

Cleanhill Woods, Aberchirder

Terrain – Woodland paths, with some inclines

We know that the Banffshire Coast is referred to as Scotland's Dolphin Coast for good reason, but there's so much more to our wildlife than the creatures beneath the waves. We have a fantastic array of wildlife, birdlife, flora and fauna just a few miles inland from our spectacular coastline.

One of the best places to see our wildlife in all its glory is the Cleanhill Woods in Aberchirder. Much of this woodland is maintained by the community, in partnership with external agencies, and is a stunning area of natural habitat.

There are three main circular routes of varying lengths, as well as less established paths, which can be accessed from the village via North Street. There is also an entrance as you head south on the A947 towards Huntly. Our advice? Just get out there and explore them all using the waymarkers as there is something to see on all routes at all times of the year.

As you look around the woodland, it's hard to believe that the hill was once almost entirely without any trees. Now there are trees in abundance and the community is gradually trying to introduce native species. A larch plantation was felled a few years ago and replaced with around 2,000 native broad-leaf species. Some of the native species to be found include Scots pine, ash, birch and rowan, along with non-native oak, maple, sycamore, chestnut, and elm.

The trees, wildflower and mosses on the hill support a variety of wildlife, in particular many species of birds. Keep your eyes on the sky and you are likely to catch a glimpse of wood pigeons, cuckoos, woodpeckers and blue tits – but don't forget to look down too as they may be feeding on insects living on fallen, dead trees.

If you are still on the hill as dusk approaches you might, just might, see an owl or bats. While the Cleanhill Woods are an excellent natural habitat, the community also assists Mother Nature by placing bird and bat boxes amongst the trees.

The forest floor, on which you will also see lots of different wildflower and fungus, is home to many different animals. Watch out as red squirrels, badgers, rabbits, foxes and roe deer scurry around and try to keep out of sight.

You may already know that this quiet area of Scotland was full of activity during World War II, as it was the home of RAF Banff Strike Wing. While you approach the highest point on Cleanhill, keep your eyes open for the remains of an observation post which was used during the conflict to keep watch for enemy aircraft. Close by is a reservoir which was built in the 1960s to improve Aberchirder's water supply.

Whatever route you choose, be sure to pause for a picnic at the most southern end of Cleanhill to take in the stunning views across country and over towards Huntly to the south, and to local landmark Knock Hill over to the west.