WALKING IN LONDON

PARK, HEATH AND WATERSIDE WALKS

25 WALKS IN LONDON'S GREEN SPACES

by Peter Aylmer

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Two local groups have been of inestimable help in putting these walks together: the London branch of the Long Distance Walkers Association and the Wren Group, whose main interest is Wanstead Flats. Both found themselves taken to far-flung parts of the capital with draft walk directions thrust in their hand, to make sure that I could distinguish left from right. Any remaining errors rest with the author, alas.

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Front cover: Isleworth from across the River Thames (Walk 18), inset: buff-tailed bumblebee

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Millrace, Watermeads nature reserve (Walk 19)

Route symbols on OS map extracts
(for OS legend see printed OS maps)

- route
- shortcut/diversion
- start/finish point
- start point
- finish point
- alternative start/finish point
- alternative finish point
- route direction

Features on the overview map

- Urban area
- 400m
- 200m
- 75m
- 0m

ROUTE SUMMARY TABLE

Walk	Start	Finish
1	Purfleet station	Purfleet station
2	Dagenham Civic Centre	Dagenham East tube
3	Chingford station	Chingford station
4	Forest Gate station; or Wanstead Park station	Forest Gate station; or Wanstead Park station
5	Stratford International station	East Ham Nature Reserve
6	Tottenham Hale station	Bromley-by-Bow tube; or Victoria Park
7	Crews Hill station	Cockfosters tube
8	Limehouse station; or Angel tube	Paddington station; or Angel tube
9	New River Head; or Finsbury Park station	Alexandra Palace station; or Finsbury Park station
10	Camden Road station; or Lancaster Gate tube	Westminster tube; or Lancaster Gate tube
11	Gospel Oak station; or Hampstead tube	Gospel Oak station; or Hampstead tube
12	Golders Green tube; or Totteridge and Whetstone tube	Moat Mount Open Space; or Totteridge and Whetstone tube
13	West Ruislip station	Northwood Hills tube
14	Yeading Lane	West Ruislip station; or Ickenham tube
15	Whitton station	Whitton station
16	Hampton Wick station	Hampton Wick station
17	New Malden station; or Robin Hood Gate	Richmond station; or Robin Hood Gate
18	Kew Bridge station; or Kew Gardens station	Kew Bridge station; or Kew Gardens station
19	Wandsworth Town station; or Morden tube	East Croydon station; or Morden tube
20	Coulsdon South station	Coulsdon South station
21	East Croydon station	New Addington tram stop
22	Nunhead station	Crystal Palace station; or Sydenham Hill station
23	Abbey Wood station	Falconwood station
24	Chislehurst station	Chislehurst station
25	Farnborough; or Downe	Farnborough; or Downe

	Distance	Time	Page
	8 miles (13km)	3½hrs	**25**
	6 miles (9km)	3hrs	**31**
	5½ miles (9km)	2½hrs	**36**
	6 miles (10km)	3hrs	**42**
	6 miles (10km)	3hrs	**47**
	7 miles (11km)	3hrs	**54**
	7 miles (11km)	3hrs	**63**
	10 miles (16km)	4½hrs	**69**
	10½ miles (17km)	5hrs	**77**
	7½ miles (12km)	3½hrs	**86**
	6½ miles (11km); or 4½ miles (7km)	3½hrs; or 2½hrs	**93**
	11 miles (17km)	5hrs	**100**
	6 miles (10km)	3hrs	**110**
	5 miles (8km)	2½hrs	**116**
	4 miles (6km)	2hrs	**121**
	4½ miles (7km); or 6½ miles (11km)	2½hrs; or 3½hrs	**125**
	9 miles (15km)	4hrs	**132**
	6½ miles (11km)	3½hrs	**141**
	13½ miles (21km)	6hrs	**147**
	6½ miles (11km); or 4½ miles (7km)	3½hrs; or 2½hrs	**158**
	7 miles (11km)	3½hrs	**163**
	6½ miles (10km); or 4½ miles (7km)	3½hrs; or 2½hrs	**169**
	7 miles (11km)	3½hrs	**175**
	7 miles (11km)	3½hrs	**183**
	9 miles (14km)	4hrs	**188**

Heronry Pond, Wanstead Park (Walk 4)

Spring in Regent's Park (Walk 10)

INTRODUCTION

London is a city of eight million people, and eight million trees. Its people speak 300 languages, while in its skies the cries of 300 bird species may be heard. For every acre of land that bears a building, road or railway, another is open space – garden, park, woodland, farmland, or perhaps just a forgotten corner too marginal or hard of access to attract the developer's shovel.

