Following the Trail

The Wild Wrekin Trail is a circular cycle tour of The Wrekin Hills – part of the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The trail utilises existing sections of the National Cycle Network and other lightly used routes but involves some interaction with other road users. Take care at all times and always follow the highway code: ride single file where the road is narrow, slow down for passing walkers, horse riders and other vehicles and watch out for gravel or greasy roads after rain. There are several challenging gradients and busy junctions en route so always ride decisively and positively. Secure cycle parking facilities and help with spares and repairs can be found nearby in Wellington, the historic capital of east Shropshire and The Wrekin's own market town – for details, consult the map in the centre of this booklet. To discover more about The Wrekin and other local heritage attractions in east Shropshire visit:

www.wellingtonla21.org.uk/discover

Acknowledgements

Written by **Marc Petty**. Photography by **Gordon Dickins**.

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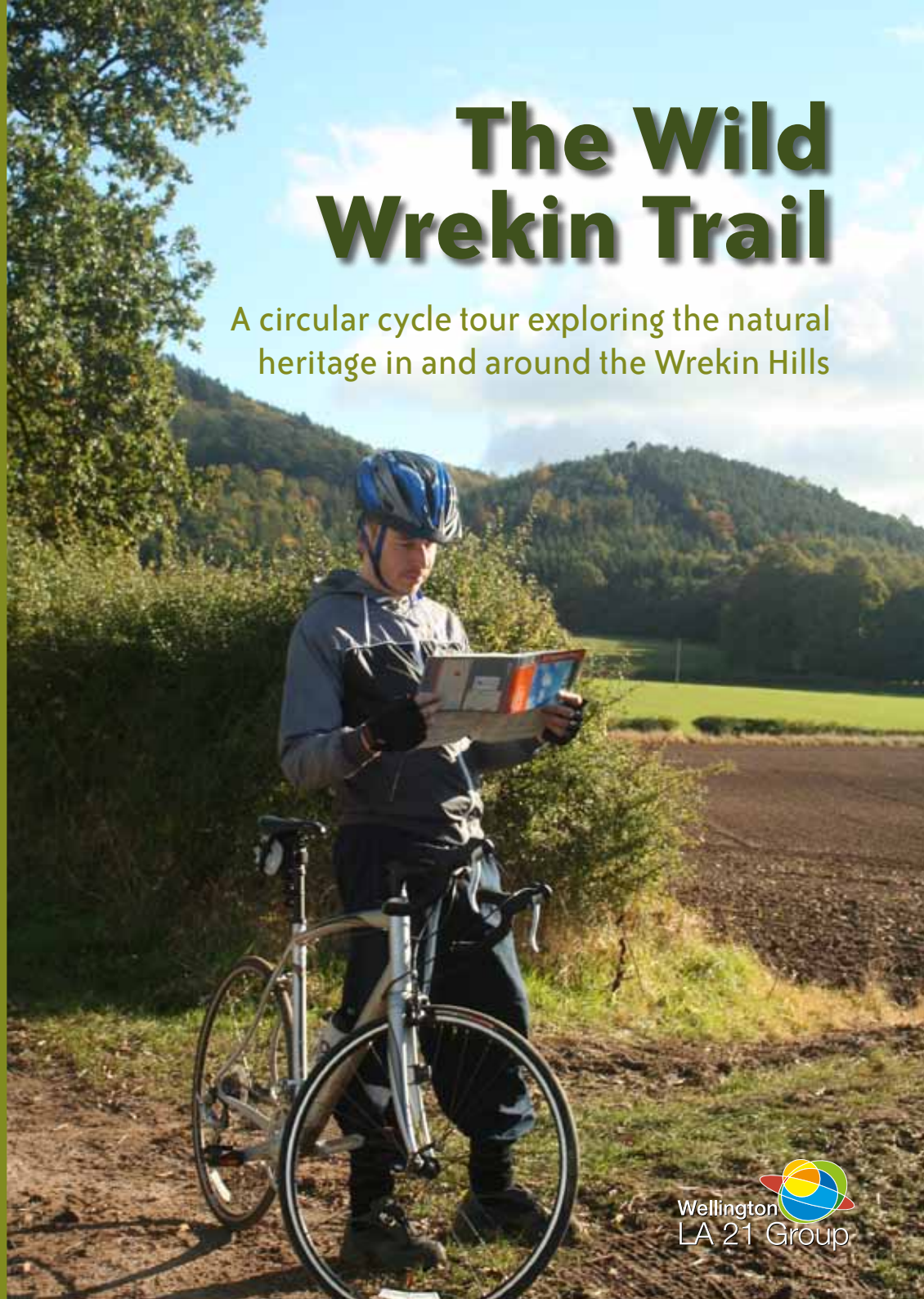
The Wild Wrekin Trail

A circular cycle tour exploring the natural heritage in and around the Wrekin Hills



Wellington LA 21 Group

The Trail Begins Here

The Wrekin sits at the heart of one of Shropshire's most treasured landscapes and is a favourite location for thousands of people looking to make a date with nature. Sharing this mini-wilderness are many more animals, plants and insects, which say as much about this magical place as the iconic outline of the hill itself. So come with us now and explore the natural heritage of The Wrekin Forest and beyond…

