently used. Some years anything from 30 to 90 birds have been present, in others none. Swallows, sand martins and house martins are likely to appear during the day to feed.

Following the lake around on the defined path with various reed patches and scrub you near the sand martin bank and see a notice board. Here ponds and shallows have been created by the volunteers. They have occasionally had bitterns here in winter and you can expect reed warblers anywhere around the lake in summer. **Shortly after the noticeboard in the same direction there is a final chance to look at the lake from a gap on the edge and then step up to the gate to the road.**

**Turn left at the road and then turn right into Bottom Lane (signposted Sulhampstead).** Follow this lovely quiet lane past mature woodland on the left carpeted with dog's mercury in spring, and nice hedgerows on the right beyond which is more angling on the lake. At the end of the lane is a cottage and a sharp left bend. **Turn right here onto the marked footpath and an extravagant sign THEALE 2.** This lovely walk through the woods and hedgerow offers a lot of interest including many ivy covered stumps. Birds will be singing all the way in spring. Expect nuthatches in the trees here and maybe a treecreeper, much harder to see!

**You reach the canal and turn right.** Canal banks come into their own in summer with many flowers and dragonflies. Cuckooflower can be found in spring. This is a lovely walk back to the swing bridge passing the mill in the trees opposite. **Cross carefully here** with the traffic lights changing quickly. **Continue past the cottage and on your right will be the car park where you started.**