

Walks Around Birks Fell

Walk Information

Distance: 16km (10 miles)
Time: 5-6 hours
Maps: OS Explorer Sheet OL30
Start/Parking: Pay & display car park at Buckden.

Refreshments: Pubs at Buckden and Hubberholme. No other facilities en route – take provisions with you.

Terrain: Riverside path from Buckden to Yockenthwaite, then a long and steady climb along a grassy and then a rough, stony path up to the top of Horse Head Moor (600 metres asl). A path then heads south-east along the top of the broad moorland ridge (Open Access land), with some boggy sections. Beyond Birks Tarn, the path joins the Litton to Buckden bridleway, which is followed steeply down across Birks Fell to join a stony track that leads back down to Buckden.

How to get there: Buckden lies along the B6160 at the head of Wharfedale, between Aysgarth and Kettlewell.

Open Access Land: The section between Horse Head Moor and Birks Fell heads across Open Access Land. See local signs for information or visit openaccess.gov.uk.

Caution: This is a demanding walk up onto the high moorland ridge between Wharfedale and Littondale, some 600 metres above sea level. This moorland is exposed to the elements, with rough, boggy and wet ground in places, including a boggy section across peat hags. OS map, compass and hill-walking gear essential.

Points of interest

FIRST walked this route exactly five years ago. It was a misty day, and so I was not able to enjoy the spectacular views that such a high-level ridge offers. I have been meaning to re-walk this route ever since, so that I could enjoy the views. Last week I picked a sunny day and headed back up onto Birks Fell; the views are indeed spectacular; some of the best in the Yorkshire Dales.

The first part of this walk follows the beautiful riverside path through Upper Wharfedale and Langstrothdale as far as the hamlet of Yockenthwaite, before an old packhorse trail leads steeply up out of the valley onto the windswept heights of Horse Head Moor; this route would once have been busy with trains of packhorses between the market towns of Hawes and Settle. The views from the top of this broad moorland ridge are superb, with the Three Peaks clearly visible. The walk along this moorland ridge is excellent, rarely dipping below 600 metres, although the ground is boggy. With

OS map in hand, it is worth the short detour to Sugar Loaf (SD 894 767) and Kirk Gill Moor (SD 912 769) to appreciate the views across Littondale and Langstrothdale.

A wall guides you across the top of this broad moorland ridge to reach Birks Tarn, a lonely expanse of water. Just before the tarn is a small cairn of rocks (SD 919 764), which marks the summit of Birks Fell. This is one of the lowest Hewitts, or Hills in England and Wales above 2,000ft at 610 metres or 2,001ft. On old imperial maps the highest point was shown as 2001ft, but this was revised to 608 metres upon metric conversion, which is just below the magic 2000ft required for a mountain. In 2006 Ordnance Survey agreed that Birks Fell was, indeed, one foot above 2000ft. The name of this moorland mountain is derived from the Old Norse words meaning birch hill, for its lower slopes are still cloaked with ancient woodland.

Beyond Birks Tarn we join the Litton to Buckden bridleway as it crosses Firth Fell. The walk down along this bridleway across Birks Fell is a wonderful way to end this walk, with fine views towards Buckden cradled beneath the heights of Buckden Pike.

The walk

1 From the car park at Buckden, head back down along the road into the centre of the village to reach the green where you take the turning to the right towards Hubberholme. Follow this down out of the village to reach the bridge across the River Wharfe. Just after the bridge take the footpath to the right (signpost) through a small gate then bear slightly left across the field to join the banks of the River Wharfe on your right. Follow the riverside path straight on heading upstream (river on your right) through a series of small gates. After 1km you reach a small gate beside a field gate across your path (where the river bends away to the right) – head through this gate and walk straight on alongside the wall on your right to soon re-join the road. Turn right along the road and follow this to reach the George Inn at Hubberholme.

