JUBILEE PARK
• WOODHALL SPA •

A Beginner's Guide to

Insect & Wildlife Spotting

Find, photograph, and record insects and wildlife in your area

You don't need specialist equipment or a science degree to record wildlife and contribute to conservation efforts. Every sighting you record – a bumblebee on a flower, a beetle under a log, a dragonfly at a pond – can add to a national picture of how species are faring and help provide evidence of improvements for projects like the Woodhall Spa in Bloom project. This guide will help you make the most of your time outdoors.

1. Choosing the Right Conditions

Make the Most of Sunny Days

Weather makes an enormous difference. Insects are much more active in warmer weather.

- Warm, sunny days (above around 15°C) are when butterflies, bumblebees, hoverflies, and dragonflies are most active and visible.
- The warmest part of the day — roughly 10am to 3pm — is usually peak activity time for flying insects.
- Light winds are fine, but strong winds make insect photography very difficult and reduce activity.
- Overcast and cool days aren't wasted — beetles, woodlice, centipedes, and many other creepy crawlies can still be found under rocks and logs.

Best Habitats to Visit

- Wildflower plantings and herbaceous borders are magnets for pollinators.
- Woodland edges and hedgerows support a huge variety of species.
- Ponds, riverbanks, streams and ditches attract dragonflies, damselflies, and water beetles.
- Even an urban garden or a patch of wasteland with nettles and brambles can be surprisingly rich.

2. How to Find Insects

Sit Still and Be Patient

This is probably the single most important piece of advice. Find a likely spot — a patch of wildflowers, a sunny log, a pond margin — sit or stand quietly, and wait. Many insects will disappear as you approach, especially if you rush, but if you stay still for a few minutes, they will return and will often allow you to get closer than you'd expect. Rushing around rarely produces the best sightings.

A settled bumblebee feeding on a flower, for example, is often completely unbothered by a calm observer. The same bee will vanish instantly if you charge forward.

Look Under Rocks, Logs, and Leaf Litter

A huge proportion of Britain's insect life lives hidden in plain sight. Gently lifting stones, pieces of bark, or rotting logs can reveal:

- Ground beetles, rove beetles, and click beetles
- Centipedes, millipedes, and woodlice
- Slugs, snails, and earthworms
- Ants, ant eggs, and similar species

Always replace rocks and logs carefully exactly as you found them — the microhabitat underneath is home to these creatures and takes time to re-establish.

Other Search Techniques

- Sweep netting: sweep a fine mesh net through long grass or vegetation to collect small insects for inspection, then release them.
- Beat netting: hold a white sheet under a shrub and give a branch a sharp tap — caterpillars, beetles, and bugs will drop down.
- Night survey: a white sheet illuminated by a UV lamp ('moth trap') on a warm night can attract dozens of moth species.
- Water sampling: scoop pond water into a white tray and watch for aquatic invertebrates — water boatmen, diving beetles, and more.

3. Photographing Insects

The Step-Closer Technique

You don't need a specialist macro lens to get good insect photos. A smartphone camera can achieve excellent results. The key is a gradual approach:

- Take a photo from a comfortable distance as soon as you spot the insect.

- Take one small, slow step closer, pause, then take another photo.
- Repeat — step, pause, photograph — until the insect moves away or you have a sharp close-up.
- You will be surprised how close you can get this way. Butterflies and bees on flowers are often focused entirely on feeding and will tolerate a very close, calm observer.

Golden Rules for Better Photos

- Never shade the insect with your own shadow — this can alarm it and also makes the photo dark and flat. Keep the sun behind you or to the side.
- Ensure your photo is in focus – on an iPhone, tap the screen where you want the focus to be. Check online for how to manually focus other types of phone.
- Take multiple shots — insects move quickly and many photos will be blurred. A burst of five shots will usually yield at least one sharp image.
- Try to get the eyes in focus — for identification purposes, a photo showing the head clearly is more useful than a wing-only shot.
- Photograph the insect from multiple angles if possible — both sides, the top, and the underside can all be relevant for identification.
- Include a size reference if you can (a pencil, a hand, or a ruler) — or note the rough size in your records.

