WIRRAL NATURE GUIDE
An introduction to coastal wildlife and their habitats
taking you past some of the cleanest bathing waters in Europe. The water may be clean but some of the things you pick up are not, so please remember to wash your hands. After a visit to the foreshore, take a welcome break in one of the picturesque towns and villages of Wirral. You are welcome to collect shells and pebbles, but please do not remove any live animals or plants from their natural habitat, and use this guide to record your finds.

For further ideas about where to play, eat and stay in Wirral go to www.visitWirral.com

Introduction

Welcome to Wirral’s Nature Guide.

This booklet will encourage you to explore the wonderful Wirral coastline, from mature woodlands and windswept grasslands, to rocky foreshores and miles of golden sandy beaches. There are six Green Flag parks along the coast, and we have selected three as ‘hubs’ from which to start your journey,
The Dee Estuary

Rocky foreshores, saltmarsh and mudflats can be viewed from the Dee Cliffs, and are easily accessible from Gayton, to the mouth of the estuary. The retreating tide exposes miles of mud and sand, rich in invertebrates that make the Dee one of the most highly protected sites in the UK, and home to 120,000 waders and wildfowl found here during the winter months. Visit the award winning Wirral Country Park at Thurstaston, or the busy seaside town of West Kirby, and use the species list to see what you can find.
The Dee Cliffs at Thurstaston provide spectacular views across the River Dee to Wales. Deposited by melting ice sheets over 15,000 years ago, the clay cliffs contain the crushed remains of seashells, making the lime-rich soil suitable for some interesting plant species. Insects including butterflies and dragonflies patrol the cliffs and grassland, which are also attractive to rabbits. The stands of gorse provide perches for birds including the Yellowhammer with its distinctive call.

The Dee Cliffs are constantly eroding due to the actions of wind, rain and tides. They are very unstable and must not be climbed. Access up and down the cliffs is by the steps provided only.

During the winter months a variety of waders and wildfowl can be seen on the estuary from the cliffs. A walk down the steps provides the opportunity to walk along the strandline, or get close to the estuary mud, rich in tiny snails and worms that provide food for the birds that gather here. The mud is very soft in places and it is recommended that all observations are made from the sandy foreshore.

Wirral Country Park Visitor Centre at Thurstaston is open every day from 10am - 4.45pm. There is plenty of free on-site parking and there are toilets within the Visitor Centre. A refreshment kiosk and separate café are also on site.
The summer months provide colour along the Dee Cliffs, which are a habitat for some rare plants and invertebrates. Access to the foreshore is down the steps at the end of Station Road near to the Visitor Centre and pond. It is the best place to see the vegetation growing on the cliffs, as well as the birds and insects also found there.

**Yellow-wort**
Growing up to 30cm tall, this plant has a stem that looks as though it passes through the leaves. This gives it its scientific or Latin name *perfoliata* which means ‘through the leaves’.

**Emperor Dragonfly**
One of the largest European dragonflies, the male has a bright blue body that is often slightly bent as it flies fast over water in search of prey. It can also be found away from water.

**Restharrow**
This low, creeping plant has a network of woody stems that are so strong that they would have stopped a horse-drawn plough. It is found along the edges of the mown grass paths, along the cliff tops.

**White Clover**
An important species once used to help put nitrogen back into the soil after harvesting. This short creeping plant is often the first to be seen colonising bare ground where it enriches the soil for other plants to grow.

**Yellowhammer**
This bird can often be seen perched on a stand of gorse where it sings its unmistakeable song that is often referred to as ‘a little bit of bread and no cheese’, with the last note drawn out. It is usually easier to listen to its call first before trying to see this bird even though the male has bright yellow colouring.

**Bird’s-foot Trefoil**
This plant has many names including 'Bacon and eggs'; the red-brown tips of the flowers looking like bacon amongst the yellow (egg yolk) flowers, but it is the seed pods that look like birds’ feet that give it its most common name.

**Rabbit**
A very sociable animal that lives in colonies below ground in a warren, rabbits can be seen feeding on short grass at dawn and dusk. At Thurstaston they have become used to visitors and can often be seen feeding during the day.

**Blackthorn**
Covered in white blossom from early spring the thorny twigs provide protection for nesting birds and small mammals. The blue-black fruit (called sloes) appear in late summer.
The Dee Estuary provides one of the best places in the UK to see thousands of wading birds, as they are herded together into larger and tighter flocks, as the tide advances. The foreshore is a great place for birds to search the strandline, especially after winter storms. A visit to the bird-hide in the Visitor Centre provides close up views of birds on feeders.