2 At the pub, turn right over the bridge across the River Wharfe, just after which take the farm track to the left (signpost Dales Way, Deepdale, Yockenthwaite, Cray). Follow this farm track straight on (churchyard on your left) through a gate passing some barns on your right then, follow the track round to

the left to quickly reach a fork where the track begins to climb steeply uphill – branch left here along the level path alongside the churchyard on your left (signpost Yockenthwaite). Just beyond the churchyard, the path joins the banks of the River Wharfe on your left – follow this clear path straight on for 2.25 km heading along the riverbank and across riverside pastures heading up through Langstrothdale alongside the River Wharfe all the way to reach the hamlet of Yockenthwaite. As you reach the buildings of Yockenthwaite (with a metal gate and a barn in front of you), head up the steps to the right and through a small wall-gate, after which head left through another small gate in a fence (signpost) then straight on through another gate that leads onto a track in the heart of the hamlet. Follow this track straight on to reach Yockenthwaite Bridge (stone bridge) across the River Wharfe.

3 Cross this bridge then follow the road to the left heading back down through Langstrothdale for 500 metres then, just before Raisgill Farm and a cattle grid across the road, turn right along a bridleway (No Vehicles sign). Head up the small, low limestone outcrop just ahead to quickly reach a signpost above it where you follow the grassy path to the right (signpost Halton Gill via Horse Head). Follow this path steadily up for 150metres then, where it levels out on a narrow shelf of land, follow the path bending round to the left then straight on climbing quite steeply up the hillside (choice of paths – follow the clearer central grassy path). The gradient soon eases and you continue straight on climbing steadily up, with the ravine of Hagg Beck falling away down to your left. The path soon levels out and leads straight on, with the ravine of Hagg Beck to your left, for 0.5km all the way to reach a small ford across a side-stream near the head of Hagg Beck. Cross this stream and follow

the clear stony path ahead climbing quite steeply up across Horse Head Moor for 1km to reach the gate in a wall across your path along the top of Horse Head Moor.

4 Do not head through this gate but turn left alongside the wall on your right (Open Access Land). Follow this wall straight on across the top of the broad ridge of moorland (separating Upper Wharfedale to your left and Littondale to your right) for 1km until you reach a fence across your path, where the wall on your right ends (SD 895 768). Head left alongside this fence on your right then, after 150 metres, follow the fence bending sharp right. Continue alongside this fence gently dropping down across an area of peat hags and boggy pools (keep to the fence as much as possible – look for grassy tussocks to walk across to avoid sinking into the peat). Beyond the peat hags, continue along the fence gently rising up to join a wall at the top of the rise. Follow this wall straight on (to the left) with the wall on your right to soon reach a small gate in a wall corner across your path (SD 904 765). Head through this gate and carry straight on across the top of the broad moorland ridge alongside the wall on your right for 300 metres to reach another wall across your path. Turn left alongside this wall on your right and follow this straight on then curving round to the right after a short distance. Follow this wall straight on heading across the top of the broad ridge then, where this wall ends, carry straight on alongside the fence on your right for 150 metres to reach a gate in a fence across your path (where the fence becomes a wall on your right – SD 912 768). Head through this gate and follow the wall (on your right) straight on, heading across a moorland landscape of peat hags and large pools, for 750 metres to reach a small gate in a wall across your path (SD 917 764).