Although it is a world city, hub of finance and centre of culture, London is equally a city of open spaces in which 13,000 wildlife species have their niche. This might surprise both native Londoners and the teeming millions who visit for leisure or business: some is plain for all to see, as in the majestic Royal Parks that spread in a loop from Westminster through to Camden (Walk 10), but most is much less-known, except perhaps in its local community, such as Sydenham Hill Wood in the south (Walk 22) or Wanstead Flats in the east (Walk 4).

Take Wanstead Flats as an example. During 2016, the local wildlife group set itself the target of positively identifying 1000 species on its tiny patch, just under 1 mile square, across the year. They finished with a count of 1508, and that is in just 0.2% of London's area.

It should therefore come as no surprise that there is a serious

proposal to have London declared the world's first National Park City. Not for an entity with planning powers, as say in the South Downs or Peak District national parks; instead, one that would celebrate London's greenery and the opportunities it gives its people, both for recreation and business, and improve the richness, connectivity and biodiversity of London's habitats.

This book asks you to invert your view of London – to see it not as a city for humans, but as a range of habitats for wildlife – and this is incontrovertibly best done on foot. A corollary of London's greenness is that there are remarkable opportunities for the walker – one National Trail, six regional trails, and many more local ones, all taking advantage of over 600 miles of signed footpaths and countless extra miles of informal paths. You will from time to time encounter roads and houses – but on every one of these 25 walks, you will often wonder where all of these have gone.

That said, London is clearly a city that the hand of man has shaped in extreme ways, dating back now over two millennia. It would be foolish to say that even the off-the-beaten-track stretches, which you might visit with this book, are immune. Even the verdant open landscapes of the Lake District are highly artificial in their way, the result of centuries of tree-clearance for sheep pasture which, if mute economics were allowed to take its run, would soon become afforested again. Perhaps a better way of looking at things is to accept that no landscape of Britain – from

The Capital Ring is a well-signposted London trail

the great hillscapes of the Scottish Highlands to the long level fields of Fenland – is free from human influence. The question is, where is the line drawn between influence and overt domination?

In the case of London, it is a question without easy answer, bound up in the approaches of Londoners and their authorities (regal and mercantile, state and municipal) to the needs of humans in the city. And that, in turn, depends in part on its geology, and the very particular circumstances of an invading force of Romans in the first century AD.

THE GEOLOGY OF LONDON

If there were no city, there would be a great tidal flood plain, as the Thames made its way to the sea. It would be maybe five times the width of the current river. One of the meanings of the word 'strand' is 'bank of a river'; the central London thoroughfare known as the Strand, now 200 metres from the river, was named in 1002 as 'Strondway' because then the Thames lapped its edges.

The Roman army that Aulus Plautius commanded in AD43 landed in Kent and soon had a beachhead on the south bank of the Thames opposite what is now Westminster. A ford was practical here (it was then, roughly, at the tidal limit) and the army advanced to its first capital in England, Camulodonum, now Colchester in Essex, where it took over a Celtic fortified town. It was soon apparent, however, that the Thames would have to be bridged if supply lines were to be effective. A pontoon bridge in the vicinity of what is now London Bridge was replaced by AD55 by a permanent structure, and on its north bank the Romans started to create a new town from scratch, which by AD120 was known as Londinium.

The north bank was more favourable than the south as three little hills, now Ludgate Hill, Tower Hill and Cornhill, each rising barely 15 metres from the river, afforded some protection against flooding and perhaps some relief from insect life, which is why London's core is where it is. To gain some idea of what the territory must have been like, look at the marshes around Tollesbury, just south of Colchester, a warren of mud, channels and islands through which progress is difficult to this day.