**Hornwrack**
Found along the strandline this may look like a seaweed but is in fact the remains of a colony of thousands of tiny animals. When alive, each animal feeds by putting out tiny tentacles. It smells of lemon when first washed up.

**Hydrobia**
This tiny snail only grows to 6mm long, but occurs in huge numbers. It is important food for many of the waders and ducks which overwinter on the estuary. Look on areas of wet sand - but keep close to the shore and watch the tide!

**Mallard**
A very common duck found on ponds, rivers, estuaries and feeding on stubble fields. Listen for its loud quacking in the saltmarsh. The male is colourful, but the female is brown-speckled.

**Shelduck**
This large duck feeds mainly on Hydrobia (below), sieving them out of the mud with its red bill. It is found all round Wirral’s coast but easiest to see towards Thurstaston and Heswall.

**Common Cockle**
Buried just below the sand, cockles are harvested commercially on the Dee for food. The living animal consists of two tubes, one that draws in water and filters any food particles through gills, and the other to expel waste. It is usually the empty shell that is found washed up on the beach.

**Barnacle**
Related to crabs and shrimps, this crustacean permanently attaches itself to a rock or other hard surface and uses six feathery legs to move food particles towards its open mouth, which it closes tight when the tide is out.

**Black-tailed Godwit**
A large wading bird with a large, slightly upturned bill, that it uses to probe the estuary mud for worms and snails.

**Kestrel**
Most likely to be seen hovering over the Dee Cliffs in search for small mammals, the Kestrel may be seen descending lower and lower, until finally swooping on its prey, with wings closed in a final dive.
The Hilbre Islands Local Nature Reserve is home to a variety of plants and animals that require a rocky shore habitat. Atlantic Grey Seals haul out on the nearby sandbanks at low tide, or can be seen swimming at the northern end of the main island, where rock pools provide a habitat for starfish and other animals awaiting the rising tide.

The islands can only be reached at low tide and the only recommended crossing route is from the end of Dee Lane, next to the Marine Lake. Tide information and recommended crossing times can be found on the noticeboard (crossing information is also available from Wirral Country Park on 0151 648 4371). Do not cross to the islands unless you have checked the crossing times.

Past the bathing beach are saltmarsh and sand dunes that lead to the Red Rocks Site of Special Scientific Interest. Dunes and freshwater habitats provide a wide variety of specialist species. The Marine Lake is always worth a visit during the winter months as it attracts sheltering sea ducks and gulls. The golden sands here may look barren but a closer look will reveal signs of life and a food source for the mass of migrating and over-wintering birds.

There is free parking along the Marine Lake promenade. Public toilets are next to the Wirral Sailing School and there are plenty of shops, restaurants, cafés and bars in West Kirby for you to enjoy.
The busy amenity beach is very popular during the summer months and it is always worth a walk along the strandline to see what can be found. However, a walk over the sands to Hilbre at low water, or to Red Rocks, will provide opportunities for discovering wildlife in two very different habitats.

**Starfish**

Sometimes found washed up along the strandline after being brought up off the sea floor by storms, the Common Starfish may be red, pink or orange and can be found in rock pools where it feeds mainly on mussels.

**Thrift**

Also known as ‘Sea Pink’, this plant adds a splash of colour to the Hilbre Islands Local Nature Reserve in early spring, right through to the end of summer.

**Burnet Rose**

The rose of the sand dunes, growing low to the ground. It is very spiny, with white flowers and large black hips.

**Sea Radish**

Cousin to our edible radish, this forms large bushes on the sand dunes. Look for the knobbly seed pods, with round chambers for each seed.

**Common Blue Butterfly**

This is a widespread butterfly as its caterpillars are able to feed on a variety of foodplants including Bird’s-foot Trefoil. The male has bright blue upper wings and the female colouring is very varied but usually brown with orange markings, although both have brown patterned underwings that are seen when closed.

**Orange Tip Butterfly**

One of the first species out in spring, it flies in April and May. Only the males have the orange tips, the females are white and grey. Caterpillars feed on cuckoo flower, jack-by-the-hedge and honesty.

**Sea Beet**

Feel the leathery leaves, needed to withstand the exposure to sun, sea and sand. This plant is the ancestor of beetroot, beet spinach and chard.

