

Lurgan Park Nature Trail

1. Start

Hello and welcome to the Lurgan Park nature trail. Green spaces like this one are full of really interesting things, so join us as we take a walk around Lurgan Park and explore the incredible wildlife that lives here. The trail will take about an hour and a half to complete, and along the way, you will encounter 12 interesting facts about nature.

Lurgan Park is the largest Park in Northern Ireland and the second largest in Ireland after Phoenix Park in Dublin. The Park was once part of the Brownlow estate and Brownlow House, a beautiful 19th Century country Manor which still stands today.

While visiting Lurgan Park, we encourage you to follow the "Leave no trace" principles; "Leave what you find where you found it", "respect the wildlife that lives here", "dispose of your waste properly", and "be considerate of other park users."

Now let's begin our walk, walk forward and turn right onto the tarmac path. You are now on the Nature trail.

2. Lime Tree Avenue

We are now walking along an avenue lined on both sides by large, mature lime trees. The lime trees here are over 100 years old, but they can live up to 3 or 400 years. Some of these trees could grow to be over 40 meters tall and have a circumference of up to 3.5 meters.

The flowers of the lime tree provide a rich source of nectar to visiting insects. Honey made by bees visiting the flowers of the lime tree is of a particularly high quality.

As you walk, take a minute to listen to the woodpigeons calling in the trees. They have a distinctive call and have a loud wing beat when taking to the air.

To your right, along the old stone wall, you can find some of the many rhododendron bushes which grow in Lurgan Park. The flowers of the

Rhododendron can be very attractive to pollinators, such as butterflies and bumble bees. Rhododendron plants are not a native to Ireland, and the plant provides little benefit to other invertebrate and animal life.

Grey squirrels are abundant in Lurgan Park. This non-native species has spread rapidly across the country since its introduction to Ireland from North America in 1911. They are larger than our native red squirrels, and as they eat a wider variety of food, the greys can out compete the reds for food.

Keep walking along the Lime Tree Avenue. Listen out for the next point at the end of the Avenue.

3. Rookery

A large, mature horse chestnut tree is on your left where the paths meet. The leaves of the horse chestnut are large with 5 to 7 lobes, and the trees display pyramids of white flowers in spring. The seeds, known as conkers or chestnuts, form on the trees from late summer and are instantly recognisable with their spiky cases, with the mahogany brown seed of the conker being revealed as the seed case splits. Horse chestnut trees were introduced to the UK in the 16th Century from Turkey. While they are non-native, they are well-loved by everyone and do benefit our native wildlife. Caterpillars of leaf mining moths feed on the leaves, which in turn are eaten by blue tits. The flowers also provide a rich source of nectar and pollen for insects.

Lurgan Park has a variety of different habitats for nesting birds.

The many mature and tall trees are an important site for roosting crows. Known as a rookery, crows gather in large numbers at dusk and create a great racket as they settle for the night. Birds of the crow family will also nest together, and in spring, you will be able to see the nests high in the branches before they are obscured as the leaves appear on the trees.

Rooks, hooded crows, and jackdaws are all known to behave in this way.

Magpies and Jays are also members of the crow family and while they are more solitary, can be equally noisy and will squabble amongst themselves.

Growing on the ground beneath the rookery in spring are bluebells. Our native bluebells are a rare and protected species, extremely fragile and sensitive to trampling.

Turn left to continue on your walk. Here you may feel the path surface change underfoot. You might hear the park keepers working in their sheds or smell the fumes from their machinery as you pass by.

4. Large oak tree

A large mature oak tree is growing to the left of the path. Supporting more life than any other native tree species, a single oak tree can support over 2000 other species over the course of its life. Fallen leaves provide a habitat on the ground and are a food source for minibeasts, birds and mammals. Fungi, mosses and lichens grow on the trees and on branches that have fallen from the trees.

Look for acorns on the ground in autumn and appreciate the distinctive shape of the oak leaves you find on the ground.

Take a moment to feel the bark of this native woodland giant.

From late spring, we can hear the sound of the wind blowing through the leaves. On wetter days, this is the perfect place to stop and shelter while you listen to the rain dripping through the leaves.

As you continue walking, listen and look out for grey squirrels chattering and the sounds of their feet as they chase each other around the tree trunks. There is a slight incline along this section of the path.

5. Older oak with a hole at the base

A short distance along another oak tree is found to the left of the path. This tree has a large hole at the base of the trunk. This hole is so large that you see the whole way through to the other side! Holes like this can often be found in older trees. Whether created as a result of damage to the tree or through the natural course of aging, these holes provide nesting and roosting sites for a range of different animals, including birds and bats.