5 Head through this gate and follow the path straight on alongside the wall on your right for 600 metres to reach Birks Tarn just across to your left (detour to the left before Birks Tarn to reach the summit of Birks Fell, marked by a small cairn on a low gritstone outcrop). Carry straight on alongside the wall passing the tarn and follow this wall for a further 1km to reach a tumbledown wall across your path (SD 924 751). Turn left alongside this tumbledown wall (with the wall on your left) to soon join a clear, stony path coming in from your right (Litton to Buckden bridleway), which you follow for a further 200 metres then follow the clear path cutting left through a gap in this tumbledown wall. After the wall-gap, follow this wide, stony path to the right (bearing away from the wall) to soon reach the brow of the hillside (cairn), where Buckden comes into view ahead. Follow the clear stony path heading quite steeply down across the hillside (bearing slightly left), then down along a flagged section of path. At the bottom of the flagstones, continue quite steeply down along the clear path (heading towards Buckden) then, as you reach the bottom of the steep hillside, follow the clear path bearing to the left down across the gently sloping shelf of land (blue waymarker posts) for about 0.75km to reach a clear, stony track across your path (with a ruinous barn just to your left and woodland ahead). Follow this track to the left (signpost) down to reach a gate that leads through some sheep pens, after which follow the clear, stony track winding down the hillside, passing Redmire Farm across to your right, to join the road. Turn right back into Buckden.

Mark Reid
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Country diary

OAK tree buds have begun to open, revealing delicate new leaves that are a vital link in the woodland food chain for nesting birds. Almost as soon as the leaves expand they are chewed by tiny caterpillars, that in turn are caught by blue tits and great tits and fed to their chicks.

The caterpillars of three species of native moth – the winter moth, the mottled umber and the green tortrix – are notorious for their ability to consume young oak foliage and can even defoliate whole branches. The hatching of their caterpillars is synchronised with oak bud burst, which in turn is closely linked to the time of egg-laying in some woodland birds. These linkages are critical to their nesting success because a large great tit family of ten fledglings, for example, needs up to 700 caterpillars each day to sustain them.

It's hardly surprising that this heavy predation has led to the evolution of some amazing survival strategies among the caterpillars. All three of these moth species produce caterpillars that are



variously known as loopers, inchworms or geometers – all terms which describe the way that they move by throwing their body into a loop, then drawing up their tail end, using it to grip a twig then extending their head end forward, as if pacing out the twig, inch-by-inch, with geometrical precision. But when they feel a twig tremble under the feet of a foraging bird they freeze instantly. Then mottled umber and winter moth caterpillars, whose colours match the bark or leaves, grip with their tail, remain motionless and rely on their camouflage. Green tortrix moth caterpillars have a different strategy. When they sense danger they fasten their tail end to a twig and drop from the tree, dangling on their emergency lifeline.

Phil Gates

Birdwatch

WITH many birds now settled down to breed, the attention of many observers is now on two important surveys of very different species taking place this spring. The first involves woodcock, unique among waders as the family's only woodland breeder. They are always most active at dawn and dusk when males display by flying low over treetops giving strange croaking and whistling calls. In the last national survey ten years ago, 78,000 displaying males were found, but there is evidence that numbers have since declined.

The survey by the British Trust for Ornithology and the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust will cover 1,580 one-kilometre squares nationally. These include six in County Durham at Beldon Burn, Croxdale, Gainford, Gibside, Lanchester and Waldrige. Similar sites elsewhere, all which held woodcocks in 2003, will also be covered by regional volunteers making three evening visits. In addition, birders will be encouraged to submit sightings from other woodlands of their choice.

The second survey involves that great favourite among seabirds, the puffin, famed for its clownish appearance and multi-coloured beak. They are counted every five years at their internationally important colony on the Farne Islands. The last count in 2008 showed 36,800 pairs, a sharp drop from 55,600 pairs in 2003. There are fears that another reduction could be revealed when National Trust rangers check more than 30,000 nesting burrows.

Puffins have had a very rough time recently. Last summer's torrential rain flooded 8,000 island burrows, washing away eggs and chicks. Then hundreds, perhaps thousands, perished from starvation, unable to feed in rough seas caused by the persistent easterly winds throughout March and into early April. But puffins, like many other seabirds, are long-lived. One found dead last month had been ringed 31 years earlier on the Farnes and puffins of up to 37 years old have been recorded. It means that short-term problems may, hopefully, have little long-term impact.

Ian Kerr