Then, as now, the Thames, rising 215 miles away in the Cotswold hills, drains much of south-east England, and is the longest river entirely within England. For the last quarter of its length, it runs across a flat plain of clay laid down around 50 million years ago and so specific of its type that it is known as London Clay. Bricks made from it are yellow, and easy to distinguish throughout the capital. But for agriculture London Clay mostly gives rise to poor, alkaline soils, and in prehistoric times the flood plain supported fishing and rough pasture but little in the way of crops.

On a wider scale this clay – which covers most of Essex to London's east as well as much of modern London – is encircled by the chalklands of the foothills of the Chiltern Hills to the north and the North Downs to the south. In the south London boroughs of Croydon and Bromley there are examples of downland that could easily be mistaken for the South Downs of Hampshire and Sussex.

But there is a smaller scale, too, the most significant of which are the gravel beds and terraces. In south London, the sandy Lambeth beds are associated with heathland and acid soils. The Bagshot beds, named for the Surrey town, spread into London's south-west and also cap some of north London's higher parts, such as Harrow and Hampstead; they reappear too in Epping Forest, on London's north-east boundary with Essex.

Through this pattern run London's rivers. The Thames apart, they are often forgotten, even by Londoners, but they are an essential part of London's geography. Out east, the Lea (or Lee – it retains two spellings), the old Essex/London boundary, was an industrial corridor for many years, as was the Wandle in south-west London, its steep course once powering many watermills. With the Brent in north-west London, these three rivers divide the capital conveniently into the four sectors that provide a structure for this book.

The Lea, Brent and Wandle are the three major tributaries but others feature too. In the very centre of London, the Fleet, Westbourne and others have been lost to underground culverts, but against that can be set London's canal system. Between them, the rivers and canals provide many quiet spaces in

The Wandle in Watermeads Nature Reserve (Walk 19)

which wildlife can flourish, as well as untroubled routes for walkers.

To sum up: London is built on impermeable clays across the centre; porous chalk to the south and north-west; and gravel toppings appear throughout. Each of these, and little local outcrops too numerous to count, combined with the flow of London's many rivers, give rise to different habitats, and contribute to a diversity of wildlife which is still apparent to this day. It may require significant human intervention to maintain it – often in conflict with forces of human self-interest that seek to destroy it – but that diversity is a glory of London. Any Londoner should be proud of it, and any visitor can seek it.

LONDON'S OPEN SPACES

Londinium was tightly enclosed within its walls. After the Romans' departure, that settlement was largely left to ruin, but a new city grew up to its immediate west, and so began the slow development of London.

Slow, that is, until the 19th century, when the city became the largest in the world, and the tight Thamesside site that had served for centuries, barely more than a couple of miles long, simply could not hold the burgeoning population. The railways enabled new suburbs to be carved out of green fields, woods and market gardens, with the last major developments, such as the Metroland of outer north-west London and the great estates around Becontree in the east, taking place between the wars.

And yet, open space survives, by a mixture of private benevolence, public planning, some luck, and the often very active and direct role that Londoners themselves have played.

Although most London open spaces were first created so as to give humans a place to relax rather than wildlife a place to thrive, the two often go hand in hand. It's worth noting, too, that land which is not 'open', such as railway cuttings and derelict industrial sites, not to mention house gardens and allotments, can also be fantastically valuable for wildlife, precisely because human involvement is so limited.

Successive monarchs (and senior courtiers), at least until the 18th century, saw London's hinterland as an opportunity for sport, by which they meant hunting and frolics. Great tracts of land were maintained for that purpose, either as formal gardens such as those around Hampton Court or rougher lands over which men could gallop, nearby Bushy Park an example. But tastes, and pressures on royal time, changed, and the lands became less necessary to their daily needs.

The eleven Royal Parks range from small gardens (and one cemetery) to the famous large expanses such as Hyde Park and Richmond Park. Save for Greenwich Park in the south-east, these are all situated in the wealthier areas of the capital. Much of London's growth during the

Allotments, West Finchley (Walk 12)

19th century, often in cheap housing where crime and disease were rife, took place elsewhere. Many developers no doubt saw open space as just a lost opportunity for profit.

