

## **Solitude Park Nature Trail**

### **1. Start**

Hello and welcome to the Solitude Park nature trail.

Green spaces like this one are full of interesting things, so join us as we take a walk around the park and explore the incredible wildlife that lives here. The trail will take about an hour to complete, and along the way, you will encounter 10 stops bursting with fascinating facts.

The park is perfectly placed along the banks of the River Bann as it meanders through our town, giving you a great opportunity to experience lots of our local wildlife.

While visiting Solitude 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, turn left at the bottom of the 's' shaped path. Join the trail and walk along the path overlooking the park.*

### **2. Garden Feature.**

To your right will now be a small feature garden, with three grassy mounds surrounded by paths. Evergreen shrubs, willow and cherry trees have been planted here. The cherry trees look their best in spring, with a beautiful display of pink blossom. There are some benches in this little ornamental garden and a bright yellow "chatty bench". If you feel like having a conversation, sit on the chatty bench, or just relax on one of the others. Take the opportunity to explore the botanical scents like lavender, which has been planted in this area and is beneficial for pollinators like bees and butterflies.

*Continue back onto the main path.*

### **3. Parks bird life**

On your left, the steep banks here provide a rich habitat for insects. The low wall at the base of the bank is the perfect place to take a seat and listen to some of the sounds of nature. From February, listen out for a range of different

birds, like robins, dunnocks, chaffinches or great tits. Great tits are easy to recognise from their squeaky song; some people even think it sounds like it's singing "teacher, teacher, teacher".

Amongst the grasses on warm summer days, you can listen for grasshoppers and the buzz of pollinators busy about their work. Look out for butterflies and hoverflies too, which often mimic bees and wasps.

*When you feel ready, continue walking straight along the path, and then turn right onto the bridge.*

#### **4. Suspension bridge**

We are now crossing one of the bridges in Solitude Park. This bridge is a suspension bridge and the platform of the bridge hangs from strong wires called cables. The cables hang between the two towers. Take a moment to appreciate the movement of the bridge and the vibrations as you walk across. Listen to the sounds of your footsteps on the wooden boards. As you cross the river Bann below, you are at the perfect height to appreciate the treetops from a different perspective. In spring, you can enjoy the lovely pink cherry blossom and the bird song from this higher level.

*At the end of the bridge, follow the path right until you get to the next stop*

#### **5. Holly and Ivy**

As you cross, you will notice ash trees as you approach the end of the bridge. If you are visiting in winter or early spring, the twigs of the tree will be tipped with black buds, as if they have been dipped in ashes. In the late spring and through the summer, you will be able to see the compound leaves of the ash tree. Each leaf is made up of smaller oppositely arranged leaflets held together on a single stem.

Once off the bridge, the trees to the right are covered in holly and ivy, both *important* native species for wildlife. Providing berries for food in the autumn and winter, as well as dense cover for nesting in spring, we can hear and observe birds such as great tits, robins and magpies. As you walk, listen to the distinctive coo of woodpigeons.

*Continue along the path as it curves to the right and climbs.*

## **6. Viewing platform**

Take a moment to walk out onto the viewing platform. Sitting high above the River Bann the elevated position gives you a clear view up and downstream. As you walk onto the platform, focus on the sound of your footsteps on the wood underfoot. Feel the warm sun on your face on bright days and wind in your hair on breezy days. Watch the ripples and listen as the river flows through the park.

You may be able to hear Blackbird, Robin, Chaffinch, Goldfinch, or even a Goldcrest.

On the opposite side of the river, you may hear or see children playing in the amphitheater, or the distant rumble of skateboards in the skate park. Have you tried skateboarding?

*Leave the platform, turn right, and follow the path on the left when they divide.*

## **7. Explore the large trees**

You will pass a thick laurel hedge on your left, with lots of large glossy and waxy leaves. Laurel provides little benefit to our native wildlife, as few species can consume the toxic foliage. It does, however, provide good cover for nesting birds.

Growing directly beside the path on your right, you'll pass a large Ash tree with wonderfully textured bark. This tree is approximately 120 – 140 years old. As you pass it, you could take a moment to reach out and feel the deep ridges and hollows in the bark. The bark of mature trees like these, with all their many nooks and crannies, provide fantastic habitats for minibeasts such as millipedes and woodlouse, which in turn feed many of the bird species found within the park.

*Continue along the lefthand path.*

## 8. Beech Avenue

You are now walking along an avenue of mature beech trees. High in the trees, magpies and other birds of the crow family will nest here in spring. Nest boxes have been installed on some of the trees, creating nest sites for smaller birds, such as bluetits and great tits.

To the left, dense undergrowth can be found at the base of some alder trees. Cow parsley with its frothy white flower heads grows here. A firm favourite for many pollinators and other insects. Another ground cover plant found here are cleavers. You may know this better as 'Stickybacks' or goosegrass and many of us will remember sticking it to our friends' clothing in our childhood, it sticks like velcro and can hang on for hours. Nettles grow here too, an important food plant for the caterpillars of many moth and butterfly species.

Listen out for woodpigeons cooing as you walk onwards and great tits and robins continuing to sing. Perhaps you are ready to take a seat for a moment – up ahead, you can find a picnic table off the main path to the right, a good place to pause and take in your surroundings

*Carry on and as you pass the play park on your left, listen out for the children laughing and playing on the swings as the Mums and Dads chat away.*

## 9. Upstream Bridge

You will pass a dogwood hedge on your right. Dogwood is a tree species, closely related to willow, with easily recognisable deep red wood bark. Lesser celandine grows at the base of this hedge and is one of the first of the wildflowers to bloom in spring, providing a valuable source of nectar and pollen for early insects.

*As you cross over the wooden bridge, can you feel it bouncing up and down under your feet, don't panic, it is quite safe.*

Taking a moment to note the sounds and sensations of the bridge underfoot as it sways and bobs slightly with your movements. The sound of the water flowing under the bridge can be heard as it splashes and bubbles over the

weirs. After times of heavy rainfall the flow of the river will be stronger and the noise much louder.

Brown trout live in this section of the Bann. These fish remain solely in freshwater, while their relative, the sea trout migrate to the sea for most of their lives, returning to freshwater only to spawn. Interestingly, there is no genetic difference between sea trout and brown trout, and what determines whether they migrate or not remains a mystery.

Turn right as you leave the bridge, and follow the path. You have nearly completed the trail, just a few more stops to go.

## **10. Beech Avenue**

We have almost returned to our starting point. You are now walking along a path bordered by young beech trees. The stone retaining wall on your left has become home to several types of plants that can grow in harsh conditions and without soil. They include, ivy leaved toad flax, willowherb, dandelion, ferns, mosses, grasses.

Step off the path and take a closer look at these hardy plants, feel the texture of their leaves, and look out for ladybirds, beetles, and caterpillars during the summer months.

How many different insects did you find?

If it is a beautiful sunny day, enjoy the dappled shade provided by the trees as you conclude your walk.

## **11. Finish**

Congratulations, you have just walked half a mile. Did you know walking is a great way to stay active and healthy? A brisk walk in nature can help boost your mood, reduce stress and improve your concentration. Try walking a little more each day, as 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 Solitude Park today; we hope you have enjoyed the experience. Please come again soon and try one of our other audio trails. Safe home.