

Flora of the River Banks

Above White Bridge the species range is very similar throughout the valley. The plainer plants like tansy, burdock, mugwort, yarrow, nettles, docks, thistles and grasses form a backdrop for the brighter Foxgloves, Red Campion, Comfrey, Mallow, the towering whites of Hogweeds, Cow Parsley, Hemlock Water Dropwort (poisonous!), and the architectural Teasels and Alexanders. Nestling amongst them are the dainty Stitchworts, vetches and Pennyworts. Honeysuckle, Brambles, Dog Roses, Bedstraws and Bindweeds scramble over all. Spring starts with scented violets in February, carrying through to bluebells and ransoms (wild garlic) in May. Through the summer months you can hardly see the river for the tall pink-flowered Himalayan Balsam.

In the old hedges above Colaton Raleigh you will occasionally see a small dead tree; because of the Dutch Elm disease, elms always die when they reach this height. Willows and alders predominate along the riverbanks on the flat but the sandstone cliffs have mature oak, sycamore and beech. On the east bank between Colaton Raleigh and Ricketty Bridge there is a small stand of Black Poplars, so-called because they have no silvery undersides to the leaves.

The Estuary

The Otter estuary is a Nature Reserve managed by Devon Wildlife Trust, and a good starting point is the Information Board at the NE corner of the Lime Kiln car park. The estuary was formed by the formation of the pebble bank separating it from the sea. This arrived quite



Common Teal

suddenly in the 16th century and the resulting deposition of mud brought down by the river led to the loss of navigation first to Otterton and later to the other small harbours nearer the sea. The path running along the top of the pebble bank has been constructed with wheelchairs in mind, as has the path running northwards from the car park as far as the White Bridge (more a dirty concrete colour). There are two viewing platforms built out from the latter path that give wheel chair users uninterrupted views of the saltmarsh and its channels.



Otterton

Otterton is a pretty village, with thatched cottages beside its brook and village green. Its name comes from the Saxon word for water - 'oder'. Until the estuary at Salterton was closed by the pebble bar Otterton was a thriving port,



Little Egret

probably established by the Saxons, trading in salt and wool. In the 13th century it belonged to the Abbey of Mont St. Michel. Otterton Mill, mentioned in Domesday, is still in working order, and, with its restaurant and mill shop, open to the public. Upstream is Otterton weir, on which a fish pass for migratory fish was built in 2001.



Shelduck

Estuary birds in Summer

The river is quieter now that the wintering duck have returned to their breeding grounds in the north, but **Shelduck** are pairing and the **Mute Swans** prepare to nest in the reed beds. Shelduck are striking birds with black, white and green plumage, a broad chestnut band across the breast and a red beak. You may be able

to see **Reed Warblers** or **Reed Buntings** which nest in the reed beds near White Bridge. Reed Buntings are recognisable from their jet black head and contrasting white moustache stripes which stand out as they sing from the tops of the reeds. From late July the **Canada Geese** return to the estuary after rearing their young.

Fish

The River Otter is home to Brown and Sea Trout and, now that the fish pass has been constructed in the weir at Otterton, Salmon have been found in the upper reaches of the river. Before this, however, the migratory Sea Trout seemed to find their way above Otterton weir, perhaps by one of the various channels associated with the mill. From the White Bridge you may see a small shoal of large fish swimming upstream. If they are grey and robust looking they are very likely to be Grey Mullet. These are sea fish but like to enter the river estuaries of the South Coast in summer.