

This is a pleasant 2km walk that takes in the fantastic meadow habitat, Lock No. 2 and Lester's Dam. The trail is a circular route. Some of the paths may be narrow and may have uneven surfaces.



Facilities

Toilet facilities are available on site. There are many areas where you can have a packed lunch including a covered pergola if it rains. There is also a café on site, as well as a play park.

Guided tours can be pre-booked by contacting Lagan Valley Regional Park.

Tel: 028 90491922

Email: admin@laganvalley.co.uk

Website: www.laganvalley.co.uk

Equipment needed for the trail

- Outdoor shoes & clothing
- Trail booklets
- Teachers guide
- clip boards / pens / crayons
- Clip boards / pens / crayons
- Camera (optional)



Stop 1 – Lagan Meadows

As you enter the park through the wooden kissing gate you will see a Lagan Valley Regional Park sign, on your left welcoming you to the Lagan Meadows. Ask the pupils to find out information and complete the associated fact finding activity.

As you set out along the trail, you will quickly leave the city hustle and bustle behind you and become immersed in the meadow environment. A meadow is an area of open grassland, managed using traditional farming techniques to ensure it maintains a large and interesting variety of flowering plants amongst the different grasses. Some of the meadows here are used for grazing cattle, whilst others are cut for hay.



From the gate take the path to the left and continue down the hill until you find a hedge with a hole in it (see image in trail).



Stop 2 – The Fairy Tree

You will pass a Hawthorn (fairy) tree where the pupils can make a wish to Gabriel Finn, 'King of the Fairies'. Hawthorn trees are a traditional hedge tree. They have lobed leaves and bright red seeds called 'haws'. In springtime they have a delicate pink or white flower that usually appears in May thus giving the name 'Mayflower'.



Continue along the path until you see a wooden kissing gate. Go through the gate and walk straight on up a hill.



Stop 3 – In the Meadow

You will find yourself in a large meadow. This is a good area for completing both meadow activity sheets. Ask the pupils to find a plant that they find interesting and ask them to make a sketch in the box provided. They can also tick off any things they find as they walk. This is also a fantastic area to introduce meadow plants and the concept of insect pollinated and wind pollinated plants.

The gorse bushes provide a cheerful yellow colouring to the hill when they flower, a delicate fragrance in the early evening, and a safe haven for small birds to perch and nest. They were used in the past to sweep chimneys, for yellow dye, fuel, fencing, and to hang out washing.

Grass plants do not need to have showy flowers to attract insects, as they are pollinated by wind. Because a vast amount of pollen must be released into summer breezes, some people suffer from severe hay fever on visits to the countryside.

Discovering the natural world activity

Ask the pupils to find their own spot and to sit quietly and observe the natural world around them, making notes or drawing pictures to represent what they've found. After about 5 or 10 minutes ask them to form a circle so they can discuss their findings.



Continue walking through the meadow, keeping to the right hand side. You will see a trampled path that takes you towards some larch trees. When you get to this point you will have a fantastic view along the Lagan.



Stop 4 – In the Larch trees

Larch trees are the only conifers that lose their needles in winter. They have small brown cones which are a great food source for small mammals e.g. squirrels, mice, stoats and seed eating birds. The needles are eaten by caterpillars. Ask the pupils to discuss the concept of deciduous and evergreen. This is also a good area to introduce the tracks and trails activity.

Answers to tracks & trails: 1. badger, 2. duck, 3. fox, 4. dog, 5. heron, 6. squirrel



Leaving the larch trees behind continue down the hill. Take care as the hill is a little steep. Go through the gate at the bottom and once you reach a path turn left. You will approach another wooden gate. This leads you onto the Lagan towpath. Take a right and walk until you reach an old lock.



Stop 5 – The River Lagan

Approach the River Lagan quietly and you may see a host of bird life. You may see mallards, moorhens, little grebes and black-headed gulls. Moorhens nest along the river's edge. Their large feet help them to balance on the rafts of twigs, where they nest, and the soft mud where they feed. You may be lucky enough to see a flash of colour as a kingfisher passes, or a cormorant sunning itself.

Ask the pupils to complete the two worksheets associated with the River Lagan.



Stop 6 – Mickey Taylor's Lock

Lock 2, known locally as Mickey Taylor's after one of the lock-keepers. Lock keepers were employed to look after the locks and help the boats pass through them. They had to ensure that the locks were kept clean and operational and that the banks were kept clear. Most lock keepers had a weir to look after as well to help maintain the correct water level. If it was too high or too low the boats could not pass. Sometimes in severe weather conditions they had to stay up all night, moving constantly between lock and weir to make sure the water levels were correct. Each lock keeper was paid a wage and given their own house with a small piece of land where they could grow their own food.