4. Identifying What You've Found

Google Lens

Google Lens (built into Android and available on iPhone via the Google app) can identify many common insects from a photo. Point it at your image, tap the Lens icon, and you'll usually get a suggested species along with links to find out more. It works best with clear, well-lit images of common species.

Dedicated ID Apps

- iNaturalist — photograph, upload, and the app's AI suggests an identification. A global community of experts then confirms or corrects it.
- Seek (by iNaturalist) — real-time identification using your camera viewfinder, good for beginners.
- PictureThis and PlantNet — primarily for plants, but useful for habitat context.
- UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme app — specifically for butterfly recording in the UK.

Field Guides

A good field guide is still one of the best identification tools. Collins Field Guide to Insects of Britain and Western Europe, or the RSPB Pocket Guide to British Wildlife, are excellent starting points. Many species groups — hoverflies, beetles, bugs — have dedicated specialist Facebook guides for when you want to go deeper.

5. Recording and Submitting Your Data

iRecord — Why It Matters

iRecord (irecord.org.uk) is the UK's national biodiversity recording platform, run by the Biological Records Centre. Submitting your sightings here is one of the most valuable things you can do as an amateur wildlife recorder:

- Expert verification: your records are checked by specialist volunteer verifiers — real experts in their species groups — who confirm or query your identification. This quality control makes the data genuinely useful to science.
- National datasets: verified records flow into national species distribution databases used by conservation charities, government bodies, and academic researchers.
- Tracking change over time: your records build a long-term picture of how species distributions and populations are shifting — vital for understanding the effects of climate change and habitat loss.
- Planning and policy: local wildlife records are consulted when planning applications are assessed and when Sites of Special Scientific Interest are designated.
- Personal record: iRecord stores all your sightings in one place, so you can look back at everything you've ever recorded, map it, and share it.

What to Record

For each sighting, try to note the following:

- Species (or your best guess — even 'bumblebee species' is valuable)
- Date and time
- Location — the more precise the better. Most apps will capture a grid reference automatically from your phone's GPS.
- Number of individuals (one, several, many)
- Habitat (wildflower meadow, garden, pond edge, woodland, etc.)
- Behaviour (feeding, basking, flying, mating, nesting)
- A photograph whenever possible — photos dramatically increase the chance of expert verification.
- Weather conditions (sunny, overcast, temperature if known)

Other Recording Schemes

- iNaturalist — excellent global platform that shares data with biodiversity databases.
- The Big Butterfly Count (Butterfly Conservation, every summer) — a simple 15-minute timed survey anyone can do.
- BeeWalk (Bumblebee Conservation Trust) — monthly transect walks recording bumblebees.
- Garden BirdWatch and Garden Moth Scheme (BTO/Atropos) — for garden-based monitoring.

6. Extra Tips for Getting the Most from Your Survey

- Go out regularly to the same patch. Repeated visits to the same site across a season produce far richer data than one-off trips to many different places.
- Keep a notebook as well as using apps. Jotting quick notes in the field — size, colour, flight pattern, which plant it was feeding on — gives you details to refer back to when identifying later.
- Learn the common species first. Once you can reliably identify a Red Admiral, a Buff-tailed Bumblebee, and a Common Blue Damselfly, rarer species will start to stand out naturally.
- Don't be afraid to record 'unidentified'. Even an unidentified beetle from a specific location and date is potentially useful — a verifier or expert contact may be able to name it from your photograph.
- Think about plant diversity. The richest insect habitats are usually those with the most diverse plant communities — particularly native wildflowers. Learning your plants helps you understand where to look.

7. Example Photos Taken with an iPhone

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