The Wrekin Awakes

The Wrekin first sprang to life around 566 million years ago, at a time when Shropshire was situated somewhere in the south Atlantic, in an area now occupied by the Falkland Islands! The portent attending its birth was an event known (and no sniggering at the back, please) as the Caledonian Orogeny. The Wrekin emerged during this period of mountain building as part of a chain that includes some other well known local landmarks, such as Caradoc and the Long Mynd –all of which are now part of the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Don't get lost like this idiot! Turn to the centre page map to see the Wild Wrekin Trail in full

The Wrekin from Leighton

English Oak

While it was never a volcano as such, The Wrekin comprises a thick, mile-wide pile of lava and ash that was violently discharged from long-disappeared volcanic vents in the earth's surface. In its original location, some of its sandstones (known as Wrekin Quartzite) would once have formed part of a beach and evidence of this watery past can be found in the form of ripples in the rock, which can be seen just past the first bend on the main track up the hill and in the old quarries at the foot of The Ercall. As we shall see later, the geology of The Wrekin's smaller sibling tells a remarkable story of significance to all life on earth.

The Forest Landscape

The composition of the woodlands around The Wrekin is strongly linked to the area's complex geology. Much of The Ercall, for example, is occupied by Sessile oak *(Quercus petraea)* a close relative of the English variety *(Q. Robur)* whose acorns lack the stalks that lend the latter its more formal 'Pedunculate' title. These stately Sessiles are generally taller, straighter and far less gnarled than their cousins and thrive on the type of thin acidic soils that overlie Wrekin Quartzite.

Other factors, such as drainage, also play a hugely influential role in the make-up of The Wrekin Forest. On more fertile ground, oak and hazel tend to predominate, while damper, richer soils support ash and, in permanently wet areas, alder. In turn, these woodlands create special habitat niches that appeal to different wildlife. Oak woods, for example, tend to have large openings in the canopy that let in light and create a rich, herbaceous under-storey, providing ideal conditions for countless living things – some of which we shall encounter on our journey.

The Wrekin Forest is home to a broad mix of deciduous and coniferous woodland

Conversely, beech, which grows plentifully on the drier, free draining slopes of the hill, blocks out light but is favoured by species that flourish in the shady, open conditions below the canopy. Yet, perhaps the most obvious disparity in the Wrekin Forest is between the broadleaved, deciduous woods (which are leafless in winter) and the large blocks of conifers that, with the exception of Larch, remain evergreen throughout the year. Younger pine plantations that grow in thick, dense stands of single species offer relatively little wildlife value but thinner, older woodlands can create favourable conditions for a variety of inhabitants.

Five Hills, Many Habitats

Beyond its wooded heart, the Wrekin Forest is a landscape of mosaic habitats that support a richly varied array of flora and fauna. Within the confines of the hills, species-rich grasslands teeming with plant and invertebrate life can be found beneath The Ercall, while the lowland heath landscapes

Shropshire Wildlife Trust/Phillip Precey

The common toad: this visitor to the Wrekin Reservoir is well-known for its annual, late-winter passage across Ercall Lane

atop Lawrence's Hill and The Wrekin itself provide a glimpse of another habitat that has become increasingly scarce elsewhere. Further afield, wet, wooded stream valleys flow down towards the River Severn, connecting the forest to a wider landscape of thick wide hedgerows and farmland, all with its own unique story to tell, as we shall soon discover...

Glenn Bishton

The Pied Flycatcher: an iconic Wrekin bird that thrives in upland oak woods

Voyages of Discovery

The sheer variety of wild places (and their attendant flora and fauna) that comprise The Wrekin and its environs couldn't possibly be described within the margins of this booklet. Our aim is to provide you with an entry point into the local landscape and a launch pad for your own investigations. So, why not pack a few field guides and a pair of binoculars into a rucksack and head for Wrekin country yourself? Just remember to get off your bike before using them!

THE WREKIN LANDSCAPE

In The Forest

The Wrekin Forest is a landscape with wildwood at its ancient heart. While it might not seem obvious from the saddle of a bicycle, people have also helped shape the appearance of its woodlands for several millennia. Look more closely, however, and clues to the area's human imprint are more apparent than you might think...

Ancient oaks on The Wrekin

Beech

Through the Wildwood

Thousands of years ago, vast areas of Britain were covered by the kind of familiar wooded landscape that surrounds The Wrekin and its sister hills today. Despite appearances to the contrary, this arboreal connection to the wildwood of pre-history exists in little more than name only. By the time of the Roman invasion, in the middle of the Fourth Century, perhaps half of Britain's ancient woodland had already disappeared under the plough, or gone for fuel and timber. This pattern of decline has continued ever since, and Britain is now one of the least wooded countries in Europe.

The Wrekin Forest has also experienced changing fortunes over the centuries and has at various times been carefully preserved or denuded of trees according to demand for food and timber. In early medieval times, it stood at the centre of a vast Royal hunting forest that was one of many created by the country's Norman rulers. These were not forests as we might understand them and included vast swathes of land with little or no woodland cover, where the crown could wield power and make money. So, despite the supposed imposition of many draconian 'forest laws' to protect the wild game and its habitat, many illegal practices, such as the clearing of forestry for agriculture, were allowed to persist in return for an annual fee.