It took government action to create London's first public park, Victoria Park in the east end, in 1842. But such a top-down approach was needed less as first the Metropolitan Board of Works and then the London County Council, with smaller boroughs beneath it, took on the responsibility of providing open space for London's residents.

All around Victorian London there were great natural spaces held as common land. From Tudor times, and gathering great force from the 18th century, tracts of land which were once open for all to use – for grazing, say – became enclosed by a landowner and the collective rights withdrawn. Although the city had grown in part through the use of enclosure for housing and commercial development, areas right across the capital from Tooting Common to Hampstead Heath and Epping Forest were still held in common. In 1864 the proposed enclosure of much of one of the largest of the commons – Wimbledon – proved a spur to campaigners, who feared that if Wimbledon went, no other common in the capital would be safe. Meanwhile, in Epping Forest, enclosures by a local vicar were opposed by the direct action (and ensuing imprisonment) of his parishioners.

Within a year a Commons Preservation Society was set up, its aim 'to save London commons for the enjoyment and recreation of the public'. It had early success, with an act of 1866 that in essence barred further enclosure of London Commons. Not that the war was quite over; as an example, in 1896 a golf club sought to ban locals from One Tree Hill (Walk 22), only for mass demonstrations of first 15,000 then over 50,000 to assert their rights. However, we must thank the 1866 act and its successors for the retention of common land across the city, which provides much relatively untampered, relatively wild land to retain its natural aspect, and with it a refuge for many species that would otherwise be lost.

During the 20th century, many other open spaces were taken into local authority ownership while others have come under the control of the National Trust. Allied to that, the Metropolitan Green Belt established in 1938 provides a chain of green spaces encircling London. Not that such provisions are guarantors for all time. The green belt is chipped away a little each year, and the post-2010 relaxation of planning law deliberately makes the life of a developer easier.

London's physical boundaries may not increase, but the number of people who live in it undoubtedly will: perhaps to 10 million by 2027. That brings more pressure on places to live, work and play, and to travel within the city and beyond. Watchfulness and a campaigning spirit are needed to defend the open spaces that London has. But as we

Above Happy Valley (Walk 20)

Walk 1

Rainham Marshes and Coldharbour Point

This is a walk around one of the best places in southern England to see its birdlife. The marshes east of Rainham were formerly used by the military, which kept other users away, and the recent refurbishment of the area by the RSPB is an object lesson in conservation. The walk starts with a circuit of the reserve, just inside Essex, before taking to the riverside, at London's easternmost edge – industry hems in the path, but many species of gull, duck and wader rest and forage here.

The southern edge of the RSPB reserve

Start/finish	Purfleet station (TQ 554 781)
Distance	8 miles (13km)
Time	3½hrs
Maps	OS Explorer 162, Landranger 177
Refreshments	Royal Hotel, Purfleet; café at the RSPB centre
Public transport	Trains every 30 minutes off-peak
Parking	Rainham Marshes RSPB centre, New Tank Hill Road, RM19 1SZ (TQ 547 787)