The Canal and the Lagan Navigation

The eighteenth century was a time of massive change for the whole of the Lagan Valley. New industry depended on fast movement of supplies and produce. Transport by road was frequently slow and inefficient. Rivers, lakes and seas were faster and more efficient ways to travel. On rivers and canals one horse could pull a sixty foot long barge, or "lighter", as they were known in Ireland, thereby transporting tons of produce.

The lighters needed straight stretches of river with enough depth and adequate water levels. Most of the River Lagan is like that between Belfast and Lisburn. Where the river bends or it is not deep enough, Thomas Omer, the first engineer, would make a new "cut" which would avoid the bend in the river, and locks and weirs which kept the water at the correct level.

In September 1763 the Belfast to Lisburn stretch was opened. "The Lord Hertford" was the first boat to travel along this stretch of the navigation and was greeted by bands and cheering crowds!



Retrace your steps back along the towpath, returning through the gate to Lagan Meadows once again. This time however continue along the path; do not go back up the hill towards the larch trees. You will pass through another wooden gate before you come to Lester's Dam a wetland habitat.



Stop 7 – Lester's Dam

The **grassland** alongside the path up to Lester's Dam is wet underfoot, and so boasts a range of plants which are adapted to life in water. In spring, the delicate pinkish white flowers are cuckoo flowers, and they attract orange-tip butterflies which lay their eggs only on cuckoo flower leaves. In late summer, pink ragged robin are interspersed among the carpet of bright blue devil's-bit scabious, a plant traditionally used as a treatment for scabies. The devil, apparently jealous of its healing properties, bit off the root tips in anger. To this day the plant has blunt ended roots.

On the other side of the fence, in the swamp, you will see the giant pillars formed by the greater tussock sedge. These provide winter cover for wetland birds such as snipe, while in summer other plants avoid the waterlogged soil by growing on the back of the tussock sedge. Birds such as the reed bunting nest in the blackthorn and willow thickets, in the swamp, in spring.

Standing on the bank of Lester's Dam, you may see evidence of amphibians and insects. Many of the insects that we enjoy watching flying in summer, spend their larval stage in the water, including dragonflies, damselflies and mayflies. Watch out for frogspawn in the spring. Adult frogs mate in the water, and lay clumps of up to three thousand eggs. The jelly like spheres act as a mini greenhouse for the eggs, effectively incubating them and protecting them from temperature drops when the sun goes down. The larvae which hatch, called tadpoles, live underwater by breathing through gills and filtering small organic particles from the water for food. They gradually metamorphose into adult frogs, and when they breathe using lungs, can leave the pond. However, they will return to water to hibernate in winter.

One of the most notable historic features at Lagan Meadows is Lester's Dam. This was the source of Belfast's first piped water supply. Built nearly 200 years ago, the dam created a reservoir of one acre capable of holding one million gallons. The reservoir was fed by a spring rising close to the Knightsbridge Park entrance.



Continue along the path when it ends take the path to the left. You will now be entering a woodland habitat.



Stop 8 - Discovering woodlands

As you go into woodland, you will see a change in the plants around you. Plants growing on a woodland floor need to survive with less light than those in open meadows. Some plants, such as lesser celandine and bluebells, solve this problem by flowering early, before the trees have developed their thick canopy of leaves. They store energy in bulbs underground over winter, to allow them to grow quickly as soon as spring arrives. Ivy solves the problem of the lack of light by climbing up the trunks of trees to reach the sunlight above the tree canopy. Ivy is especially important for birds in winter when it retains its leaves to provide them with cover, and also provides fruit for them to eat. In spring some birds will nest in the ivy.

If you see any dead wood, check to see if any fungi are growing on it. Jelly ear fungus, grows here on elder wood, and resembles a human ear. Watch out for small woodland birds, including chaffinches, bullfinches, blue tits, great tits, coal tits and long-tailed tits. They chirp from the tree tops and drop down to the forest floor to pick up seeds or to branches to catch insects. These birds, unlike other species which migrate with the seasons, are with us all year round. There is little competition between the birds for food, as they each employ their own strategies for foraging.

As you walk along the trail ask the pupils to tick of any trees that they find.



Continue along the path when it ends take the path to the left. You will now be entering a woodland habitat.



Stop 9 - Discovering Hedgerows

As you walk down the next section of path you will be walking alongside a hedge. Hedgerows used to be a common feature in the countryside, but have sadly been disappearing as farmers remove them to make way for large machinery. The best hedges consist of a mix of species; they provide flowers for nectar eating insects, fruit and seeds for hungry birds, cover for small animals, to move from one place to another, a windbreak for cattle, and shelter for a mix of wildflowers. The prickly hawthorn in this hedge will help to keep the cattle on the right side of the fence but this hedge has a long way to go yet before it reaches the standard of some of our ancient hedgerows.

Ask the pupils to complete the discovering hedgerows worksheet.



Stop 10 - Looking for Evidence



When you come to the end of the little grass path, take a right back on to the main path. Continue along this until you reach the entrance to Lagan Meadows

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Lagan Meadows Trail