Lawrence's Hill and The Wrekin : According to John Leland large parts of this landscape were 'barren of wood' by the 16th Century

Cutting Back

Ironically, it is probably because they paid their way that the Wrekin woodlands were able to survive at all. Centuries after the Norman forests ceased to exist, the industrial boom that swept east Shropshire from the late 1600s brought new demands, as trees were continually cut back to provide pit props and charcoal for local furnaces .

These 'coppiced' trees were often worked by successive generations of woodsmen and are an abiding feature of the Wrekin Forest landscape, providing us with an enduring reminder of the area's commercial lineage. So, while many of the woodland sites around the hill are regarded as ancient – because they have remained wooded for so long – the equally long influence of human activity means we cannot say the same for many of the trees and shrubs growing on them. It is for this reason much of the Wrekin Forest is classified as 'semi-natural' or, where conifers are present, 'planted' ancient woodland.

Among the Ancients

As our closest connection to the wildwood of yore, ancient semi-natural woodlands often support a varied range of habitat features rich in wildlife. Some of the richest are also among the very oldest and, although you can't walk or cycle through them, you'll almost certainly pass several on your way round The Wrekin: the venerable order of veteran and ancient trees!

Recognising a long-lived tree is not always easy, as what constitutes great age in one species (say, a 100 year old Silver birch) may only equate to mere youthfulness in another. While many factors can influence a tree's appearance, there are several characteristic signs (especially in beech and oak woods) that should alert you to the possible presence of an ancient in your midst. A wide, hollow trunk and a shrinking canopy, are not only classic hallmarks of aging but essential survival mechanisms for an old tree – becoming smaller makes it harder to be uprooted in high wind! The large amounts of decay associated with these processes are also vital for wider woodland life, from bats and birds that nest and roost in rot holes where branches once hung, to fungi that recycle organic matter and soften dead wood for the many invertebrates that need it to complete their life cycles.

Shropshire Wildlife Trust

Nothing says 'spring' like violets!

Seasonal Treats: Spring Flowers

Another key feature of ancient woodland is the presence of spring-flowering plants that have seeded and re-grown naturally over many centuries. Life among trees, with their huge thirst for water and ability to cast deep shade over the forest floor, can be difficult for plants, so some species have evolved to flower before the canopy is in full leaf. Locations like the Ercall Woods (where over 150 woodland species have been recorded) are great places to view carpets of spring flowers, such as the distinctive low-growing white petals of Wood anemone. It spreads slowly on root growth, so that what appears to be many plants might in fact be just one individual. Woodland edges (such as those along Spout Lane) can be equally rewarding vantage points (especially for bluebells) and are, of course, much easier to see from a bicycle!

The Life of an Ancient: These illustrations show the life cycle of an ancient oak. It is often in the second 'veteran' stage that trees begin to acquire the signs of ageing – including: 'hollowing', 'growing down' and 'stag headedness' – that characterise the final phase of their existence. Head to the centre map to discover the locations of some venerable Wrekin giants en route.

Above and Below the Canopy

Cycling round The Wrekin you could easily remain blissfully unaware of the high drama playing out before your eyes. These woodlands might not look like the set of your average soap opera but the stories unfolding in each tree really are the natural world's equivalent of 'Upstairs, Downstairs'!

In The Wrekin woods

Common Ash

Life on Many Levels

An inability to tell the 'forest from the trees' is usually regarded, if we are to believe a very old and familiar adage, as something of a drawback. Yet, for many of the countless plants, mammals and invertebrates that call The Wrekin Forest home, the individual trees that comprise the largest block of woodland in east Shropshire are very much part of a 'bigger picture'. For aside from helping provide them with a vast wilderness in which to roam, these real life Wrekin giants (by far the tallest living organisms within the vicinity of the hill!) also afford woodland residents plentiful opportunities for high rise accommodation!

The Beech Avenue on The Wrekin Hill

From the humus and leaf litter at the bottom of the trunk, to the fissures and cracks in the bark and the dense crown above, trees are quite literally teeming with life. Existing so close together, these species – through the natural processes they perform – have become reliant on each other for survival and, together, it's their symbiotic relationships that help make the forest a living entity.

At the Bottom

According to another popular aphorism, 'life begins at the bottom' and in the woodlands around The Wrekin this is certainly true. The ground floor of the forest is essentially the 'recycling level' where rotting foliage and dead wood are broken down, nourishing and enriching the soil so that life in the woodlands can continue. While this might all sound a bit moribund, it's really anything but. The leaf litter associated with oak woods are especially rich in life, while beech trees also create their own distinctive carpet of mast and fallen leaves where many plants, animals and organisms find food and shelter.

William Nevett

Great Spotted Woodpeckers

Horned (Mini) Beasts!

The ground floor community is a mind-bogglingly varied bunch and includes all manner of living entities: from microscopic bacteria, fungi and lichens to slugs, earthworms and spiders. One of the most distinctive is a member of the beetle family, the third largest order of insects in Britain. Although they occur in every type of land habitat, there is one group that has a close association with woodland and, more specifically, dead and decaying wood.

Nigel Jones

***Rhagium mordax:* a common longhorn species of deciduous broadleaf woodland**

Longhorn beetles lay their eggs in the stumps of dead conifers, under the bark of deciduous trees and even in the twigs of shrubs. Their larvae can feed in these situations for up to two years before emerging as adults and play an important part in recycling woody materials. With their long, swept back antennae longhorns are not too difficult to spot and late spring and early summer will find many species feeding on pollen, with the white, open flowers of hawthorn and umbellifers, such as hogweed, being popular destinations.

