



# RANDALSTOWN FOREST



Total length: 4km Grade: Easy

Randalstown Forest is a mixed conifer forest that contains an owl conservation centre, Deer Park and several walking routes. There are also two small adjacent Nature Reserves at the forest edge on the shores of Lough Neagh. To get to Randalstown Forest follow New Street in Randalstown onto the Moneynick Road. Then turn left onto the Staffordstown Road, following the signs for Toome before turning left again following the signs for Randalstown Forest. While there is the option of following several trails within the forest, this card follows the route indicated by the red arrows.



From the parking area, follow the path into the forest, past the World of Owls Centre and through the turnstile. Immediately after passing through the turnstile, turn right and follow the path around the western side of the forest. The forest covers 430 acres and contains large broadleaved trees including oaks as well as a conifer plantation. In spring the forest floor is, in parts, a carpet of bluebells. Continue following this path for approximately 1,500m until you reach a “cross-roads” of tracks. The red arrow indicates you turn left but, for a small diversion, turn right at this point and follow the track through another turnstile to the Randalstown Forest and Farr’s Bay Nature Reserves.

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The loughshore here is heavily wooded and while parts of the ground are quite dry allowing ash, hawthorn and blackthorn to grow, other parts are wet and allow alder and willow to thrive. These wet areas were once part of the Lough itself, but are now isolated from it. This occurred as a result of the lowering of the water level of Lough Neagh



at several times since the 1840s in an attempt to reduce annual flooding of the surrounding countryside. The Yellow Flag Iris may be seen in these areas. Flowering from June to August, this tall handsome perennial plant has stiff and swordlike leaves. In former times the leaves were often used for thatching and bedding and the flowers were often left outside houses for the annual Corpus Christi festival in June.

At the loughshore, the rich birdlife of Lough Neagh can be discreetly observed from the bird hide. Lough Neagh, and nearby Lough Beg, have been designated as a “Ramsar” site, that is, a site of international importance because of the wildfowl that can be found here. In winter, the lough can be home to up to 100,000 waterfowl, mainly diving duck including the Goldeneye and Pochard. Other winter visitors include the Widgeon and Teal ducks. In the summer, the Lough is home to the Common Tern and Black-Headed Gull. Among the year-round residents are the Cormorant, Tufted Duck and the Mute Swan. Many of these species live off midge larvae - in particular those of the Lough Neagh Fly. These non-biting midges



live for up to one year in the lough mud before they emerge for one day in which they try to find a mate and lay their eggs before dying. On still days in spring and early summer, the air of the loughshore can be home to clouds of these flies so dense are their numbers.

After visiting the Nature Reserves, return to the “cross-roads” of tracks and continue following the red route. As the route passes the eastern edge of the forest, a shelter provides access to look into the neighbouring Deer Park which separates the Forest from the grounds of Shane’s Castle (the original castle was destroyed by fire in 1816). The track soon leads you back to the starting point where you turn right, pass through the turnstile and walk back to the car park. The forest also has several further options for walking routes in addition to this one.