Dense undergrowth beneath the younger beech and birch trees on the right supports many of our spring flowering plants. Bluebells, lesser celandine, wood anemone and Lords and Ladies can be found growing here in the spring and summer. As the trees in this area are relatively young, the canopy is less dense and does not entirely shade out the ground in the summer. Other plants such as herb Robert, stitchwort, and dock are found here also. This diverse undergrowth provides a wonderful habitat for birds, ground living minibeasts, and small mammals such as mice and shrews.

Continue walking onwards.

6. Conifers and mixed woodland

This area of woodland in Lurgan Park is known as mixed woodland, due to the combination of deciduous and coniferous trees growing together here. Perhaps you'll be able to smell the scent of pine trees as you pass. Look out for cones on the ground that may have fallen from the branches above.

Take a moment to stop and appreciate the birdlife of this area. In spring, a great variety of birdsong and calls can be heard in this area of mixed woodland. Species you might listen to calling in this part of the Park include blackbirds, robins, great tits, and coal tits. Listen for the chiffchaff and the willow warbler in late spring and summer. Both are summer migrants to the UK and Ireland in the spring from sub-Saharan Africa, migrating to Ireland to take advantage of our longer summer days and abundance of insects and invertebrates.

Continue walking and enjoy the cool shade cast by the trees in this area.

7. Directional Marker. At the path junction, keep right!! The path returns to a smooth tarmac surface.

Where the paths divide, remember to keep right. The path we are walking on now is at a raised elevation providing views over the Lake, mainly when the trees are bare during winter.

8. Water's edge

Scots Pine trees grow along this part of the path with three large trees close to the path and behind the bench. As you pass, take a moment to feel the bark of the scot's pine. The bark is deeply fissured with grooves much larger and deeper than that of the oak tree.

Have a look on the ground and see if you can find any of the pine cones. It is quite common to find cones that the squirrels have eaten. The squirrels strip the scales from the cones to extract the seeds leaving the core and scales behind.

Have a seat on the bench – alder and willow trees partly obscure the view of the Lake in front of you. These species can be found along much of the shoreline and both species thrive in damp areas and water-logged soils. Interestingly, the wood of alder trees is resistant to rotting when submerged in water, instead becoming harder and stronger.

From this vantage point, you may hear the calls of some water birds that live on the Lake. Listen for the coot and moorhen, who spend more of their time well hidden amongst the vegetation growing in the shallow water at the edge of the Lake. Listen also for our familiar woodland birds, such as the robin, chaffinch and blackbird.

As you continue along the path, you may hear the golfers teeing off on the nearby golf course.

9. Old Hawthorns and fishing stands

To the right of the path are three mature hawthorn trees. These trees have particularly thick trunks, indicating their age – possibly hundreds of years old. Hawthorn is a species most commonly associated with hedgerows in Ireland and it is unusual to see individual trees of this age. Coming into leaf in April these trees come into flower in May, displaying masses of small white flowers. On a warm still day you will be able to smell the sweet scent of the flowers as you pass.

The flowers of the hawthorn are very attractive to bees and other insects. Listen for the hum of the insects as they visit the numerous flowers in search of nectar and pollen.

An old proverb states "Never cast a clout till the May is out". A "clout" is an old English term for winter clothing, and here 'the May' refers to the blossoms of the hawthorn tree. It advises us not to put away our winter clothing until the first Hawthorn blossom has been seen!

In autumn, hawthorn trees produce bright red berries called 'haws.' These provide an excellent food source for many species of birds, including thrushes and blackbirds, and winter visitors such as redwings and fieldfares.

A number of fishing stands have been installed around the Lake giving anglers the facilities to catch fish such as pike, perch, roach, rudd, tench and carp, all species that are considered to be introduced. The fish found in the Lake are species that usually prefer bodies of still water with limited flow and a good amount of submerged vegetation. You can watch for swirls at the water's surface and listen for the occasional splash of young fish jumping. Some of the shyer species of waterfowl, such as moorhen and little grebe and the can be observed from the fishing stands on this side of the Lake where there is less disturbance. The grey heron is often seen standing at the shore and has been known to nest in the trees of Lurgan Park.

10. Directional marker

CAUTION: You are now exiting the Park. Please be aware of traffic as you walk along the footpath.

