



Wessex
Rivers Trust



Chalk Stream Challenge

Sweatfords Water, Fordingbridge

The walk starts by the gate opposite Augustus Avenue. Follow the gravel path ahead and bear right, continuing along the path and keeping the stream on your left. After 20 meters or so, the path forks. Take a left here and enter the boardwalk as it snakes along to the right of the stream.

Depending on the time of year, you may see an abundance of hemlock water dropwort (1) here. A native plant, hemlock water dropwort favours the damp conditions provided by waterside and riverbank locations and can grow in huge swathes. When flowering in June and July the plant provides a great source of food for bees and other pollinating insects, but don't get too close as the sap can cause a rash and blistering.

Watch how the current changes as the stream twists and turns. Can you see the brickwork half submerged in the water (2)? These remain once supported sluice gates: moveable and usually vertical barriers used to manage the water level and flow rates in the channel. Can you spot any other man-made features along the route? Local dogs love to refresh themselves with a dip in the water at this point.

Challenge route: 1 mile

You should be able to cover these parts of the challenge on this walk:

- Section 1: 1
- Section 2: 2 and 3
- Section 3: 8, 9, 10 and 11
- Section 4: 12
- Section 5: 16, 18, 19 and 20

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Once off the boardwalk, turn left and enter a circular-shaped natural green space with benches. This space has been designed with curves and circles that are much like the circles you may spot in the natural world. As the path forks to the left, you will see Whitsbury Green play area on your right-hand side. You may want to stop and play!

Keeping the playground on your right, follow the lefthand path as it descends gently to the wooden gate. Go through the gate onto the next boardwalk and see if you can spot the mysterious garden gate tucked away on your left, amidst the trees. You may have to look behind you to spot it! Create a story in your head as to why this gate may be here.

Stop for a moment where the bridge crosses the stream and look how the river meanders. Can you memorise the shape of the river? Draw its shape in the air with your finger.

Ever played pooh sticks? What a perfect spot to play it here on the bridge! You could throw in your stick and time how quickly it takes to flow downstream. As you walk over the bridge and continue along the boardwalk, see if you can spot the alder trees on your left. The alder is a water-loving tree. Can you see the cone like female catkins (3)?

The boardwalk is a good spot to take in the surrounding meadows which are remnants of a much larger system of 'floated' water-meadows. 'Floated' means the meadows were deliberately flooded with river water for the winter, using a system of channels and sluices: this supplied silt which fertilised the fields whilst the river water also protected them from frost. As a result, the grass grew earlier than elsewhere and provided plenty of food for sheep and cattle. No longer grazed today, these meadows are a haven for wildlife whilst acting as a natural buffer, slowing floodwater and storing carbon. Depending on the season, the riverbanks and meadows may be covered in creeping buttercups and Lady's-smock (4). Also known as cuckoo-flower, it's pale pink blooms are thought to coincide with the arrival of the first cuckoo.

Follow the path as it twists and veers you into the woods. This deciduous woodland has a bench along the way for you to sit and watch the world around you. Take a seat, breathe in and look around. You may hear a woodpecker! The fallen trees, deliberately left, provide shelter for small mammals. If you were a mammal, where could you hide or hibernate?

Can you spot the curved and twisty branches of the oak trees? Or the vertical shoots of new growth on the hazel? The holly berries are a wonderful food source for mammals and birds. How many species of tree can you see? You may want to stop and see how many faces you can see within the smooth bark of the beech trees that stand gracefully

tall next to the path. There is an old, hidden green sign behind one of the trees, perhaps you can try and find it.

After a time, the path will descend to your right and you will enter the boardwalk again into a nature rich wetland area. If safe to do so, you may want to crouch down low on the boardwalk and look into the water. Can you spot a trout (5) in amongst the gravel?

Soon you will come upon the viewing platform (6), if you are lucky, you might see wagtails and wrens. Can you identify any birds from their song? You may even be lucky enough to spot a lapwing (7) zigzagging through the sky. These birds are now a red list species, so what a delight it would be to see one!

Take a mindful moment here. What can you hear? The rustle of the grasses? The water flowing? Ducks quacking? The sound of nearby feet on the boardwalk? Or the buzzing of insect wings? Keep your eyes and ears open, as in amongst the tall grasses, rushes and brambles, there is a wealth of wildlife.

Follow the boardwalk to the end. With the housing estate opposite, you will see another wooden gate to the left. Go through this and turn left onto Puddleslosh Lane and before long, you will come to a bridge. Stand on the bridge and take time to notice the flow of the water as it navigates the vegetation and the roots of the trees. Look out for water mint and fool's watercress enjoying the ebb and flow of the chalk stream habitat, along with rosebay willowherb growing in the margins. Spot the brambles clinging to the bridge wall and feel the moist, green moss. Look downstream and spy the tree stump in the centre of the stream's flow.

At this point, you will need to walk back on yourself along Puddleslosh Lane and head back through the wooden gate, now on your right. To finish the walk, continue straight on the stony path with the houses on your left. The balancing ponds (8) down to your right are designed to collect and hold the surface runoff from the housing estate, slowly releasing it to avoid overwhelming the sewer systems. This is a good spot to look for grey wagtails (9) as they hunt for insects. Soon the path will take you back to the play area and circular shaped green space with benches to rest and ponder should you wish. From here, you could retrace your steps back along the boardwalk, or at the fork in the path turn left and continue straight until you find yourself back by the gate opposite Augustus Avenue.