**Atlantic Grey Seal**

The local colony of seals haul out on to the sand bank west of Hilbre at low water, but for a closer view they can often be seen swimming at the northern end of the island, close to the old lifeboat station.
The Dee Estuary West Kirby

Autumn/Winter

Birds start to gather along the shore, as autumn approaches, so take care not to disturb them. The rock pools around Hilbre Islands, or the reedbeds and saltmarsh at Red Rocks, are great places to sit and watch a variety of wildlife (please don’t use pond dipping nets here, as they can damage the fragile wildlife habitats).

**Dunlin**
This small, lively wader has a fairly long bill for its size. It has a greyish back and a white belly on which a black patch develops in spring. It is usually seen in large flocks.

**Knot**
This is a small, grey, short-billed wader. It usually feeds, rests and flies in large, tight flocks which in flight resembles smoke. In spring the birds migrate to Greenland and Canada to breed.

**Periwinkle**
The Periwinkle is able to survive, being exposed to the air at low water, by closing an airtight ‘door’. Touching the shell opening will cause the animal to retreat inside its shell closing the hard bony plate shut!

**Limpet**
Limpets stick themselves tight to a rock at low water. They feed on fine vegetation that cover the rocks at high tide, and return to exactly the same position on the rock - look for a limpet feeding trail!

**Lugworm**
Piles of black worm-like casts are evidence that a Lugworm has burrowed beneath the surface, sorting food from the sand, which it rejects and can be seen at low tide. The black colour is because the sand just beneath the surface contains rotting organic matter that uses up oxygen and gives off a rotting egg smell. Anglers can often be seen digging up Lugworms, that can grow up to 20 centimetres long, for bait at low tide.

**Bar-tailed Godwit**
A fairly large wader with long legs. It uses its long bill to probe the mud and sand for small prey, mostly worms. It is grey in winter, but turns reddish-brown in spring before migrating off to its breeding grounds in Siberia.

**Common Reed**
Taller than a person, this reed forms dense marshes near Red Rocks, and elsewhere round the coast. It is an important habitat for many invertebrates and birds. Listen to the wind rustling its stems.

**Pied Wagtail**
Watch for wagtails scurrying along the walkways and embankments, catching insects. As they run their long tails wag up and down.
North Wirral Foreshore

Acres of sandy foreshore meet miles of hay meadows and dunes, from Hoylake through to Wallasey, providing plenty of places to explore. Leasowe Lighthouse stands at the heart of the north Wirral coast that has easy access to the parkland and amenity beaches at Meols, Moreton and Harrison Drive. Hoylake Beach and Leasowe Bay are two of the best places for a walk along the strandline to see some of the species on the foreshore and the embankment. The promenades are good places to stand with a pair of binoculars and see birds along the shoreline.
Turning the corner past Red Rocks leads to a vast expanse of sand and mud exposed at low tide. The fast, incoming tide fills deep channels and although the Hilbre Islands may look quite close, the only recommended crossing point to the islands is from West Kirby.

The promenade that runs nearly two miles from Kings Gap in Hoylake to Meols, provides an excellent opportunity to stay close to the shore or to access the miles of sandy beach.

The highest tides rarely reach the sea wall, and as a result, grasses have started to grow on the sand, that will one day develop into saltmarsh if the sand continues to build up and beach levels continue to rise.

As the tide comes in, it forces roosting birds closer and closer to the shore, providing excellent close up views.

*Please take care when approaching the foreshore as access points may be slippery with algae.*

There is plenty of free parking along the promenade, between Hoylake and Meols, with public toilets at Meols Beach.
North Wirral Foreshore Hoylake and Meols

Spring/Summer

Plants starting to grow on the sands are indicative of environmental change. The dark, smelly mud just below the surface of the sand is the result of bacteria absorbing all the oxygen and is not a sign of pollution. Always take care when exploring the lower parts of foreshore. Be aware of the tides and don’t cross soft sand or mud.

Glasswort
Also known as Marsh Samphire, this plant was used in salads, adding a salty tang, and today is collected for use in expensive restaurants as a delicacy.

Sandwich Tern
This tern has striking, bright white plumage, and a long black bill with a yellow tip. It has a harsh, rasping call sometimes written as ‘kirrick’. The name comes from Sandwich in Kent - not the lunchtime favourite.

Swallow
This bird can be seen hunting for flies and midges along the shore. It has a long forked tail with two streamers, creamy-white underneath and shiny blue-black upper parts. Listen for their soft twittering calls.