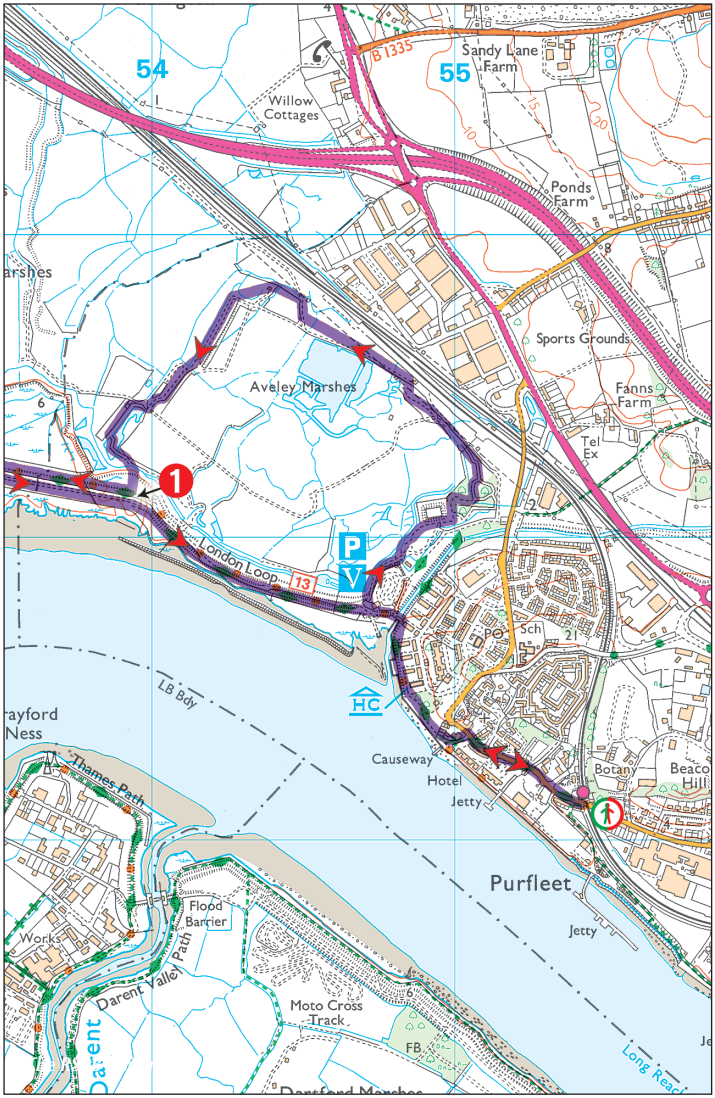
Turn right out of the station and walk along London Road to the Royal Hotel. Here turn left on a path for a few metres to the Thames, and turn right beside it, passing the **Purfleet Heritage Museum** housed in a former munitions magazine on your way to the RSPB centre. Here, get a ticket to enter Rainham Marshes Nature Reserve – it's free for RSPB members and residents of Thurrock and Havering.

Despite its name, the **RSPB** reserve in fact occupies Aveley marsh. The reserve is open daily except for Christmas Day and Boxing Day. Check www.rspb.org.uk for opening times and entry charges.

Cross the bridge from the end of the café and go ahead at the map sign, soon passing the first and most simple of the hides, known as the Purfleet Scrape. Ignore two left turns at the cordite store – at the second (where there is a little tunnel) go half-right – and also ignore two right turns on a boardwalk. In a little while you will come to the Ken Barrett hide, a good place to observe birdlife on the adjacent ponds.

Beyond the hide, there is a lengthy boardwalk section through a reedbed, and then a path takes you to the very substantial

The RSPB visitor centre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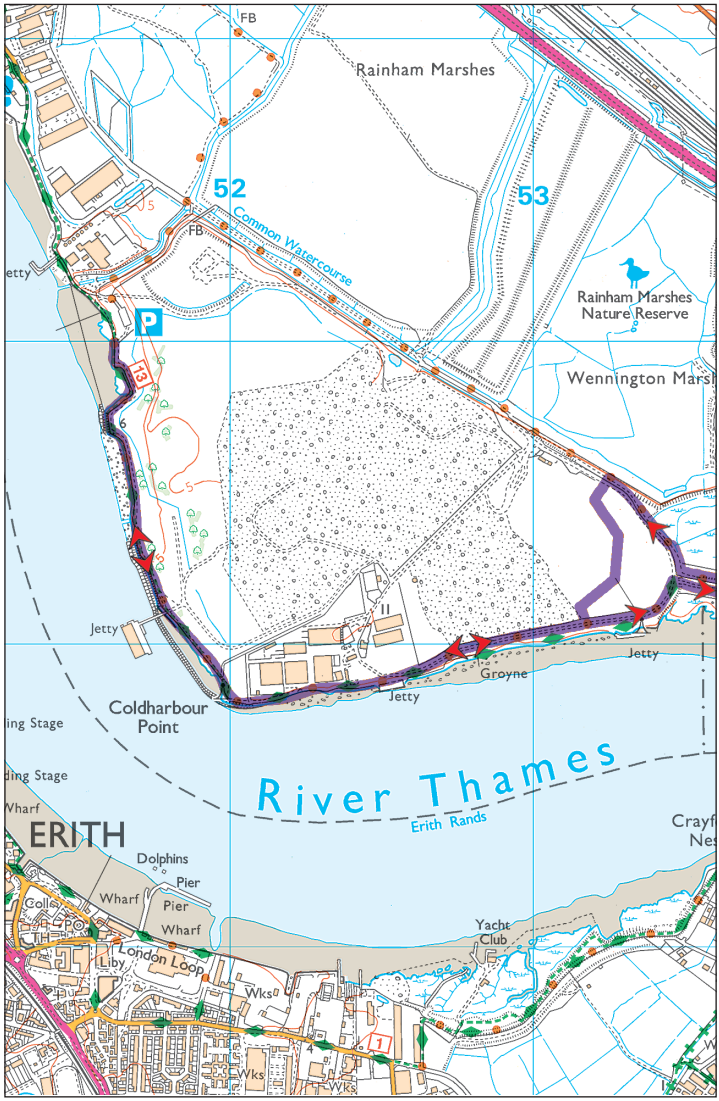
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Shooting Butts Hide. Continuing, there is a picnic area to your right, then more boardwalk leads you to a bridge. Here, it's a simple matter to continue back to the RSPB centre, but for the full walk, leave the reserve through the turnstile 1, and turn right on the path signposted 'Rainham Village'.

