

# The Wildlife of Torwoodlee Golf Course



All golfers know that relaxation is a vital part of our game. No-one can concentrate on golf for the entire duration of an 18 hole round and there are few better ways to relax between shots than to notice and enjoy the natural beauties of the course.

Golf courses can offer a rich variety of wildlife habitats and our course at Torwoodlee is a fine example. Essentially a parkland course, it contains a large number of fine mature trees and some quite ancient ones. Its old oaks, some probably 200 years old, are a special feature. While all Torwoodlee players will have suffered dismayed encounters with these trees, all would agree that the whole character of our course is dependent on them. They are just magnificent in every season.



The **Nuthatch** is a bird which often uses these oaks. It has a variety of bold and very loud ringing calls for a bird of its small size and can be heard in the large oaks in any part of the course. The observant may spot it climbing up, or down, branches seeking insects. It's a species which has moved north in recent years. It only reached the Borders in the late 1980s but has become common since then. **Mistle** and **Song Thrushes**, **Blackbirds**, **Robins**, **Treecreepers** and **Wrens**, and various finches and tits are also frequently present in the wooded areas. **Great Spotted Woodpeckers** use the old trees, their March drumming a welcome sign that winter nears its end. The **Green Woodpecker** or "yaffle" nests in the large trees. It is uncommon in the Borders and we are fortunate to have it present most years at Torwoodlee. Perhaps it's just my imagination but its unmistakeable laughing call seems to be heard mainly after dismal shots!

The Gala Water, another key feature of the course, teems with life. **Grey Herons** stalk the banks, **Pied and Grey Wagtails** are often present and **Dippers** bob on prominent stones and rocks. One of the earliest breeders, the Dipper's delightful territorial song can be heard from December onwards. Just occasionally a **Kingfisher** will dash up or down the river. The way to spot them is to learn their abrupt squeaky call. I once heard this while addressing the ball on the 15<sup>th</sup> tee and was happy to abandon the stroke in favour of glimpsing the blue-streaked flash.

From March to September an **Osprey** will occasionally appear over the river though perhaps less often now that the Fish Farm has closed. During an Open competition I noticed one floating towards the river behind my city-based partner. He was concentrating on a difficult long putt. By the time the stroke was completed the Osprey had vanished behind trees and failed to re-appear - and I was reprimanded for not interrupting the putt. My partner had always wanted to see an Osprey!



Spring is particularly delightful at Torwoodlee. On one glorious May morning I logged 35 bird species during a 2 hour walk through the course. That included a Great Spotted Woodpecker extracting **Blue Tit** chicks from a nest hole—nature isn't always pretty. In spring resident birds are joined by summer migrants such as **Swallow, Sand and House Martins** and throughout the course we can hear the songs of **Willow Warbler** and **Chiffchaff**. A less common warbler, the **Whitethroat**, often sings its scratchy song from the rough ground on the edges of the long uphill 5<sup>th</sup> hole. In autumn migrant thrushes fly in from Scandinavia and Russia. During these October days the trees are at their autumnal best and can be full of feeding **Redwings** and **Fieldfares**.

Golfers should look upwards during their round. Divine intervention might be available but, more likely, there will be birds to delight the eye and add pleasure to the round. **Buzzards** and **Kestrel** are often seen and, in autumn, skeins of **Pink-footed Geese** which have arrived from Iceland and Greenland. Occasionally something completely unexpected turns up. One April morning my partner and I were walking up the 5<sup>th</sup> fairway when we saw three **White Storks** flying up the valley! My colleagues in the group behind failed to notice them. Unfortunately the date of that sighting was April 1<sup>st</sup> and my record is disbelieved to this day! **Hawfinches** are extremely rare in the Borders. I had been hoping I might one day come across one and finally succeeded on a freezing December morning. It was feeding among the bird cherries close to the 8<sup>th</sup> tee.

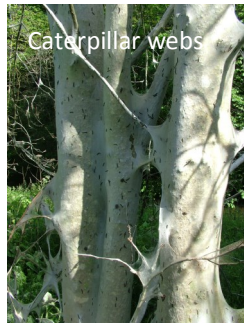


Lovely plants grow in various parts of the course, awaiting discovery by those of us who frequent the rough. In early summer the banks of the Gala Water give a fine display with a profusion of flowering plants such as **Water Avens, Red Campion, Bluebell, Stitchwort, Marsh Marigold** and **Forget-me-knot**. Behind the 6<sup>th</sup> tee there is a lovely stand of **Cuckoo Flower**. These flowering areas are patrolled by our common butterflies – **Orange-tip, Small Tortoiseshell, Red Admiral, Peacock** and **Green-veined White**. Other areas of rough, especially in the upper part of the course, are clothed in a variety of grasses. These areas will be visited in summer by **Ringlet** and **Meadow Brown** butterflies and by a number of day-flying moths such as **Chimney Sweeper** and **Silver-ground Carpet**.





The course and its environs hold a very rich moth population. At least 130 species have been found, though most of these are nocturnal and seldom seen by day. One moth species makes its presence felt in a most unusual way. The caterpillars of the **Bird-cherry Ermine** moth weave a protective web of silk under which to feed on the cherry leaves. In some years there is a population explosion such that a whole tree can be covered in a tent of silk under which every leaf is eaten. The summer of 2014 saw several trees along the Gala Water become such “silver ghosts”. Remarkably all had fully recovered by the end of the growing season.



Numerous other insects are evident in the summer months. Many **Hoverfly**, **Bee** and **Bumblebee** species can be seen seeking nectar sources all over the course. **Midges**, though, can be an unwelcome distraction during evening play. A more unusual distraction was caused by a huge nuptial hatch of **Flying Ants** one summer afternoon on the 1st tee. Various types of **Mayflies** and **Sedges Flies** hover over the river in vast numbers, their aquatic stages an important source of food for the river’s freshwater fish, such as **Brown Trout** and **Salmon**. An occasional **Damselfly** or **Dragonfly** may be seen, even hovering over fairway pools left from summer downpours.

**Roe Deer** are often seen leaping across the fairways to and from the river and a **Brown Hare** or **Stoat** will occasionally appear. **Rabbits** and **Moles** are commonplace though their nocturnal diggings and excavations are not always welcomed by the green keepers! We are very lucky to have a small population of **Red Squirrels** with more frequent sightings in recent years following some control of the non-native **Grey Squirrel**. The entrance driveway edge is perhaps the most likely place to see a Red Squirrel. In summer, late-finishing players may be aware of **Pipistrelle** and **Daubenton’s Bats** hunting, sometimes in large numbers, over the surface of the Gala Water. A sighting of an **Otter** is exceptional but quiet observation at dusk may be rewarded.



So please do try to see and listen to what’s around you while you play. Consider putting a pair of binoculars in your bag - it’s perfectly legal! We all know that Mark Twain’s often quoted remark “*golf is a good walk spoiled*” is nonsense. But do remember that you are playing in a very special place where an interesting and enjoyable walk can make such an important contribution to our wonderful sport.