



Dorset County Council working in partnership
Access - Conservation - Information - Recreation - Tourism

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This leaflet has been produced with sponsorship from the following organisations:



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dd02824



Ratty's Trail

A circular route within the Frome Valley corridor

Ratty's Trail was set up in 2005 to encourage local people and visitors to explore some of Dorset's beautiful countryside. Based from the county town of Dorchester, it highlights the importance of the River Frome as a habitat for a wide range of wildlife, most particularly the water vole. "Ratty" the water vole has suffered from habitat losses and degradation due to heavy grazing, housing development, insensitive river engineering and inappropriate bank management. Another major reason for the decline is predation from American mink. Other difficulties are caused by fluctuations in water levels, pollution, persecution and population fragmentation.

The richness of our chalk stream habitat is highly valued. Chalk streams support a unique range of plants, invertebrae and animals. The Environment Agency, Dorset Wildlife Trust and Dorset Countryside are working together to conserve these valuable wildlife habitats and hope to encourage growth in water vole numbers along the River Frome. If you would like to help survey for water voles along your local river, please contact Dorset Wildlife Trust on 01305 264620. Your survey results will help to shape conservation initiatives for the future.

Bryony Ford is the young artist who designed Ratty for this trail. She was picked amongst a number of children who have taken part in Dorset Countryside's logo competitions over the past 4 years. As a part of her prize she spent time with local artist, Semi Vine, learning techniques in watercolour which will no doubt benefit her in her future artwork.

RATTY'S TRAIL

(Circular route)



- Car park: **Top of town car park, Dorchester (SY) 6892 9064 (OS Explorer 117)**
- Grid ref:
- Local transport: **Buses & trains to and from Dorchester: contact Traveline**
- Distance: **1.5 miles (2.4 km)**
- Average time: **1 hour**
- Degree of difficulty: **Easy - all gates (no stiles)**
- Terrain: **Grass, farm tracks, Dorchester High Street**
- Countryside type: **Riverbank, farmland**
- Refreshments: **Dorchester**



From Top of Town car park, cross the road towards Dorchester County library and follow the pavement around the outside of County Hall initially on the Yeovil road (B3157). Cross the road at the steps down towards Hangmans Cottage (Grid Ref: 6905 9101), named after the hangman who lived here during the Monmouth Rebellion in 1685. On the riverbank an attractive willow weeps over the water.

At Blue Bridge, swans and their cygnets are frequent visitors and sometimes shoals of brown trout can be seen treading water near to the bridge. This is a favourite place for local children to paddle and enjoy the shallow river. Leaving the bridge, cross a couple of small footbridges and turn right across the fields. Sheep are grazed here so dogs on leads is essential. The view to Dorchester is impressive and reminds us that this is still a very rural area. Buzzards are often heard crying above and the occasional deer may be spotted. Pass a small copse to your right and you are now walking on Coker's Frome Farm land where the Annual Dorchester Show is held.

Meet up with the river again where, during summer time, the pink bonnets of the Himalayan Balsam will have taken over the riverbank. Although picturesque in colour, this alien species is known to take over bare soil on riverbanks and as a result, the natural variety of local plants are squeezed out. Alarmingly the plant is known to shoot out as many as 800 seeds per flower-head and up to a distance of 7 metres. As an experiment, volunteers have been engaged on some parts of the Frome to physically pull up the plant by its roots before flowering and grass seed has been planted in its place.

The trail meets the main High Street by Grey's Bridge. Turn right here over the bridge, observing the important notice about transportation on the other side! Beware of the traffic. Walk back towards the town until you reach the passage on your right, just before the White Hart Pub.

Following the path the houses are built up to the riverbank here. If you are lucky you might see Ratty, but don't be alarmed, the River Frome is one of the most important rivers for water vole in Britain. Unlike the larger eared, longer tailed brown rat, the furry, small eared water vole lives in burrows along the riverbank. Like some of the residents of Dorchester, water voles like to keep their gardens well mown and eat a fresh supply of greens. They feed on grasses, sedges and other waterside plants.

Carry on along the riverbank back to Hangman's Cottage. There are plenty of benches to sit on and ponder the wildlife of the river before you return to your home.