THE RESURRECTION OF RAINHAM MARSHES

Rainham, Wennington and Aveley marshes were used as a military firing range for virtually the entire 20th century, thus saving them from other development. In essence, they remained a medieval landscape, and indeed beneath their surface Bronze Age trackways, from a time when the regular flood and drain of the river gave a rhythm to everyday life, criss-cross the site.

To a bird looking for a resting place, or a source of food, even the 20th-century marshes would have looked much like any other wildlife-friendly river estuary. The end of military use gave the RSPB a great opportunity to acquire the eastern part of the marshes in 2000 and to set about restoring habitats such as pools and reedbeds. The bold new visitor centre opened in 2006.

Follow this until it comes to a gap in the fencing on your left, cross the road here, and continue ahead on a fenced path over the eastern tip of the landfill site. This is due for completion in the mid-2020s, after which it too will be actively managed for biodiversity. The path climbs a little to give good views over the marshes, down the Thames estuary, and across Kent, the North Downs in view, and Essex.

Cross the road again and turn right on the riverside path. At **Coldharbour Point**, where there is a navigation light, the river swings from west to north, bringing Shooter's Hill and the Canary Wharf financial district into view. In about 1km you reach the cement barges – around a dozen of them, remnants of a fleet of 500 used in the D-Day landings; they too are a favourite place for birds to rest. The large building in front of you is the Tilda Rice factory.

The stretch from the cement barges to Purfleet station forms the last 3 miles of the **London Loop**. This 150-mile long-distance path, essentially the walker's M25, starts just over the river at Erith Pier, barely a mile across the Thames – but 10 rewarding days or so for the keen walker.

Retrace your steps back past Coldharbour Point and keep on by the river until just before a gate to a small car park. Here turn right on a gravel path to access the sea wall, and stay on it for the views, perhaps venturing over towards the Thamesside saltmarshes. Once back at the RSPB centre, you can either go in, perhaps returning to one or two of the hides, or continue over the bridge over the Mardyke back to the station at **Purfleet**.

WATER PIPIT, *ANTHUS SPINOLETTA*

Photo: Russ Sherriff

On a typical winter's day, there might be 200 water pipits across England, and there's a good chance that a score of them will be dotted about Rainham Marshes.

Unlike rock and meadow pipits, the water pipit is only ever a winter visitor to these shores, arriving from the mountains of central and southern Europe in the late autumn and staying to the spring. Rainham is one of its few overwintering sites in England with the remainder being elsewhere in the south and east. It favours marshy sites but can also be found on flooded fields and places such as sewage works.

The water pipit returns to mainland Europe to breed but it might be possible to see it in breeding plumage just before it does so; it then has a pinkish breast and grey head. Normally it is greyish-brown above and pale below with a pale stripe over its eye.

It is difficult to distinguish a water pipit from a rock pipit, and indeed the two were once thought to be the same species: look for the white outer tail feathers when in flight, which the rock pipit does not have. Rock pipits can be found at Rainham, but they prefer the rougher coasts of western and northern Britain.