



## Exploring Darfield: Autumn Walks and Nature Discovery

### 1) Little Walk (approximately 0.5 miles)

Darfield has an abundance of scenic countryside that offers rich habitats for wildlife, particularly birds. This guide provides a glimpse into the natural features that Darfield has to offer. While a few highlights are mentioned here, the true pleasure lies in exploring the area yourself.

To enhance your experience, consider bringing a small pair of binoculars and a phone to help identify the various birds, trees and plants you encounter. These simple tools will allow you to observe wildlife more closely and learn more about the natural environment. This guide is just a starting point. With so much to see and discover, the countryside invites you to venture out, observe, and appreciate the wildlife that surrounds Darfield.

Begin your walk at Darfield Museum, then make your way into the nearby churchyard.



As autumn arrives, the countryside becomes relatively quiet as most birds have ceased their songs, and nature shifts into a period of preparation for the winter months ahead.

In the churchyard take a moment to observe the big trees around you. Leaves change colour and begin to fall—have you ever crunched your way through a pile of leaves? What colours can you see, and what sounds did the leaves make beneath your feet? Can you recognise the different types? As you wander through the fallen leaves, examine their shapes and see if you can find any nuts. There are several types of tree here, including ash, walnut, oak, and horse chestnut. See if you can spot their leaves or fallen nuts.

This season also sees some animals, such as hedgehogs and bats, getting ready to hibernate for the winter months. Others, like squirrels, are busy gathering and storing nuts and seeds to keep them fed when it gets cold. As you walk, keep an eye out—can you spot any squirrels?



These old tall trees are also home to a variety of birds. The trees attract insects which then attract birds to feed on them. Also, old trees have hollows providing nesting places for species like blue tits, great tits, nuthatches, treecreepers, and great spotted woodpeckers. These birds often hide among the branches—can you catch a glimpse of any?

During autumn, one bird you might notice more frequently is the jay. Its distinctive, harsh squawk often gives away its presence in the trees. At this time of year, jays are busy searching woodlands for acorns, which they collect and bury as a food source for the colder months. Interestingly, not all the acorns are retrieved—those left behind can eventually sprout and grow into new oak trees. In this way, jays play an important role in planting and sustaining oak woodlands.

Follow the main path and descend the steps towards the river. Here, the terrain becomes noticeably wetter, which is reflected in the plant life found in this area. Take note of the large willow trees, which thrive in damp conditions, as well as the tall Himalayan balsam. This tall plant stands out with its vibrant purple flowers and distinctive seed pods that burst open when touched.

Throughout the area, you may notice a variety of common birds such as robins, blackbirds, and starlings. Take a moment to look around—can you spot any of these familiar visitors? Many of these birds remain with us all year, but as autumn arrives, they are joined by others migrating from Europe to escape the colder weather.

Robins are particularly noteworthy during this season, as they are among the few birds that continue to sing through autumn and winter. Interestingly, the robin whose song you hear now may not be the one you heard in summer; it could well be a migratory robin from a country in Europe such as Germany, taking refuge here as the seasons change.

After descending the steps, walk across the recreation ground, observing the open space around you. Continue onward to Pinfold Lane, where the path climbs steeply. As you make your way up, pay close attention to the various rock layers and structures along the lane—each layer offers a glimpse into the natural history and geology of the area millions of years ago.

## 2) A Little Bit Longer Walk (approximately 2 miles)

Instead of heading back up Pinfold Lane, cross the A635 road and continue over the bridge. When you reach the river, stop and look into the water. Are any fish swimming below the surface?



As you walk across the bridge continue on the riverbank upstream. Along the way you will encounter rapids in the river. Anywhere along the river you may encounter the colourful grey wagtail, easily recognised by its long tail as it darts among the stones along the river. Other birds are drawn to these waters in search of fish. Look for tufted ducks, goosanders, and cormorants, each expertly adapted to diving and fishing beneath the surface. If you are especially observant, you may spot a flash of dazzling blue: the elusive kingfisher. While kingfishers are often shy and difficult to see, listen carefully for their high-pitched “psssst” call as they swiftly dart past along the river.

As you continue your walk along the river, the old railway embankment rises to your right while the river is to your left. Emerging from the shelter of the woodland, turn left onto the high flood banking. This vantage point offers views over the landscape. On the opposite side of the riverbank lies an expanse of tall reeds, with patches of goat willow trees which grow in swampy conditions such as these. This area is a nature reserve that provides a tranquil habitat for wildlife and marks an important feature of the riverside environment.