Moving On Up

The woodland floor is also exploited by larger creatures more commonly associated with other levels of the forest canopy. Woodpeckers, for instance (of which the Wrekin Forest has all three native British species: Green, Lesser and Great spotted) are very partial to longhorn beetle larvae, and will often break open dead wood, using their long tongues to extract their unwitting victims!

One local character that makes full use of the Wrekin woodlands is the Yellow-necked mouse. This small mammal has something of a predilection for tree seeds and uses its prodigious climbing ability to scurry from floor to canopy in search of its favourite food, which is supposited away in complex networks of underground burrows that can often be found within the roots of trees and shrubs. Like its more common cousin the Wood mouse, it has large ears, protruding eyes and a long tail but is distinguished, as its name suggests, by a band of yellow fur across the neck (which appears grey in juveniles). As a chiefly nocturnal animal, you'll be lucky to catch a glimpse of a Yellow-necked mouse on your travels; especially as The Wrekin is right on the northern edge of its UK range. However, there is one place where you should find it much easier to experience the sights and sounds of the Wrekin Forest from your saddle, as we shall now see...

John Lightfoot

Uses for dead wood #1: A nest for a family of Kestrels (note the black band on the tail that denotes the male of the species – known as the tercel)

WOODLAND ECOLOGY

Life on the Edge


On Spout Lane

Travelling around The Wrekin your best view of the woodlands will be peering in from the edge around Spout Lane and the Forest Glen. These peripheral vantage points can often be the best places to see and hear the myriad wonders of the forest throughout the woodland year.


Rowan

History is Bunk!

The locations where you're most likely to find wildlife at its most plentiful are those where the dense, enclosed structure of high Wrekin forest gradually give way to open countryside. Historically, 'scrubby' areas have all too frequently been endowed with little value but, in this instance at least, history really is bunk! Scrub is a natural part of both wood and grassland, providing food and nesting opportunities for a large, and often unique, community of insects, birds, and mammals that thrive among the understorey shrubs, tall herbs, grasses and wildflowers that characterise these sheltered, open sunny landscapes.

Nigel Jones

William Nevett


The Silver-washed fritillary (above) **and the Brimstone** (right) **have both been recorded around The Wrekin**

Ticket to Ride

One group of habitat specialists that flourish in scrubland are butterflies. The Wrekin is home to many species, which can be found wandering different areas of the forest canopy – both along the edge and deeper within woodland rides and open glades. Appearing on the wing from mid-March, one of the earliest you might encounter is the Brimstone. With its heavily veined and leaf-like yellowish-green underwings, it's fairly easy to spot because it always rests with its wings closed.

Yellow spring flowers, such as Primrose and Daffodil are a favourite source of nectar for adults, while larvae feed and pupate on Buckthorn, a typical shrub of scrub areas. You might also find these resilient insects along woodland rides in autumn, feeding on purple thistles ahead of hibernation, but this is a season that really belongs to brown butterflies, such as the Speckled Wood. It can be found perching on tall grasses in dappled glades but its preference for honeydew (a sugary substance secreted by aphids on leaves) often leads it high into the canopy. If you're lucky, a glance into the tree tops may also reward you with the characteristic flash of a Purple hairstreak. This colourful high flier is unique among UK butterflies for its dependence on oak and lives in self-contained colonies centred on single trees.

However, it's certainly not alone in its remarkable relationship. The Silver-washed fritillary, a large, orange butterfly with black markings, is a deeper woodland specialist that, on the northern edge of its range, can sometimes be seen in the type of sheltered lanes that encircle The Wrekin. The key to finding this scarce insect is to look for oaks with spring flowering Common Dog-violets at the base. It's here, within the crevices of the bark, that females lay their eggs, allowing emergent caterpillars to crawl down and feed on the leaves of the violets the following spring.

William Nevett


Blue Jay Way: the sound of ripping cloth followed by the sight of a big white rump

Specialists and Generalists

Experienced from the edge, The Wrekin's distinctive panorama also tells us much of the hill's birdlife. Buzzards and other raptors, such as Ravens and Kestrels, use strong updrafts to glide, hover and soar over the slopes of the hill, while the thrilling descent flights (or 'stoops') of Peregrine falcons might also be witnessed here. Most of their prey is taken on the wing and while the hapless Wood pigeon is the usual meal of choice a wide range of birds, from tiny Goldcrest to Grey heron, can be taken. The presence of this top predator provides us with a clue to the diverse aviculture that can be seen and heard at all levels of the canopy throughout the year.

The advent of the breeding season, in spring, is perhaps the best time to experience this aural treasure trove but other seasons, too, have distinctive sounds. Try, for example, listening out for the sound of ripping cloth that often accompanies a reclusive Jay breaking cover to collect acorns in October. This is a time of year when many smaller birds flock together as food becomes scarcer, so look out for gangs of roving tits whose numbers may be swelled by woodland specialists like Nuthatch and Treecreeper that patrol the lengths of trees trunks in search of insects.

