



## REA'S WOOD



Total length: 4km Grade: Easy

Rea's Wood National Nature Reserve lies at the north-east corner of Lough Neagh. To get there follow the signs to the Lough Shore Park off the Dublin Road in Antrim. On reaching the Park, turn left and continue to the car park that looks out over Lough Neagh. Rea's Wood now lies to your left as you look out over the Lough.

At 383km<sup>2</sup>, Lough Neagh is the largest freshwater lake in Ireland and Britain. A lake, of varying size, has existed here at different times over the geological past.

Some 60 million years ago, north-east Ireland was the scene of intense volcanic activity and large volumes of lava were erupted. Older fractures, or faults, that had already existed here began to give way under the weight of the newly erupted lava and the Earth's crust began to sag. By 25 million years ago, large depressions had formed and they filled with water. Thick layers of clay accumulated on the floor of these ancient lakes while around their shores, a warm moist climate allowed forests to grow. As the trees of these forests died their rotting remains were compacted into peat and then into brown coal or lignite. Although, rarely seen at the surface or around the loughshore, Lough Neagh is underlain in places by clay over 340m thick and lignite some 100m thick.



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From the car park follow the path into Rea's Wood. Unlike the ancient lignite forest that once existed here, which was dominated by palms, conifers, cypress and ferns, Rea's Wood today is a fine example of a wet woodland. Dominated by alder, birch and willow trees the richly vegetated woodland floor is home for many plants as well as for rare invertebrates including snails, slugs, hoverflies and beetles. Some of these creatures are relics from the end of the Ice Age, some 13,000 years ago. They have survived due to the unbroken history of woodland cover here since trees recolonised the land after the retreat of the ice.



Continue to walk through Rea's Wood, ignoring all tracks off to the right and left. After 750m you reach the National Nature Reserve. In the midst of some of the mossy alder trees, swampy areas on the woodland floor are filled with sedges, Marsh Marigold, tall Yellow Flag Irises and the rare Summer Snowflake.

In spring time, the floor is filled with Wood Anemone, Wild Garlic and the Lesser Celendine. Spring is also a time for birdsong and among the familiar songs of the blackbird, wren and robin, the calls of the blackcap, willow warbler and chiffchaff may be heard. Between the path and the loughshore, several parallel sand bars can be seen with wet peaty hollows in between them. These hollows were once part of Lough Neagh itself but, following various schemes to control the level of the water in the Lough, they have been left isolated as the level of the Lough has fallen. Today, Lough Neagh is 3.6m lower than it was in 1847.

After a further kilometre, the path reaches an iron gate. This is the southern limit of the National Nature Reserve and there is no public access beyond this point. To finish this short walk through Rea's Wood, simply retrace your steps back to the Lough Shore Park. Once there, look to the right (i.e. westwards) to see the ruins of Shane's Castle. This was the seat of the Clondeboy O'Neills who were given the title to the estate in 1607 following the "Flight of the Earls" and the collapse of the old Gaelic order. The castle was destroyed by fire in 1816 though the castle grounds remain one of the most beautiful and well maintained in Ireland. The fire is often blamed on a banshee who is said to haunt the grounds of the castle. She is believed to be the daughter of a much earlier O'Neill who was carried off by fairy-folk to the bottom of the Lough while still a child.