Here, you might see Polish ponies called koniks. These hardy ponies graze on reeds and rough grass that other ponies find difficult to eat. The reserve also provides a home to birds that prefer reeds—though these species, like water rails, are usually shy and hard to see.

As you scan the reedbeds, keep an eye out for reed buntings balanced on top of the swaying reeds. With a bit of patience, you might also notice the dark shape of a moorhen, easily recognised by its flicking white-tipped tail as it searches for insects along the bottom of the reeds.

Continuing further along the riverbank, you will come upon a large weir on the river marking a distinct feature of the landscape. In this area, blackthorn and hawthorn hedgerows flourish, their branches heavy with berries throughout autumn. These berries provide an important food source for fieldfares and redwings—thrush species that migrate from Scandinavia specifically for the autumn and winter seasons.

Fieldfares are relatively large thrushes, identifiable by their grey heads and distinctive "chak chak chak" calls. Redwings, smaller in size, can be recognised by their characteristic "zeep" call. On clear autumn nights, you may hear the "zeep" calls overhead as thousands of these thrushes arrive in Britain, fleeing the cold of Scandinavia.

Wherever blackthorn and hawthorn bushes line your route, keep a keen eye and ear out for these migratory thrushes. Their presence is a true hallmark of the autumn landscape, adding movement and sound to the changing season.

As you stand on the bridge above the weir and gaze upstream, the fields either side of the river are managed to support farmland birds. The yellowhammer—a species whose numbers have fallen across much of the country—still finds crucial refuge here. This landscape highlights the continued importance of maintaining habitats for farmland birds, ensuring their survival in the face of widespread decline.

Continue along the path until you arrive at the old bridleway, distinguished on the left-hand side by its high stone wall. The route rises gently here. Countless generations have walked this ancient way. Along the path, ancient oak trees can be seen, scattering acorns across the ground. Take a moment to notice these remarkable oaks, their presence marking the passage of time. At the end of the footpath cross the A635 Road back toward School Street and the Darfield Museum.

### 3) A Longer Walk (approximately 3 miles)

For those wanting to explore further, instead of walking into the churchyard turn right onto Vicar Road, and continue walking down the hill.



As you reach the bottom of Vicar Road, continue through the gate and over the stile, entering a patch of wet woodland dominated by large willow trees. Follow the path ahead until you find yourself at a concrete and metal bridge. Pause here to observe the fast-flowing River Dove beneath you—this river is the overflow from Worsborough Reservoir near Barnsley.

After crossing the bridge, walk up to the top of the high banking. Have you wondered why these bankings are built so tall? Its height allows the land in front of you to hold flood water during heavy rain, preventing flooding into other areas.

Beyond the banking stretches another nature reserve: Wombwell Ings. In autumn, the water level often drops very low, which is done intentionally so that grasses and plants such as creeping buttercup grow. When the water eventually returns and covers these plants, they provide a valuable food source for many species of ducks, including mallard, wigeon, and teal. While these birds may be some distance away, see if you can spot any. Listen, too, for the distinctive whistling "sweeoo" call of wigeon.

Although the chill of winter can feel harsh here, many of the ducks and other birds that gather at Wombwell Ings during autumn and winter have travelled remarkable distances. These visitors migrate from as far away as Iceland and Russia, seeking refuge from the far more severe cold that grips their northern homes at this time of year. The relative mildness of Britain provides a vital sanctuary, making these wetlands a haven for overwintering wildlife.

Throughout the autumn months, Wombwell Ings becomes gathering places for flocks of greylag and Canada geese—the Canada geese are those with the white faces and black necks. These geese, having raised their young nearby earlier in the year and assemble in large numbers for the season. Occasionally, their gatherings are joined by pink-footed geese

that have migrated from Iceland. During autumn, keep a watchful eye on the sky. If you spot strings of birds usually flying in a characteristic V-formation and hear their distinctive “wink wink” calls, these will be pink footed geese that have arrived here from Iceland. Their long journey brings them to Britain where they will spend the autumn and winter.

After reaching the riverbank, turn left and follow the riverbank with the river on your left and Wombwell Ings to your right. Continue along this route until you arrive at a metal gate. Go through the gate and turn left onto the old road.