11. Sequoia/Giant redwood

As you walk around the end of the Lake, you will come to a large giant sequoia tree to the left of the path. Native to California, these trees have been known to live for more than 3000 years and specimens have been recorded as growing to almost 100m tall. First introduced to the UK in the 1800s, these trees became a status symbol and were planted in many estates by wealthy owners.

On the ground underneath the tree, you may be able to find some of the round cones that contain the seeds. The bark of this tree is soft and feels almost spongy, with a beautiful red hue. Take a moment to feel the soft, spongy bark, you will notice it is so much softer than the oak and scots pine from earlier in your walk. You may also be able to smell the pine-like scent.

If you look up at the giant sequoia trunk, you may notice the small hollows in the bark.

These small hollows in the bark, often with a little bird poo below them, indicate a roost site for tree creepers, nestling close against the tree trunk at night. These small brown birds with white bellies forage for insects on the bark of trees, creeping up the tree trunk before flying to the base of the next.

12. Directional marker.

Re-enter the Park via the side gate and continue forward with the harbour on your left. This area has many benches, so take a minute and rest and enjoy the view over the Lake.

13. Gulls and Ducks

Welcome back into the Park. Mallard ducks, mute swans and black-headed gulls often gather here at the edge of the Lake. Male mallard ducks have a bottle green-blue head and a mostly grey body, while the female is mainly brown. This species is common across the UK and Ireland, and well known to most of us. Listen out for their iconic quack. Look out for tufted ducks with their smart black and white plumage.

Mute swans are Ireland's most common swan species and have orange and black beaks. In spring, you may see swans sitting on their nests and later in the season with a raft of fluffy grey cygnets being closely watched by the parents.

You might be lucky enough to observe swans coming to land on the water. Listen for the whistling of their wings first before they stretch out their necks and turn up their feet to use them as skis as they land on the water. With a bit

of splashing and flapping, they quickly settle to resume their graceful appearance.

Close to the water's edge, listen to the water lapping at the lake shore and the cur-chuk of the more secretive moorhen in the vegetation.

Continue walking straight, passing the play park on your left, then left along the water's edge.

14. Grey squirrels

Grey squirrels can often be seen scampering through the trees in the wooded area to the right of the path. Listen to the calls of our woodland birds, the harsher and throaty calls of the magpies and jays, and the drumming of the male woodpecker on rare occasions in spring. Fallen trees and branches have been left to decay naturally in this area, creating a valuable habitat for invertebrates or minibeads and many of the logs support a variety of mosses.

Bluebells may be seen growing amongst the trees in this area in spring.

Continue along the path.

15. Weeping willow umbrella, red leaves of the copper beech

As you near the end of the gravel path a large weeping willow can be found on the right. Stand under its umbrella-like canopy, enjoy the shade on a warm summers day and listen to the sound of the leaves on a breezy day. The caterpillars of many moth and butterfly species feed on the willow tree's leaves. The fluffy catkins that appear in early spring are an important source of early nectar and pollen for bees and other insects and birds may nest or roost in the branches.

A group of copper beech trees grows to the left of the path. With striking deep purple-red foliage, copper beech trees have been cultivated form of beech trees and while they do not occur naturally, they still provide the same value to wildlife at the common beech. Caterpillars eat the foliage, and the seeds are eaten by mammals such as mice and squirrels and by many species of birds.

Turn right onto the tarmac path and continue towards the cricket pavilion.

Here two unusual non-native trees can be found. Before you reach the pavilion, on the right-hand side of the path you will find a young Chilean pine tree also known as a monkey puzzle, with sharp, spiky, leathery leaves.

On the other side of the cricket pavilion is a Eucalyptus tree, native to Australia. It is the favorite food plant of the Koala but the high levels of essential oils in the leaves make them difficult for many other animals to digest. Bees and pollinating insects are, however attracted to eucalyptus. The scent from the leaves is released when they are crushed or broken.

16. Return home

Now take the next path on your left and across the field, you will be back at the start.

Congratulations, you have just walked 2.2 miles; did you know that walking is a great way to stay healthy, protect the environment and help reduce your carbon footprint? Try walking a little further each day. Every step counts.

As you journey home, think about what you have experienced today. What can you do to support our local wildlife and nature? What about feeding the birds? Building hedgehog houses? Recycling? Perhaps you could support a conservation organisation by donating or volunteering? There are lots of ways to help.

Thank you for coming to Lurgan Park today, we hope you have enjoyed the experience.

Please come again soon and try one of our other audio trails.

Safe home.