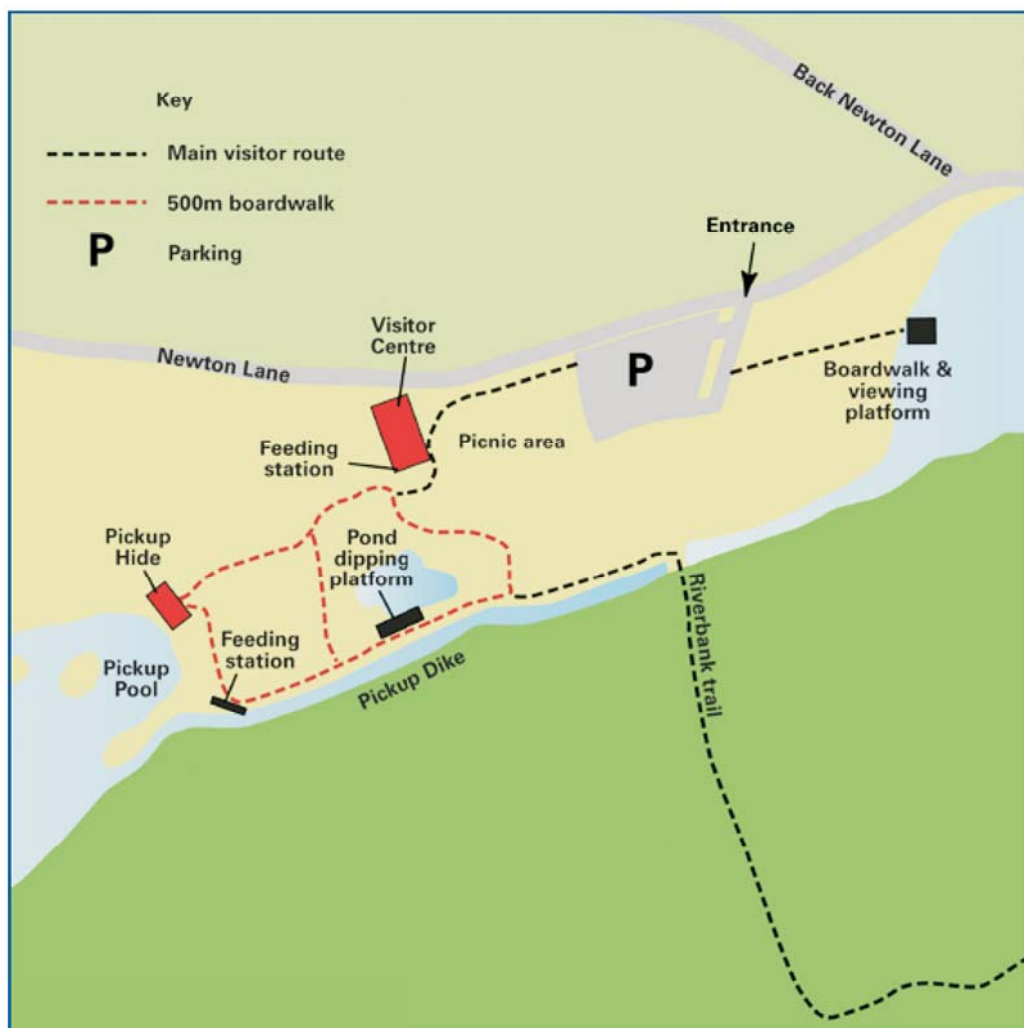


RSPB Fairburn Ings Self-Guided Trail

Please refer to the map below:



Although it is advised that class visits to RSPB Fairburn Ings should be arranged as part of the Field Teaching Programme, it may be useful to have this information for reference.

Because Fairburn Ings is such a large site, this section will be restricted to the visitor area immediately around the visitor centre. The area is most suitable for visitors and the boardwalk marked in red on the map is accessible to wheelchair users.

It will take about an hour to walk the following route round the boardwalk and onto the tips (the hills at Fairburn Ings that were produced by 'tipping' colliery spoil on the site).