Baltic Tellin
These small bi-valves grow up to 2.5 cms long. They live burrowed in the sand where only some of the longer billed waders can reach them. The empty shells are commonly washed up along the strandline.

Common Cord Grass
Often called by its scientific name ‘Spartina’, this saltmarsh grass is often the first plant to colonise an area of mud, within an estuary or at the tidal edge. A single plant spreads its roots, from which other plants grow, and forms circular ‘islands’ of vegetation. It was originally planted for land reclamation and is now spreading around much of Wirral’s coast.

Wild Carrot
This is the ancestor of our cultivated carrots. The flowers are popular with a large number of insects, especially hoverflies and beetles. Inspect the seed heads and open one gently to see if a spider is hiding inside.

Common Saltmarsh Grass
This grass is one of the first to grow on areas of coastal mud and wet sand, and spreads its long roots to form a mat of vegetation, that eventually becomes saltmarsh.

Carrion Crow
The most common and blackest of the crow family, it is often seen scavenging along the strandline for food. It eats a wide range of food, including grain, but performs a useful job in removing carrion.
**North Wirral Foreshore Hoylake and Meols**

**Autumn/Winter**

A great place to view birds is close to the sea wall, as the advancing tide pushes them together, into large flocks. The high winter tides also bring with them shells and seaweeds, that can be found along the strandline, after the tide has gone out. Birds are easily disturbed, so please don’t approach them. If you have a dog - please keep it on a lead.

**Grey Plover**
This wader has a relatively short bill and feeds on invertebrates near the surface of the sand and mud. It has a habit of standing hunched, as if dejected. Listen for its call, a plaintive whistle of three slurred notes ‘tlee-u-ee’.

**Grey Heron**
Heron are seen as solitary fishermen in winter, spaced out along the estuarine creeks and shores. Can you stand still for as long as they do? In summer they nest in large colonies inland.

**Razor Clam Shell**
Razor clams burrow deeply in the sand, so we don’t often see the living clam, but like other clams and whelks they are edible and harvested in the UK.

**Sea Potato**
The burrowing Sea Potato or Heart Urchin can be found by digging down in wet sand at the very lowest tides. A star shaped hole shows where this relative of the starfish has burrowed up to 20 centimetres into the sand. More often though, it is the white, empty fragile skeleton or ‘test’ that is found washed up on the strandline.

**Redshank**
Another wader with a lovely piping call. They probe the tide pools for worms and crustaceans. The obvious red legs give this bird its common name.

**Serrated Wrack**
The wracks are tough, olive-brown seaweeds which grow on rocky shores. They are found on the strandline, washed here from Hilbre and Wales. Serrated wrack has toothed fronds but no bladders.

**Knotted Wrack**
This is more common on sheltered shores than Bladder Wrack. The bladders on Knotted Wrack are very difficult to pop, whereas those on Bladder Wrack pop quite easily. Which one have you found?

**Rayed Trough Shell**
These are bivalve-like cockles, but the shells are smooth with concentric rings, usually purplish inside. They can grow to 5cm buried in the mud, filtering food from the sea water, but empty shells regularly wash up on the shore.
Stretching four miles from Meols to Wallasey, and next to three of the cleanest bathing beaches in Europe, the park contains a variety of habitats, from hay meadows and reedbeds, to sand dunes and woodland. Rare invertebrates can be found within the dunes, that in places, have started to be vegetated by specialist plants adapted to survive the coastal winds.

The acres of hay meadows provide a habitat for a number of colourful insects, as well as birds that nest within the undisturbed rough grassland, hidden from the many visitors that are attracted by the ever changing coastal landscape.

The adjacent beaches and Leasowe Bay provide great opportunities for discovering what has been washed ashore from Liverpool Bay.

Please note:
The large boulders used here as coastal defences must not be used to access the foreshore. They are dangerous and may be cut off by the tide at high water.

There are 8 free car parks along the length of the 4-mile park. Toilets are at Meols Beach, Leasowe Common, where there is an outdoor café, and Wallasey Beach, where there is a local pub with food.
North Wirral Foreshore
North Wirral Coastal Park

Spring/Summer

Acres of hay meadows and sand dunes run parallel to the foreshore within the North Wirral Coastal Park, and colourful wildflowers in the grasslands attract insects, whilst woody shrubs provide perches for birds.

