



Flag Fen
Archaeology Park

Flag Fen Through the Seasons

Information for Teachers

During the Living Things & their Habitats/Animals & Habitats learning programmes, pupils will have the opportunity to explore their surroundings to find out what lives at Flag Fen and where on site they can be found.

This document is designed to provide an insight into the array of living things and their habitats that we will be learning about on your school visit.

Please use what information you think would be useful to the children as a way of introducing their upcoming trip.

Spring

Spring is when our site starts coming alive, with Blackthorn starting to blossom, particularly around the car park. As a result our hedgerows become alive with our resident birds foraging for insects and berries, such as Blue tits, Great tits, Long-tailed tits, Robins and Blackbirds, feeding up in preparation for the breeding season.

During breeding season our birds are foraging for nesting materials (grass, moss, feathers, sticks and even wool!), lay eggs and look after these chicks until they fledge. Depending on the species of bird, their breeding season timeline looks a bit different! Blue tits lay 8-12 eggs and hatching in roughly 2 weeks and fledging in roughly 3 weeks. Whereas for Barn owls they only lay 4-6 eggs and hatch in 31 days and the chicks stay with their parents for 10 weeks before they fully fledge and leave the nest for good! Some birds forage in the day time, often seen amongst the trees and on the grassland whereas Barn owls hunt for small rodents such as Field voles, and Field mice during the night. With their heightened hearing and silent flight, they make excellent hunters!

As the year starts to warm up over spring and into summer we start to see an emergence of butterflies, particularly Red admiral, Peacock, Small white and Large white. Many of our butterflies use nettles, which can be found all over site, to lay their eggs on. From there these eggs hatch into caterpillars which feed on the nettles before emerging as a butterfly! Alongside nettles, many species of butterfly also enjoy buddleia which can be found just beyond the dig tent.

The ditch which runs through the site, hosts an array of wildlife as well, including water voles, a rare and special species here at Flag fen, one we survey for specifically every year, and equally the local pair of Kingfishers enjoy flying up and down the ditch whilst hunting for fish. Both of these species rely on waterways, both nesting in the banks, with kingfishers flashing their bright blue feathers as they traverse the ditch, often gone in a flash! Whereas water voles are rarely spotted but you can often here their 'plop' as they enter the water, chewing on sedge and reeds at a 45 degree angle, leaving a



Kingfisher
Photo credit: John Ellis



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pile of vegetation on the waters edge, so we know where they have been and how their local population is holding up!

Summer

Summer is when we see our peak number of butterflies on site as they bask in the sunshine feeding on the nectar of many flowers now blooming around site such as bramble, ivy, mallow species and honeydew secreted by aphids! Some butterflies feed on the abundance of willow around site, which grows along the Roman road, around the Mere and by the Museum. This is one of the most common trees on site, but one we also manage through the art of coppicing and pollarding in winter. This involves cutting the branches off the tree to leave the trunk and encourage more branches to grow; we use these to create fences around site but also have been used to build the new roundhouse!

As nesting season was well underway in spring, many of birds eggs will have hatched and chicks fledged, meaning many juvenile birds will be flying around site learning to feed, fly and survive!

Kestrels will be at their peak during this time, you will see them hovering as they fixate on their next meal, mice and voles, before diving down to catch them. These birds of prey nest on site, often in the boxes on the Preservation Hall so can often be found in the trees nearby. Unlike Kestrels, Red kites and Buzzards can be seen circling up high, riding the thermals, waiting for their next meal to appear, feeding on scraps rather than hunting for small mammals themselves.

We have a range of small mammals on site, with some you are more likely to see than others, particularly in spring and summer, including both stoats and weasels. Stoats have a black tip to their tail and are often seen hiding in the dead hedges which border our waterbodies such as by the mere or the visitor centre moat. Whilst they are small, they are quite fierce, often targeting rabbits 5 times their size!



Stoat
Photo credit: David Savory

Autumn

Autumn sees the arrival of migrants to our site, including Redwings and Fieldfare from Iceland and Scandinavia which particularly enjoy feasting on the remaining berries left on our Hawthorn trees. They also enjoy the area behind the preservation hall where they can hunt for insects hiding amongst the grass, often in larger numbers for safety.

Autumn is also the prime time to spot fungi, their fruiting bodies appear above ground often in rotting wood, around the bottom of trees, in grassy areas or even on trees and deadwood themselves. Some species such as the Jelly Ear fungus is spotted quite often on decaying wood, resembling an ear with jelly consistency, whereas Hares-foot inkcaps are often seen in the woodchip in the car park.



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Winter

Large flocks of finches start to build up over winter, largely comprising of Goldfinch, with Chaffinch and Siskin intertwined. These birds enjoy eating the catkins on the Alder trees next to the museum and Silver birch which are dotted around site.

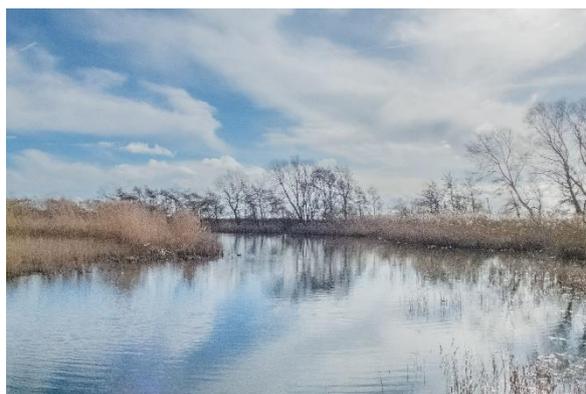
Whilst many species are less active and the leaves have fallen off the trees, there is less to forage around site. However grey squirrels are prepared for this and you will often see them digging up seeds and nuts which they buried in summer whilst the food was plentiful! They are often seen by the Iron Age roundhouse, with lots of small holes along the edge of the hedgerow path up the museum, evidence of their forward thinking!

Several species overwinter here which you may not know about unless you know where to look! Small overlooked species such as beetles, woodlouse, worms, earwigs, and millipedes can often be found hiding under a sheltered log, often feeding on its decaying matter. These are important species in our landscape, without them the rest of our wildlife would struggle to survive.

Mere

The mere itself holds a host wildlife from Cetti's warblers and Water rails calling to each other as they overwinter on site, to the Reed and Sedge warblers returning here to breed in spring. The Mere is mainly comprised of reeds and bulrush, with small pockets of yellow flag iris and water mint dotted around. It is also home to Moorhens, Coots and Mallards which nest here, but also hosts larger groups of overwintering Mallards, Teal and the occasional Mute swan.

Dragonflies and damselflies breed on the mere, laying their eggs in the water and on the vegetation on the waters edge. Once these eggs hatch into larvae, they can spend a year or even up to 5 years in the water before hatching, but only living as an adult for a few months! They are quite fierce underwater predators often eating other small invertebrates. Life within the water is also more diverse than what you may see above water, with many species being living here such as several species of beetle, and larvae from many different groups such as flies, stonefly, alderfly, mayfly as well as leeches, snails and worms!



Flag Fen mere
Photo credit: Emma Bothamley

Life at Flag Fen is really quite vibrant once you know where to look, keep your eyes peeled for birds flittering amongst the trees, check under logs and pieces of deadwood for detritivores eating away such as beetles, or amongst the flowers for insects feeding on their nectar!