RSPB Fairburn Ings Self-Guided Trail

1. Start at the viewing platform

The viewing platform allows you to look across the Main Bay that is the largest water body on the nature reserve.

Main Bay was, like most of the water bodies on the site, created when the land was subject to mining subsidence due to workings in the underground coal mines. It has appeared in the last 90 years; prior to that the whole area was open fields!

You can feed birds from here with duck and swan feed from the visitor centre; feeding the birds with the correct food rather than bread is encouraged, because it is better for the birds. White bread especially is not healthy for birds to eat.

Birds that are usually visible on this lake are mute swan, mallard, Canada goose and black-headed gull. Lots of other birds are regular visitors also.

2. Visitor centre

Walk across the car park to get to the visitor centre that contains two classrooms with interactive displays for children about bird migration, the wildlife living at Fairburn Ings, and how the nature reserve is managed.

There is a feeding station just outside one of the classroom windows where it is possible to quietly observe birds such as blue tits, great tits, coal tits, tree sparrows, dunnocks, chaffinches and greenfinches feeding (and even to watch voles) .

There is also the Bird Shop that sells light refreshments and goods, from pencils and stickers to bird food and binoculars.

You will notice that the Visitor Centre, (and Pickup Bird Hide that you will see later), is on stilts to avoid damage that would otherwise affect the structure during the floods that occur regularly at Fairburn Ings. The nature reserve takes the water from the River Aire when it gets excessively full and thus prevents Castleford and Allerton Bywater from flooding. Infrequent flooding is good for the wildlife of Fairburn Ings because many birds like wet ground as it is nice and soft for probing with their beaks, and it brings tasty minibeasts to the surface for them to eat. Many of the fields at Fairburn Ings are wet for most of the year and this is why it is so popular with birds such as lapwing and redshank.

3. Kevin the Kingfisher

Turn right at the bottom of the steps as you leave the Visitor Centre to start on the boardwalk trail. On the right, as you turn the first corner, you will see a Kevin the Kingfisher sign board. This is the first of a series that runs around the boardwalk area. Older children and adults can read these to enhance their understanding of the reserve.



RSPB Fairburn Ings Self-Guided Trail

4. Hawthorn Copse

After another 20 m you will reach a T-junction. Turn right here and then immediately left (signed towards Pickup Hide). You are now entering an area of scrub and woodland where you can see a variety of trees and plants. The dominant species is hawthorn which can be identified by its sharp thorns and distinctive leaves ([see Fairburn Ings tree key](#)). Hawthorns are very popular with many birds, especially thrushes, for their juicy red berries.

There are lots of bird boxes in the trees in this area, which are worth putting up at home too, since there has been a national decline in natural places (like old and dead trees) for birds to nest.

Owls have often been observed roosting in these hawthorns and, although they are large birds, they are very hard to see because they are so well camouflaged.

In the summer there are a lot of nettles in the area and it is worth pointing out that nettles are not seen as weeds on nature reserves because wildlife, especially caterpillars and butterflies, like to eat them. The abundance of nettles is one of the reasons why there are so many butterflies at Fairburn; see how many you can count as you walk round (summer-time only!).

5. Listening post

Continue along the boardwalk until you come to a stopping area deep in the hawthorn copse. There is a Kevin the Kingfisher board here on the right and it is an ideal place to stop and listen out for what birds you can hear. The amount of bird song will vary according to the time of year (early in the day in spring is best) but you can usually hear at least a couple of birds singing. Generally, they sing to establish breeding and feeding territories.

Take a good look around; can you see any birds? Generally, it is very difficult to see woodland birds and that is why they tend to sing more than more visible birds like ducks, for example.

In winter you may hear the male robin still singing to defend his feeding territory when most other birds are very quiet; robins are also often the most visible birds in winter when the leaves have fallen from the trees.

6. Pickup Hide

Continue straight on and soon you will reach the Pickup Hide. This bird hide was named after Dr. Douglas Pickup, one of the founders of the nature reserve.

You will notice that the bird hide is on stilts to avoid damage that would otherwise affect its structure during the floods that occur regularly at Fairburn Ings.