**Skylark**
These birds are more often heard than seen. Listen for the males singing above the saltmarsh and sand dunes, sometimes so high almost disappearing from sight.

**Wheatear**
Wheatears are one of the first migrant birds to appear in March signalling the start of spring. The white rump is noticeable as they flit from perch to perch along the coast.

**6-spot Burnet Moth**
These are day-flying moths, not butterflies. Their red and black colouring is a warning to birds that they are poisonous. Their caterpillars feed on low-growing trefoils. Count the spots on each wing.

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**Vernal Mining Bee**
Found on the sloping sand dunes, these non-aggressive solitary bees are found tightly packed together, where conditions are right, so they can store pollen in burrows which they excavate.

**Cinnabar Moth Caterpillars**
The adult moths are red and black and can be seen flying during the day. The caterpillars feed together, sometimes in large numbers, on Ragwort. Toxins in this plant are ingested by the caterpillars, which are boldly coloured as a warning to any potential predators, that they are poisonous.

**Dune Wolf Spider**
This very well camouflaged spider doesn’t build a web and is therefore most often seen scurrying over the sand dunes in search of prey.

**Sand Hopper**
Often found in large numbers amongst the rotting seaweed on the strandline, hundreds of these shrimp-like animals may spring up when disturbed.

**Skate Egg Cases**
These black ‘pods’, often found along the strandline, are the old egg cases of skates and rays. There are many different types but most have ‘horns’ on each corner.

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Autumn/Winter

The highest of tides may force some wading birds onto the flooded grasslands. However, the sand dunes provide shelter from the strong sea winds, leaving lots to discover along the strandline when the tide has gone out.

**Sanderling**
This is a small, light-coloured wader. It runs along the tide-line, dodging the waves as it picks up small prey animals. Please do not disturb it by joining in - keep your paddling for summer.

**White-lipped Banded Snail**
Found feeding on a variety of plants during the evening or on wet days from April to October, White-lipped Banded Snails can often be found hibernating during the winter months, just behind the sea wall and often in large numbers.

**Marram Grass**
This grass is tall, up to 1m, tough and waxy - adapted to living on sand and facing sea gales. Its leaves trap sand as it blows onshore, gradually building the sand dunes higher. Unroll a leaf - it rolls up lengthwise to keep in moisture.

**Lapwing**
This elegant bird feeds on the fields inland but rests in flocks on the sand banks off Leasowe Bay when the tide is out. Listen for its call, which gives it its alternative name: ‘pee-wit’.

**Curlew**
This is a very large wading bird. It has a long down-curved bill, which it uses to probe wet sand and mud for worms, but it will also come inshore to feed on grassland at high tide. Winter numbers increase with the arrival of migrants and their rather melancholy ‘cour-lee’ call which gives it its common name.

**Whelk**
A large, light coloured, spiral-shaped snail that is usually only seen when the empty shell is washed ashore or when it is used by a Hermit Crab.

**Whelk (eggs)**
Individual egg capsules join together in creating a quite large ball of egg cases. Each little capsule contains many eggs, not all of which are fertile, and the one individual that hatches will eat the other undeveloped eggs.

**Little Egret**
This is a recent arrival to Wirral’s shores and its numbers are increasing. It is a white heron, rather smaller than its grey cousin, and can be seen feeding in the tidal gullies.
The Mersey Estuary

The River Mersey has one of the highest tidal ranges in Europe. However, the western part of the estuary still retains a lot of water at low tide. The narrow strips of foreshore that are exposed act like magnets to the internationally important numbers of migrating and overwintering wildfowl and waders. Use the species list to see what can be found in the woodlands at Eastham, or on the beach and rock pools at New Brighton. Don’t forget to keep a look out along the rocky shore or on the sea for birds that often come close to the foreshore.
This stretch of the Mersey Estuary and coast has a rocky foreshore habitat which receives a supply of food twice a day from the fast flowing tidal waters.

The rock pools are great places to explore and the sandy beach provides an opportunity to walk along the strandline and see what the tide has brought in.

Organic material, washed in and out with the tide, also feeds huge colonies of sand and mud dwelling worms, that are a favourite for fishermen’s bait, as well as for the birds that come here to feed.

The marine lake and boating lake attract birds during the winter months. Always check the tides before venturing out to the rock pools and be careful as there are soft, muddy areas.

Please also remember to take care if using nets in the rock pools - and please remember to put back anything found exactly where it was caught.