Glenn Bishton


(Eurasian) Treecreeper

Seasonal Treats: Autumn Fungi

You can find fungi growing around The Wrekin all year round but many species enjoy a 'flush' in warm, damp autumn soils. Mushrooms and toadstools come in all shapes and sizes but we see merely the fruiting bodies of far larger organisms beneath the surface. This might seem slightly sinister but fungi are essential in making our world habitable, nourishing the earth by breaking down decaying material and providing countless plants and trees with the nutrients and water they need to survive. While the saddle of a bicycle mightn't seem the most obvious place to appreciate their worth to humanity, there are several common fungi you may spy along the woodland edge. Look out for the small, antler-like fruitbodies of Candlesnuff fungus (which inhabits decaying tree stumps and logs) or the grey, leathery brackets of Birch polypore. Sycamore tarspot is a fungal infection that manifests itself as black blotches on the leaves of maple species – it might seem an ominous portent of doom but it really is harmless!

The Wild Wrekin Trail...

and a couple of the other things to look out for en route

William Nevett

A Fallow Deer Stag

Wild Wrekin Residents Focus: Fallow Deer

The woodland edge is the place where you may glimpse one of the Wrekin Forest's most iconic species: Fallow deer. While they tend to make more use of open spaces during the hours of darkness, these distinctive animals – with their tan coats (which turn grey in winter) and white spotting on the flanks – can be seen throughout the day, feeding on the shoots of trees and dwarf shrubs. Look for gaps in the hedgerow along Spout Lane, which are regularly used by Fallow deer to move out from the woodlands into the wider landscape.

Wrekin Places: Charlton Hill

Although it is not strictly part of the Wrekin range, Charlton Hill has much in common with its near neighbours, particularly in geological terms. For here, like The Ercall, you will find outcrops of pink, pre-Cambrian Rhyolite that are among the oldest examples in the UK and speak of a time when life on Earth was far less numerous. In spring and summer, the central part of the hill is ablaze with the brilliant yellow hue of gorse, which offers good nesting conditions for native song birds, like the Linnet, and summer migrants, such as Common whitethroat. On closer inspection you should also find plentiful invertebrate life, too, which benefits from the plant's dense structure and long flowering period.

Gorse stands on Charlton Hill

- Short route (approx. 7 miles)
- Medium Route (approx. 10 miles)
- Long Route (approx. 16 miles)
- Car park
- Public House
- Church
- Veteran oak trees
- Veteran ash trees

If you have some time to spare, why not take advantage of the secure cycle parking facilities at Little Wenlock Village Hall to take in some of the stunning views of the Shropshire Hills AONB from the *'Tom Pickering Benchwalks'*? Visit the Little Wenlock Parish Council website for further details (www.littlewenlock.org)

The Linear Landscape

Green lane at Dryton

Common Hawthorn

Just as the minor roads around The Wrekin provide us with a way of exploring the surrounding area, the hedgerows, ditches and streams that radiate from the hill perform a similar function for local wildlife. These linear features not only give many species a connection to the wider landscape but, much like woodland, offer plentiful food and shelter – providing the continuity they need to survive.

A Bustle in Your Hedgerow

As many a well-worn historical account will confirm, hedgerows have sprung-up wherever the need to establish a stock-proof barrier or territorial boundary has arisen. Although such elementary definitions help to explain their existence (many of the hawthorn hedges we see nowadays, for instance, were planted to legally define new fields created by the Parliamentary enclosures of the 1700s) they tell us little of the immense landscape value of hedgerows, or the vital role they play in the daily lives of myriad insects, birds and mammals.

William Nevett

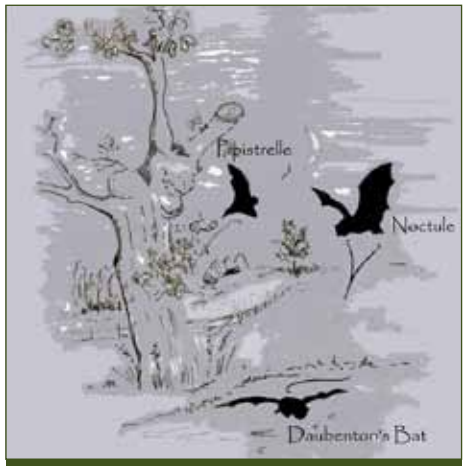
Haws (the fruit of the Common Hawthorn) are one of many hedgerow berries that, if allowed to persist over winter, will provide food for a wide variety of local wildlife, such as this Redwing (a common migrant thrush of farmland).

Like woodlands, hedgerows can acquire great age and, owing to the high diversity of shrubs and plants found at the bottom, become very rich in wildlife. Those found alongside other ancient linear features, such as old roads, tracks and green lanes, tend to make particularly good destinations for voyages of discovery and The Wrekin area has many to choose from – Spout Lane, for example, has probably existed for a millennia and once formed the medieval link from Little Wenlock to Shrewsbury. Broad, tall hedgerows that have thick cover at the base and contain trees will generally support the most wildlife, and these will invariably be the best places to begin your investigations.

The Green Roadmap

Provided you have a good set of lights and some reflective clothing, cycling at dusk can be one of the most rewarding times to discover some of the more enigmatic residents of the countryside. One group of crepuscular woodland creatures you may see using networks of well-connected hedgerows to venture out into the gloaming is bats, and The Wrekin is home to at least six of the UK's eighteen species.

Long-lived oak and beech trees like those in the Wrekin Forest are especially attractive to them because they contain plenty of standing dead wood, which rots from the inside creating holes and hollows to shelter in. Bats are very sensitive to changes in temperature and humidity and use many roost sites throughout the year as their needs change. The typically high density of trees found in woodland help meet their requirements, while offering additional protection from predators in the process.