As you continue along the old road, now closed to vehicles, the edges are bordered by dense blackberry and elderberry bushes. During late summer and autumn, these bushes are laden with dark, ripe fruit, which in turn attract a variety of small birds. The presence of these fruiting shrubs enhances the habitat value of this stretch, providing both food and shelter for local wildlife.

A short walk along the old road brings you to a gravel track that leads across a nearby field. This area at Cat Hill has been established as a new nature reserve, where new ponds have been created and the land has been planted with trees and shrubs, enhancing its natural value.

After passing the sewage works, follow the path that traces the perimeter of the fence, leading you steadily back toward Cliff Road. This is one of the most picturesque areas of Darfield with its houses nestling among mature, towering trees. The area is notable for its stone quarries, which played a vital role in shaping the architectural character of Darfield. The locally quarried stone was used in the construction of the stone houses and buildings that define the village, leaving a lasting legacy in its built environment. This is also a good place to watch for buzzards—large birds of prey that often soar gracefully above the treetops, scanning for prey items.

From this vantage, you can catch glimpses across the valley to Darfield Church. In late autumn and winter, when the trees have shed their leaves, the church tower often emerges above the canopy of trees. Upon reaching the busy A635 road, cross the bridge over the river and pause to observe the river. Continue your walk over the recreation ground, walk up the church steps through the churchyard, and return to Darfield Museum, marking the conclusion of your journey.

#### 4) A Much Longer Walk (approximately 5.5 miles)

If you are eager to extend your walk, follow the path along the river at Wombwell Ings. Instead of returning to Darfield via the old road, walk over the river bridge but then turn

immediately right, keeping alongside the river. This route promises a longer and more immersive experience of the landscape, allowing you to discover more of the wildlife along the way.



Continue your walk along the river, passing beneath the Dearne Valley Parkway Bridge, until you reach an old railway embankment. On your right, a small wooden bridge leads you onto the embankment, a pathway locally known as Warbler Way. This stretch is renowned for its abundance of warblers in the spring and summer months, though most have now migrated to Africa to escape the colder British winter.

The route forms a leafy tunnel, predominantly shaded by silver birch trees. Here and there, clearings open on either side, offering views across Bolton Ings Nature Reserve to the left and Old Moor Nature Reserve to the right. Near the end of Warbler Way there is a viewing hide that provides a prime spot to observe birdlife on the waters of Bolton Ings. From this vantage point, you may spot coots, gadwall and other birds, while marsh harriers can often be seen gliding silently above the tall reeds. With luck, you might catch a glimpse of a bittern—a heron-shaped bird with striking brown and black streaks—darting between reed patches in search of fish.

Further along the path, you will encounter the old railway bridge. Take a moment to observe the River Dearne here—the river flows wider here than it does at Darfield, thanks to streams and rivers converging at Broomhill. After crossing the bridge, turn right to join the Trans Pennine Trail, an iconic route stretching from west to east across England.

This section of the Trans Pennine Trail is a former colliery waste tip that has since been thoughtfully landscaped. The dense growth of trees lining the path obscures the golf course situated to the left, while to the right lies the expanse of Old Moor Nature Reserve.

Toward the end of this section of the trail, keep to the right to reach the banks of Knoll Beck. Following the path alongside the beck which leads to a small footbridge, which serves as the

entrance to the RSPB Old Moor reserve from the Trans Pennine Trail. This spot is ideal for taking a break and enjoying refreshments at the café or outside in the courtyard. Entry to the reserve itself requires a fee, but this is a famous place especially in the autumn months.

In the autumn months, the water levels at Wath Ings within Old Moor are deliberately lowered. This careful management creates optimal conditions for a wide range of waders—birds that thrive in muddy, shallow waters. You are likely to see green sandpipers, dunlin, ruff, and greenshank here. These low waters provide outstanding opportunities to observe these migratory species as they stop to rest and feed, many of them on their way to Africa.

Continue along the Trans Pennine Trail, following Knoll Beck beneath the Manvers Way bridge and over a large wooden bridge until you reach Pontefract Road. Turn right on Pontefract Road and proceed toward the large roundabout.

Cross the road at the roundabout and walk through Broomhill Village, passing the Old Moor Tavern and then rejoin the old road, guiding you back towards Cliff Road and from there across the recreation ground and back to Darfield Museum via the churchyard.