There are free car parks at Fort Perch Rock and along Kings Parade. Toilets can be found at Kings Parade where there are several cafés. Or, why not try the new Floral Pavilion coffee lounge.
In spring, many waders leave the estuary to breed elsewhere, but other birds arrive to raise their young. In summer, the marine lake and the tide pools in the Mersey Narrows are full of life, including the young of many species.

**Common Shore Crab**
Also called the green shore crab, this crustacean has to shed its hard, outer skeleton as it grows. The empty crab shells you see along the strandline are usually not dead crabs, but just the empty discarded shell.

**Starling**
A year round resident, the starling feeds, perches and roosts for the night in noisy flocks. Look out for them feeding in the grass and on the shoreline.

**Goby**
In summer, the tide pools and the marine lake are full of these well camouflaged little fish. It takes some time to spot them, as they are patterned like the sand.

**Prawn**
These inhabit weedy, tide pools in summer. Sit quietly and you will see them emerge. They can also be captured for a closer look by dipping in a tide pool or in the marine lake.

**Common Mussel**
These grow in abundance in fast flowing water of the Mersey Narrows and are food for many creatures. They are filter feeders and can store up poisonous chemicals in their body, so it wouldn’t be safe to eat the Mersey mussels.

**Anemone**
These are animals which capture food with stinging and entangling cells on their tentacles. The mouth is in the centre of the ring of tentacles. At low tide, the closed anemone looks like a sagging lump of jelly.

**Dogfish Egg Cases**
By the time you find the egg case washed up on the beach, it is likely the young dogfish shark has squeezed out to begin an independent life.

**House Martin**
The House Martin returns in spring to breed here. Observe their swooping flight as they hunt for insects over the parks and the shore. Note their tail is shorter than a Swallow’s tail.
The Mersey Estuary New Brighton

Autumn/Winter

In autumn and winter, the mussel beds, sand bars and the river itself are busy with waders and gulls. There is ample food to be found here: mussels, worms, crabs and fish as well as smaller creatures. Binoculars are useful for observing sea birds foraging on the mussel beds in the narrow s.

**Mute Swan**
Unmistakable with its graceful curved neck and orange bill. On their return from breeding in fresh water, swans can be seen on the marine lake begging for handouts.

**Oystercatcher**
This large, boldly patterned wader has a loud piping call, and also makes a shrill 'kleep, kleep'. It opens mussels and cockles with its strong, red bill.

**Sabellaria Colony**
You can find these fragile honeycomb-like structures adhering to rocks next to the Lighthouse. Each tube in the colony, made from sand grains and bits of shell, is the home of a worm, Sabellaria.

**Turnstone**
These busy little waders turn over seaweed and poke under stones searching for tiny sea creatures. They travel long journeys to breed and return with their young in late summer.

**Cormorant**
During the winter, this large, black sea bird moves away from its breeding colonies and disperses around the coast. When on the water, its slender shape makes it difficult to see, and it is often only noticed by the wake that it leaves when diving from the surface for fish. It is regularly seen standing with its wings outstretched.

**Herring Gull**
This large gull is a scavenger, eating almost anything with its strong, yellow bill. Young birds are streaked light brown. Its raucous call is the typical sound of the seaside.

**Black-headed Gull**
This dainty gull boasts a brown/black head during courtship and breeding. The bill and legs are bright red all year round. It is very fond of perching on the railings around the marine lake.

**Ringed Plover**
A similar size to the turnstone, notice its black and white collar. Some breed in the UK, on beaches, or in gravel pits, where they depend upon camouflage to escape attention.
Situated near to the widest point of the Mersey Estuary, Eastham Ferry and woods have been a popular place to visit for over 150 years, since the site was a Victorian pleasure garden.

The coast here consists of low sandstone cliffs. The rocky shore here is inaccessible and completely covered by water at every high tide, however there are excellent views out over the river from Crosby to Warrington. There, you will see a variety of birds from the exposed foreshore.

The extensive woods here are rich in birds, with wildflowers carpeting the ground, and are a contrast to the exposed areas of windswept grasslands, that are typically found along the Dee Estuary or north Wirral foreshore. The mature trees provide a habitat for many insects, that are food for the variety of birds drawn to the woodland; existing like an oasis along the shoreline of the Mersey.