Wrekin Bats! Here are some early evening silhouettes you may encounter around the hill, and the typical flight paths they use to catch prey items

While woodlands are also rich in invertebrates (the staple food of all British bats) some species roam farther afield in search of a meal, using linear features to guide their way. Noctule bats, for example, will roost in exposed dead trees on the woodland edge, heading out on a typically powerful, direct flight above the tree line in early evening to visit their feeding grounds (sometimes up to ten miles away). This slender-winged, starling-sized species is among our largest bats but, under Wrekin skies, the Chiropteran sight you're most likely to see is the fast, jerky flight of the smallest: the Common Pipistrelle. This diminutive bat can catch up to 3000 small flies, midges and mosquitoes a night, which it takes on the wing, but this is not the only method used to snag a meal…

Down the Bright Stream

If you're passing the Ercall reservoir at night you may catch a glimpse of something skimming the surface like a tiny hovercraft. Was it a bird, was it a plane? Probably not – but it might have been a Daubenton's bat, which hunt over and travel along bodies of water, scooping-up prey with their feet and tails! Daubenton's are particularly partial to caddis and mayflies, which are a hugely important link in the aquatic food chain and thrive in clear streams around the Wrekin hills.

Some of the most impressive of these linear features can be found in the steep-sided valleys flowing southwards to the Severn. Here, woody debris on stream floors provide egg-laying sites for riverflies and places for their larvae to emerge from the water into adult form (when they can be seen swarming close to the water's edge in search of a mate). Mayflies characteristically hold their wings aloft and are also known as 'up wing' flies, while adult caddisflies are similar to moths in appearance and can be found in great numbers at dusk. However, they are perhaps more notable for their larval stage, as some species carry a transportable case constructed from a variety of materials and bound by silk. Spent examples come in many shapes and sizes, can persist in the water for many years and may be found on the edge of a weedy pond in springtime.

Cherme's Dingle

Nigel Jones

Mayflies are one of many insects that rely on The Wrekin's stream valleys to complete their life cycles

Down by the Wayside

Road side verges are a vital habitat for many plants, small mammals and invertebrates. So, whatever time of year you're cycling round The Wrekin, there's sure to be something to pique your interest at the bottom of the hedgerow!

Hazel

Flowers by Any Other Name

A dense, bushy hedgerow with a wide, herb-rich margin at its base is, for many species, perhaps the most significant habitat across the whole countryside. Where flowering plants and grasses are allowed to flourish, these sunny, sheltered locations will provide food for insects throughout the year. Any native plant with a simple, open-structured flower will prove attractive in this respect but a wide range of colours, shapes and fragrances will benefit the greatest number. For instance, longer tongued species, such as moths, will naturally choose narrow, elongated petals, while those with shorter tongues, which include some bumblebees, will look for flowers with short florets.

Some of the best destinations for insects are among the commonest sights in our wayside verges and, amid the blossom of spring, one of the most ubiquitous is Cow Parsley. Its tiny, white flowers are bunched into 'umbels' that form floral tables for insects to land upon and are a valuable source of early season nectar for hoverflies, bees and butterflies. In late April and May, one of the most distinctive (and regular) diners is the short-lived St Mark's fly. This important crop pollinator is distinguished by the courtship dance of the male of the species, which hover on long dangling legs for the larger females on the umbels below.

William Nevett

And today's special is… Hogweed: the floral dining table of choice for the St Mark's fly (inset)**!**

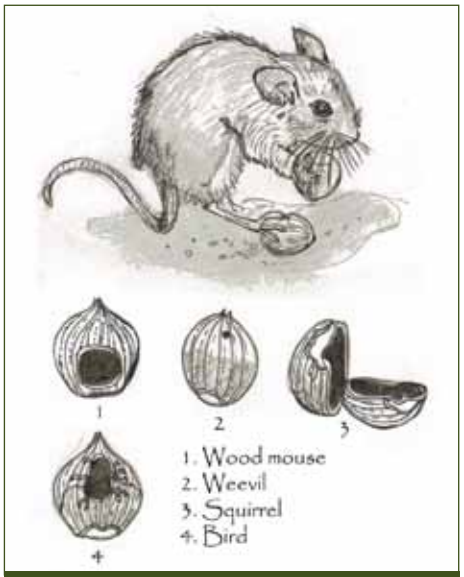
In early summer, Cow Parsley gives way to Hogweed as the predominant umbellifer of the roadside, which is typically awash with the scrambling blues and yellows of tufted vetch and meadow vetchling by this time. Sprinkled liberally between the verdant foliage, you may find numerous globs of frothy cuckoo spit, a water-proof blend of excreted plant sap protecting the larvae of the Common Froghopper bug. Look out, too, for soldier beetles. They can be seen in many locations but are often found along wayside verges during June and July, searching the flower heads of thistles and umbellifers such as Hogweed for aphids and other soft-bodied insect food (which they supplement with pollen and nectar).

