



Loynton Moss with Cathy Taylor

Visit this natural gem in West Staffordshire to follow trails weaving through a mixture of habitats and countryside views, all set around the “moss” – an area of peaty, boggy land – which at Loynton Moss consists of wet alder woodland and reedbed fen.

1 Meadow meander

On arrival you are greeted by an expansive meadow surrounded by woodland and fields. This area is pretty hardy habitat, so you can let your dog run free off the lead here. A family of crows regularly watch the goings on from a skeleton tree on the edge of the woodland; crows may remain in family groups rather than find their own territories to help raise the next year's young.

2 Hedges and fields

As you follow the hawthorn hedge to start a clockwise tour of the site, a peaceful atmosphere soon descends. Keep an eye out for birds such as yellowhammers and blackbirds that may be feeding from the hawthorn hedge's autumn berries. The fields to the left of the path are the perfect habitat to see winter thrushes, such as redwing and fieldfare, feeding in flocks. Goldfinches may be balanced on teasel heads, prising out the seeds.

3 A viewpoint

Straight ahead a small hill calls out to be climbed. The benches at the top of Rue Hill give panoramic views of the nature reserve and surrounding countryside – well worth the effort.

4 Woodland foray

A diversion from the main route extends the walk and leads through a dense wood, famous for its late winter display of snowdrops. The woodlands at Loynton Moss are also great for birds, so look out for flocks of siskin and lesser redpoll in the winter months – alder trees are their favourites - and long-tailed tits.

5 Reeds all around

This peaceful area on the edge of the moss was once the edge of a lake. Now the lake has gone but the gentle rustling of reeds can still be heard. Movements of animals such as coot or moorhens from within the reeds may give away their presence; will they come to the edge to show themselves?

6 Autumn trees

A flight of steps leads into the most dramatic area of the site. The woodland ridge, thick with mature beech trees, put on a dazzling display of autumn colour. Far below the trees is the Shropshire Union canal on the left and the moss on your right. The bank is a great place to spot tree-creepers circling their way up tree trunks.

7 Peaceful refuge

The route back from the ridge finds a quiet enclosed grassy glade on the edge of the meadow. Take a minute to listen out for the plaintive call of the bullfinch – see if you can spot the beautiful, bright salmon-red male.



Seven to spot



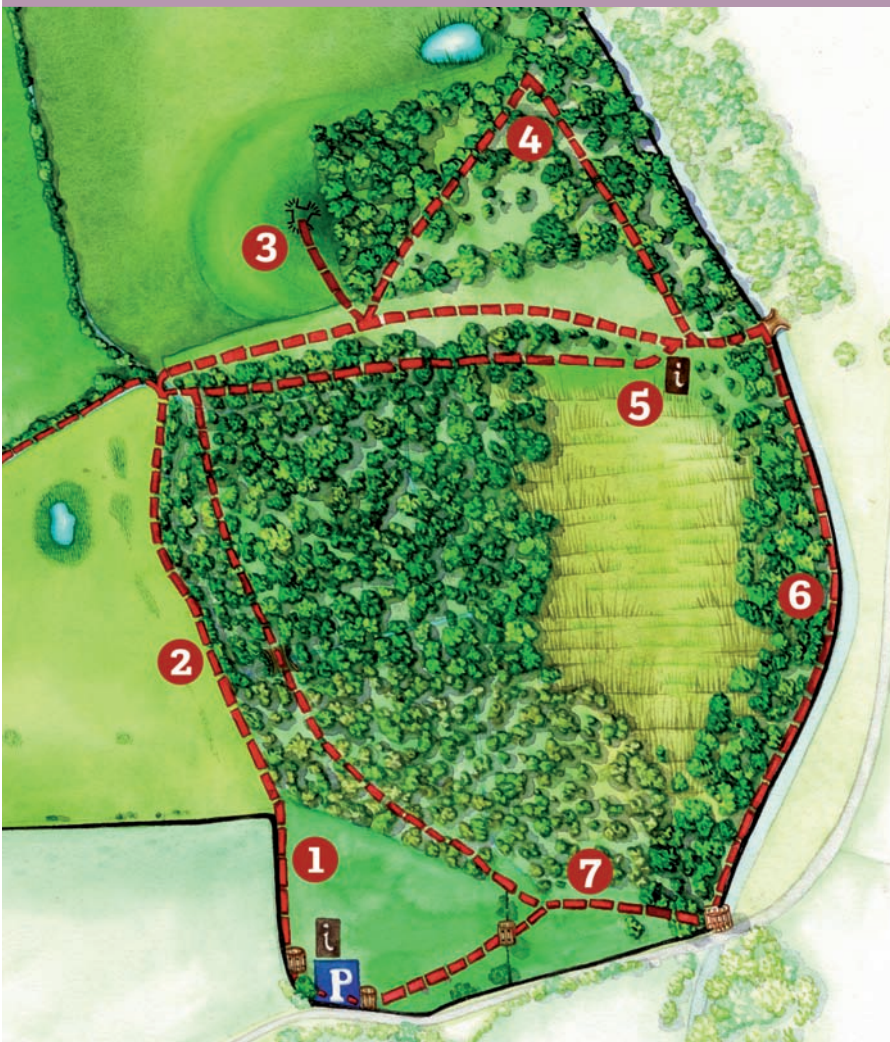
Siskin

Look in the alder trees in the wet woodland for this acrobatic yellow finch. They're often seen hanging upside-down feeding on the seeds in the alder's tiny, cone-like fruits. Siskins are generally winter visitors in Staffordshire, escaping the colder European mainland climate.

Snowdrops

February brings the first signs of spring – initially the green leaves then the nodding white bonnets of snowdrops in the woodlands. Their nectar may even tempt an early bee buzzing past.

Loynton Moss



Autumn beech trees

Beech trees can live for up to 300 years, and grow to over 160 feet/50 metres high. Their leaves transform to stunning amber and gold colours in autumn. The pairs of beech nuts encased in prickles are a good source of food for woodland birds and small mammals.



Long-tailed tits

With a chattering call, a marauding flock of long-tailed tits can pass through the woodland. They are fairly brave, so stand in their direction of travel and watch them pass in their never-ending hunt for insects.



Bank vole

Movements in the undergrowth can give away the presence of this small vole. They don't hibernate in winter so may be seen at any time searching for nuts, seeds and vegetation to replenish their food stores.

Beechwood sickener fungus

This poisonous fungus is easy to spot in autumnal beech woods. It has a symbiotic (mutually beneficial) relationship with beech trees, their roots connect and the fungus provides minerals to the tree in return for sugars. It smells of coconut when young.

Bullfinch

A plaintive whistle is often the first signal to look for these pretty birds. Despite their salmon-red breasts, the males can still be difficult to spot in foliage.

Getting there

Loynton Moss is located on the A519 to the east of Woodseaves between Eccleshall and Newport. Just after the Shropshire Union Canal, which forms the eastern boundary of the reserve, the entrance to the reserve car park is on a bend in the road.

Access

Paths can be uneven and wet in places. Fairly flat apart from the ascent to Rue Hill and steps to access the beech wood ridge. Dogs are welcome but please observe the on/off lead signage, clear up after them and take your rubbish home.