A Visitor Centre and toilets are open daily and situated next to a large free car park. There is a café on site as well as a refreshment kiosk and two pubs serving food on the main approach road.
**The Mersey Estuary**

**Eastham Country Park**

**Spring/Summer**

Visit in late April to May for the bluebells and see the woodpeckers. Later in the summer, the trees will be in full leaf, hiding many of the birds that breed in the woodland, busy seeking food for their young. A visit to the bird-hide within the Visitor Centre, will provide close up views of many bird species.

**Coal Tit**
The smallest tit, look for its black crown and white patch on the back of the head. It is a woodland species, feeding on a wide range of invertebrates, and it also visits gardens.

**Blue Tit**
A small, lively bird easily recognised by its blue crown. It feeds on insects, spiders and seeds, and is a regular visitor to the bird-feeders. The song is very varied, but usually includes a rapid ‘tsee-tsee’.

**Bluebell**
From April to May, the north end of Eastham Woods is carpeted with bluebells with their scent filling the air. They are easily damaged by trampling. Please don’t pick them but leave these wildflowers for all to enjoy.

**Great Spotted Woodpecker**
More often heard than seen, this bird drums rapidly on dead branches to attract a mate. It feeds on insects found in the bark and in dead wood, and is a regular visitor to the bird garden throughout the year.

**Chiffchaff**
This warbler is a common summer visitor to Britain. It is more likely to be heard than seen, although it is a lively bird that flits from tree to tree in search of insects. Its easily recognised call is a repeated ‘chiff-chaff-chiff-chaff’ although it may sometimes try a variation of ‘chiff-chiff-chaff’!

**Nuthatch**
It visits feeders and climbs up and down tree trunks in search of insects to feed on. Creamy underneath, steel-blue above, and a strong sharp bill to probe bark and hide small nuts. The ‘chuit-chuit-chuit’ call gives the bird away.

**Oak**
In the children’s play area is a 500-year-old oak, one of the oldest trees on Wirral. A branch fell off in a storm a few years ago and has been carved into a ‘serpent’. Feel its rough bark and look for acorns in their cups.

**Beech**
The large trees were planted in the 1800s. They are now growing old, but many new ones are springing up around them. Feel the smooth, grey bark and look for the spiky seed cases.
Autumn/Winter

Autumn fruits are on the trees and shrubs within the woodland provide food for birds. They can also be seen on the ground foraging amongst the leaf litter. Remember to look out over the river and see the wading birds that feed on the foreshore at low tide.

**Great Tit**
Larger than the Blue Tit, it feeds in much the same way, and has a black head and a ‘tie’ down the belly, white cheeks and green-blue back and tail. Its song is varied, but it frequently makes a see-sawing call ‘teacher, teacher’.

**Chaffinch**
The colourful male has a tuneful, cascading song. The female is drab brown and beige. Watch out for flocks of chaffinches on the ground, picking up seeds.

**Blackbird**
This is the male: the female is brown all over. Favourite food items are berries, but also earthworms, which it grabs with its strong bill.

**Long-tailed Tit**
Unmistakable with its very long tail, this is a highly acrobatic little bird. They fly around in small parties hunting for insects and spiders, making high-pitched calls as they flit from tree to tree.

**Jay**
A rather shy bird, but given away by its raucous call. It feeds on nuts, which it often hides for eating later, as well as small animals such as earthworms and spiders. If you are lucky, you may catch a flash of blue as it flies away.

**Silver Birch**
A very noticeable tree in winter with its white bark and fine twigs. Bracket fungi often appear on the trunk. They are called birch polypore or razor-strop fungus.

**Holly**
The dense bushes of holly provide useful winter shelter to small birds and invertebrates. Holly is increasing as winters get warmer. Its flowers are food for the Holly Blue butterfly.

**Robin**
Our most familiar bird, but do not expect to see more than one at a time. Each robin defends its own territory and will only feed near another in very cold weather. Even in winter they take mostly invertebrate and other animal prey.
Enjoy Wirral’s coast but be safe:

- Always be aware of the tide. (Call for tide information on: 0151 648 4371).
- Don’t walk over soft sand or mud - it’s easy to get stuck.
- Don’t walk over wet and slippery rocks or seaweed.
- Always wear some sort of footwear - beaches are clean, but sharp items can get washed up or be buried in the sand - rocks and barnacles can be sharp too.
- Always wash your hands after exploring the coast.
- If you don’t know what it is don’t touch it!
For further information on Wirral’s coast, please contact Wirral Council’s coastal Rangers on 0151 678 5488 or e-mail coastalpark@wirral.gov.uk

Photography by:
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