Whether Mining or Day Flying

In late summer, many wayside verges are engulfed in a straggling yellow haze of Ragwort. This tall, visually unremarkable daisy can be deadly to farm animals and horses on grazing land but, on the roadside, it is a vital food plant utilised by over 200 invertebrates. Among the most conspicuous are the black- and yellow-banded caterpillars of the Cinnabar moth, which can be seen in large numbers at this time of year. They are one of many day-flying species you might find along a margin but this habitat also provides a window into the world of their tiny lepidopteron cousins: the micro-moths! Bramble plants are a good place to begin looking for them, as one of the commonest species, *Stigmella aurella*, lays its eggs in their leaves. When hatched, the larvae create purple-coloured galleries and blotches as they munch through the inner tissues, excreting frass as they go! They emerge in late summer (and again in May) as orange-headed moths with creamy-white striped forewings and a wingspan of just six millimetres!

Common flowers like Dandelion, Sorrel and Ragwort (pictured) **can attract many invertebrate species, such as these Cinnabar moth caterpillars**

A soldier beetle feeding on Yarrow



The presence of hazel in a hedgerow is often a sign of longevity. The shells of its nuts (known as 'cobs') can also provide clues as to what's living in it.

More Signs of Life

Despite the ravages of grazing leaf-miners, only a relatively small amount of hedgerow foliage is actually eaten – most falls to the floor where it provides cover for many beneficial invertebrates, such as spiders, harvestmen, earwigs and chirping bush crickets (which can be heard in late summer and autumn). Try looking for thick hedges with tussocky margins, as these are particularly rich in leaf litter and more likely to have a wide community of inhabitants. Conversely, bare hedge banks in spring can reveal a great deal, as this is the time when bumblebees can be seen looking to make nests in old Bank vole and Wood mouse holes, which, together with Common shrews, are the predominant hedge-dwelling small mammals around The Wrekin. Trees are another natural and important part of any hedgerow and can also tell us much of the local inhabitants. Hazel is particularly useful in this respect, as its protein-rich nuts (which ripen from September onwards) are taken by a number of creatures, who all leave their own conspicuous marks on the shells.

ROADSIDE VERGES

Out in the Fields

Arable land north of Brockholes Bank

Of the many habitats comprising the Wrekin Forest, the open farmland around the hill is, for road cyclists at least, easily the most accessible. What's more, amid the woodlands, watercourses and hedgerows, the grazed pastures and crop-filled arable fields that help form this mosaic landscape have their own unique sights and sounds that can readily be seen and heard from the saddle...

Sycamore

Nigel Jones

These *Helophilus pendulus* hoverflies are one of many beneficial insects that can thrive in field margins and crop headlands

A Marginal Existence

You won't necessarily need to go to extremes to see and hear local wildlife at its most diverse on the Wild Wrekin Trail but you might like to take a trip to the edge. For some of the best places to stop, look and listen may be found on the margins of the fields around the hill, which can provide vital habitat features for many of the same species that rely on hedgerows.

Wide, well-established margins often support the most wildlife. Here, uncut grasses can develop a tussocky structure capable of harbouring over-wintering insects and spiders that feed on crop pests in spring while inadvertently providing food for the chicks of foraging birds in the process. Older margins are also more likely to contain larger numbers of broad-leaved flowering plants, which are essential for pollinating insects, including many of our most recognisable butterflies (for whom this is a key habitat).

Follow the Yellow Brick Road

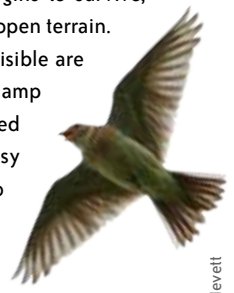
Rough grassy margins containing tussocky vegetation also support habitat for many small mammals, including one of our most common: the Field vole. Seeing this small, subterranean rodent can be difficult as it inhabits a shadowy world of well-worn runways deep in the undergrowth, where it feeds on grasses. Together with its cousin the Bank vole (which is sleeker, with a longer tail, chestnut coat, and a more varied diet of soft fruits, seeds and leaves) it is prey to many larger animals, including foxes, stoats and weasels. However, its presence in any marginal location is often given away by the sight of a hover-hunting Kestrel, for whom it is a staple food. Sadly, for the Field vole at least, this agile falcon's job is made much easier by the rodent's habit of scent marking its runways with urine. Utilising its ability to see near-ultra violet light, the Kestrel is then able to locate a vole population by its luminescent waste offerings, which glow yellow in sunlight!

William Nevett

The vole's worst nightmare: a 'hover-hunting' Kestrel!

Mid-Field Generals

Beyond the southern end of the trail, the flood meadows of the River Severn provide internationally rare habitat for many waders, warblers and hirundines but, closer to home, the farmland around The Wrekin can also provide some absorbing views. While many species rely on hedgerows and field margins to survive, others prefer the expanse of open terrain. Of these, some of the most visible are farmland birds. Grazed, damp pastures with short but varied swards and the odd grassy tussock are a good place to begin looking for them, as they are often rich in earthworms and soil-dwelling invertebrates beloved of avian diners such as Song thrushes, Starlings and Lapwing (which nest in old hoof marks created by cattle and livestock).