Here you can look out over Pickup Pool, several fields and see the restored spoil tips – a big hill in the background.



RSPB Fairburn Ings Self-Guided Trail

The hills visible in the background are entirely made up of coal mine spoil (the waste product from coal mining) that was tipped there by mining companies. The spoil tips at Fairburn Ings are the largest in Europe. Nothing much grows on spoil naturally so RJB Mining UK Ltd, in partnership with the RSPB, covered the area with soil and seeded it, so that grass and wildflowers now grow there.

Birds you might see from Pickup Hide include coot, moorhen, heron, mallard, teal and redshank. It isn't the most popular area at Fairburn Ings for water birds. To see more it is advisable to visit Lin Dike Hide towards the western end of the nature reserve (about 1 km from this visitor area).

7. Feeding station

Turn right as you leave the Pickup Hide to continue the trail through the hawthorn copse and along to the bird feeding station which is hidden behind a screen. If you look through the gaps quietly for a few minutes, you will be able to see birds feeding on seeds and nuts that are placed there daily by volunteers. Chaffinches are very common here and blue tits, great tits, coal tits and greenfinches are often busily feeding too.

8. Pickup Dike

As you continue away from the feeding station you will see the Pickup Dike on your right; this dike is popular with kingfishers.

There are many silver birch trees (identifiable by their white bark) in this area on the left and the other side of the dike; these are often the first trees to start colonising disturbed land.

The area between the boardwalk and the dike is full of wildflowers in the summer and the tall stands of purple loosestrife are particularly attractive with the lovely scent of meadowsweet to complement them. In the summer lots of different butterflies can be seen collecting nectar from the flowers here, so look out for the red admiral, peacock, gatekeeper, meadow brown, common blue, large and small white and speckled wood butterflies!

For a butterfly identification sheet, [click here](#).

Dragonflies (such as common darter, brown hawker, emperor and four-spotted chaser) and damselflies (like azure and common blue) can also be found basking along the boardwalk in the summer.

9. Pond dipping pool

Here you can take the opportunity to do some pond dipping; nets, identification sheets and bowls are available from the visitor centre for a very small fee (do not use your own net as it can spread disease). See the 'Pond Activities' section for more details.

The pond dipping platform here is made from recycled plastic, so it is environmentally friendly and will last longer than wood.



RSPB Fairburn Ings Self-Guided Trail

Again, this area is great for dragonflies and it is possible to watch them hunting over the pond for the flying insects that they like to eat.

The pond dipping pool contains a range of creatures from pond skaters and whirligig beetles on the water's surface, to water scorpions and leeches that live below the water.

[For a pond creature identification sheet, click here.](#)

10. The tips

Carry straight on and turn right after the kissing gate to go up onto the restored tips.

If you take the time to walk up the slope you will be able to see the meadows over the fence to your right that were created when the tips were restored on what would otherwise be quite barren land. Some of the ground has been left bare for birds that don't like nesting in vegetation, such as little ringed plover. The grassy areas are full of wildflowers such as bird's-foot trefoil, buttercup, and burnet in the summer, all of which are attractive to butterflies.

In the spring and summer it is usual to hear the trill of skylarks high up in the sky above their nest sites on these meadows.

From the top of the slope it is possible to see the edge of Castleford, the River Aire and, looming large in the distance, Ferrybridge power station, which produces electricity from coal. The three power stations in the area were placed to be near the coal mines that provided their energy source and the rivers which provided large quantities of water for cooling purposes. A lot less coal is now mined in this area as it is cheaper to purchase it from other countries, but the power stations are still in operation.

This tour ends here but it is possible to step over the stile and follow the riverbank trail to discover more (including bird hides around Main Bay, Village Bay and The Cut.)

11. Back on the boardwalk

Return to the boardwalk by the same route and turn right at the first seat to get back to the Visitor Centre. This is an area of marsh and swamp where you can see the moisture-loving trees that often grow around water bodies – willow and alder.

Also notice the reeds growing here; they are plants which grow in damp areas and are great for wildlife to feed and hide in. The endangered harvest mouse nests at Fairburn Ings and this is one of the places they are known to inhabit.

