

What to look for in winter

Make the most of your winter walk in your local park or the countryside a learn a little about the nearby wildlife. Even though it is colder and the days are shorter there is still plenty to see and hear.

Wooded areas in Town Parks, Country Parks and Nature Reserves.

When trees have lost their leaves it is easier to spot the smaller woodland birds high in the branches as they search for seeds and berries. Look out for our familiar Robins and Blackbirds along with Siskins, Long-tailed tits, Redpoll, Blue tits, Coal tits and Great tits.

They will move from tree to tree in search of seeds and small insects. Alder trees, growing in damp areas are a particularly valuable source of food and birds will pick out the seeds from between the scales of the small cones. Thrushes, Blackbirds, Redwings and Fieldfares will feed on any remaining berries on the holly, rowan and hawthorn trees.

As the sun sets listen for Rooks and crows calling and barging each other as they settle in tall trees to roost for the night.

Mammals. On the coldest days, mammals will lie low with foxes and badgers venturing out at dusk. Look out for mammal footprints in the mud or on snowy days.

Woodland minibeasts are hard at work breaking down rotting wood and fallen leaves. Returning the nutrients to the soil for the plants and trees to use in years to come. Woodland birds will disturb the leaves to hunt to small creatures such as woodlouse, ground beetles and slugs and snails.

Ivy growing throughout the countryside is a particularly important plant for any late flying insects. Flowering at this time of year it provides a valuable source of nectar to insects which venture out on milder days.

Ponds, Lakes and Open Water including Lough Neagh.

Mallard, Coot, Moorhen and Mute Swan will be seen on most lakes and ponds. Great crested grebe and Black headed gulls are in winter plumage. Look out for Tufted Duck and Pochard. From the northern shoreline of Oxford Island over 400 Coot can regularly be seen.

Winter migrants. On larger lakes Tufted duck, Pochard, Scaup and Goldeneye may be seen. These winter migrants depend on Ireland's ice free waters where they can dive to feed on aquatic minibeasts. Look out for large mixed flocks of Lapwing and Golden Plover over the small islands of Lough Neagh and over low lying areas of farmland. These birds will return to their northerly breeding grounds in Iceland in the spring.

Grassland and meadows.

Large numbers of Whooper Swans gather regularly on the fields at the mouth of the Closet River and other low-lying fields around Lough Neagh. These winter visitors from Iceland feed on grass and arable crops which remain largely snow free during our mild winters. They are often joined by flocks of Greylag Geese. If you are passing Closet meadows in the late afternoon you may be able to hear the swans and geese calling as they settle for the night.

Insect life. With cooler temperatures and the absence of flowering plants there are fewer flying insects. The adults of most species spend the winter hibernating in long grass, hedges and outbuildings. Some spend the winter as a larva (caterpillar), others as a chrysalis. Both will grow and develop to the adult insect in the spring.