William Nevett

Where you find arable fields with spring barley, beans and sugar beet closeby, try looking here, too, for these distinctive waders. Slow-growing cover crops provide good views of potential predators throughout the breeding season and are regularly chosen as nesting sites for this reason. Farmland is also the location where you might chance upon the one of the most celebrated birds of the countryside: the Skylark. Like the Lapwing, it nests on the ground in the middle of crop fields but it's the aerial song flight of the male bird announcing its territory for which it is most fabled. The sound of a long, rapid warble will probably be the first thing that alerts you to this remarkable spectacle unfolding, in which the small brown, Starling-sized bird ascends rapidly skywards on fluttering wings, before circling and descending slowly to earth. Song flights of over an hour have been recorded but they're more likely to provide two or three minutes of reverie!

Shropshire Wildlife Trust

Left: **"O singing lark, that singest like an angel in the clouds" said Coleridge of the Skylark – and who could disagree?** Above: **a Lapwing**

Wild Wrekin Residents Focus: Here Hare Here

The same range of habitat features that benefits wild birds also provides good conditions for the Brown hare, one of our most charismatic farmland mammals. Hares spend most of their days 'lying-up' in forms, which are essentially shallow depressions in the ground where they digest the previous night's forage and use the cryptic camouflage their fur provides to evade foxes and birds of prey. Travelling by two wheels, dusk is the time you're most likely to encounter these predominantly nocturnal animals, which are characterised by an unmistakeably tall, leggy appearance that sets them apart from their rabbit cousins (of which they can grow to nearly twice the size). At various times of the year, you may catch sight of their loping gaits on the edge of arable fields (where they feed on cereal crops, grasses and herbs) or running fast over fallow ground and overwinter stubble.

Shropshire Wildlife Trust

The Brown Hare

An Evolving Landscape

Looking towards Wrekin Farm and the Severn Valley

The Wrekin Hills have been a permanent feature on the Shropshire horizon since time immemorial but they sit at the centre of a constantly evolving landscape. This ever-changing situation brings its own challenges and opportunities that will all help to shape this unfolding story in the future and in which we could all play a crucial role.

Alder

Cast in Stone

There can be few places where the story of life on Earth is recounted as graphically as it is in the rocks around The Wrekin. From the long-lost fossilised beaches of pre-history on the approach to the hill itself to the wooded enclaves of Cherme's Dingle (where many species of trilobite and graptolites were first described) this is an area with a profound geological back story. However, this spectacular heritage has also made the area's rocks highly prized for many centuries by extraction industries. Evidence of this exploitation can be found throughout the Wrekin Forest but is perhaps most evident around Maddock's Hill and The Ercall, the south face of which was blasted away to provide hardcore for local roads until the mid-1980s.

Swan Farm Pool is one of many tranquil spots on the Bench Walks around Little Wenlock

Ironically, this brutal remodelling process actually helped to secure the international reputation of the hill, which is famed for the geological exposures created by the ravaging of its mineral wealth. One of the most important features can be found at the foot of the old quarry, where a change in the colour of the rock from a pink tinge to pale grey marks the transition from the pre-Cambrian to the Cambrian era, when life on Earth became more numerous and varied.

What The Ercall also shows us is nature's uncanny ability to recover from even the gravest intrusion. For where diggers once passed, pioneering tree species like silver birch have since taken root while, below the hill, reclaimed species-rich grassland now provides valuable habitat for abundant plant and insect life. Similar stories abound elsewhere on the trail, too. Around Little Wenlock, a number of well-appointed seats offer roadside comfort to weary cyclists seeking rest and good views of the stunning scenery surrounding the village. They form part of a network of footpaths appropriately known as the 'bench walks', which partly occupy land once dominated by open cast mining. Nowadays, instead of coal seams, you'll find wet meadows and newly-created pools playing host to wildfowl, wading birds, and other avian visitors, such as Skylark and Meadow pipit.

A Warning from the Future

While the Wrekin Hills tell us much about the forces that have shaped the area's natural heritage, the wider landscape also speaks of the problems it is likely to face in the future. Many species you could once have expected to see on the Wild Wrekin Trail are becoming less common in our countryside. This decline is most apparent among those that rely on good habitat to thrive and include many pollinating insects (upon whom the fortunes of around four fifths of our crops and wildflowers depend) and, higher up the food chain, farm and woodland birds, and small mammals such as bats. The reasons behind the changes to our environment these declines suggest are many and varied (and unlikely to be solved by finger pointing!) but our wild verges, hedges, meadows and woods will almost certainly be at the centre of any fight back. To the south of the hill, evidence of some of the measures that may help can be seen around Morrell's Wood Farm, where restored hedgerows, ponds and wildflower meadows provide wildlife friendly features that have become less numerous elsewhere.

The Ercall is steadily recovering from the ravages of heavy industrial activity

On the road to Neves Castle

Protecting Your Green Corridors

Those of us who use the countryside for recreation have a part to play, too. With over 70 000 visitors a year, The Wrekin is one of the most popular destinations within the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Beauty. Yet, research indicates a staggering nine of every ten journeys to the hill are made by car. With limited parking and a wide variety of users traversing its narrow highways and byways –from walkers and cyclists to mountain bikers and horse riders – this situation appears unsustainable.

Wellington 21 is a not-for-profit environmental group that looks for practical local solutions to global problems that affect us all. The Wrekin sits at the heart of an officially designated network of footpaths and cycle ways that provide excellent alternative links to the area for over 100 000 people and we maintain a long-term commitment to help promote and protect this Green Network and The Wrekin Hills themselves. To learn about our work and how you could get involved, please visit us at:

www.wellingtonla21.org.uk

PRESENT, PAST AND FUTURE