

WELCOMBE AND MARSLAND VALLEYS from www.discoverbutterflies.com
Devon/Cornwall border the website for the book Discover Butterflies in Britain

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Looking east along Marsland valley

Two steep-sided coombes that run inland from the sea and have a mix of coastal heath, meadows, bracken-covered slopes, woodland, streams and ponds. Together covering 220 ha (550 acres), both valleys stretch inland for almost two miles.

Both these coombes are now managed by the Devon Wildlife Trust in collaboration with the Cornwall Wildlife Trust. They were bought in sections by Christopher Cadbury in the 1960s and he gave them to the nation. The reserve is included within the Marsland to Clovelly SAC and SSSI and the North Devon AONB.

TARGET SPECIES

34 of our 58 butterfly species have been recorded here, but the main interest is for Pearl-bordered and Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries. The Marsland reserve is managed to support both species and is home to the largest population of Pearl-bordered Fritillaries in Devon. There are also regular records of High Brown Fritillaries, Grizzled Skippers and Purple Hairstreaks, to name a few of the other species you may find.

The Atlantic coast south of Hartland Point is truly spectacular. High rocky cliffs are broken by deep valleys with steep-sided bracken-covered hillsides which provide ideal sheltered habitats for Fritillaries.

Start by driving down to the sea at Welcombe mouth. A small car park gives access to one of the loveliest beaches in Devon. The rock formations here are astonishing and, when the tide is low, they stretch out to a secluded sandy beach with some excellent rock pools. From here, you can either explore the Welcombe Valley by footpaths on both sides of the valley, or you can walk south over the cliffs to Marsland Mouth about half a mile away. Large parts of both valleys are now managed by the Devon and Cornwall Wildlife Trusts as one reserve. If you don't want to walk to Marsland from the car park, there is a recommended parking place south of Marsland Valley (see below). Unfortunately roadside parking is very difficult elsewhere because the roads are so narrow.

You may see Pearl-bordered and Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries anywhere in both valleys. However, although from mid-May onwards the south-facing slopes of the Welcombe Valley should be good for Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries, there will probably be more and certainly more Pearl-bordered Fritillaries in the Marsland Valley. When I went there on May 10, I started at a footpath that begins near the house at Marsland Mouth at SS214175 and there were Pearl-bordered, Speckled Woods and Large and Green-veined Whites fluttering all along the hedges. But go further into Marsland Valley, either from footpaths starting on the north or south of the valley. You will find sloping flowery meadows with a profusion of colour and nectar and a magnet for butterflies. I found that both Pearl-bordered and Small Pearl-bordered were on the wing. When you see them together, Pearl-bordered are, not surprisingly, the slightly larger butterflies. Also, they often look slightly more worn than fresh-looking Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries that have just emerged.

After walking east through a wooded area, you come to low-lying open ground at about SS2300173 where they were Small Pearl-bordered everywhere, always keeping close to the ground, and settling frequently to bask or drink nectar. This is the beginning of that part of the reserve which has been specially managed for both species. This is done by coppicing trees to open up glades where sunshine can penetrate and by preventing the bracken becoming too profuse. The strategy with bracken cutting is to cut only a proportion of it every season, so not disrupting the immature stages of next year's butterflies too much, but still keeping bracken growth in check. Provided the bracken is not too dense, violets (which are the caterpillars' foodplant) can thrive in the dappled light below its fronds, while dead bracken on the ground provides a warm bed for caterpillars to spend the winter in. Let the bracken get too dense so that violets are choked and die off, and conditions for these butterflies rapidly become unfavourable. It has been found that Pearl-bordered Fritillaries tend to flourish higher up the sloping hillsides than Small Pearl-bordered and where young bracken is regenerating. Small Pearl-bordered seem able to cope with wetter areas nearer the valley bottom and where there is taller vegetation with grass mixed with bracken, but there is no hard and fast distinction.

Welcombe and Marsland is a stunning site with so many different natural features and so much to offer that it is surprising that it is not more well-known. The late Christopher Cadbury, who was the grandson of the founder of the Cadbury chocolate empire, brought together all the individual parcels of land by personally buying these from their original landowners to create one vast nature reserve. He then donated it to the Royal Society for Nature Conservation (the parent body of the Wildlife Trusts) as well as giving them other nature reserves and an island in the Seychelles. The South-West Coast Path passes through the mouth of the reserve and there are numerous public rights-of-way in both valleys. However Devon Wildlife Trust asks that you obtain a permit if you want to stray from the rights of way, which you can do by applying to www.devonwildlifetrust.org.

The whole of the coastline from Marsland to Clovelly (round Hartland Point to the north) is a Site of Special Scientific Interest and also in a Special Area of Conservation under European rules. Most of Welcombe and Marsland Valleys lie within the parish of Welcombe, which is in Devon and within the North Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The boundary with Cornwall is the river in the Marsland Valley. From 1851 the living of St Nectan's Church in Welcombe was held in conjunction with Morwenstow (which is to the south, in Cornwall) by the poet, the Revd. W. S. Hoskins. He has the distinction of having written Cornwall's unofficial national anthem:

*A good sword and a trusty hand!
A merry heart and true!
King James's men shall understand
What Cornish lads can do!*

*And have they fixed the where and when?
And shall Trelawny die?
Here's twenty thousand Cornish men
Will know the reason why!*



Beach at Welcombe mouth



Beach steps at Welcombe mouth



Marsland Mouth



Beach steps at Welcombe mouth



Marsland hillside in May



Footpath entrance at Marsland Mouth



Footpath entrance at SY220175 at the NW end of Marsland valley



Pearl-bordered Fritillary (f) at the west end of the valley



Pearl-bordered Fritillary (m)



Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary (f)



Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary (m)



Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary



Speckled Wood



Unusually dark Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary (m)



Courting Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries (f below)



The Old Smithy Inn at Darracott



Pub sign at Darracott



Entrance to the Old Smithy

LOCATION

Explorer Map 126: Colvelly and Hartland
 Landranger (pink) Map 190: Bude, Clovelly and surrounding area

The Welcombe and Marsland Valleys Reserve is on the Atlantic coast on the border between Cornwall and Devon. It is approximately midway between Bideford and Bude at the southern end of the Hartland Peninsula. Access is possible only by minor roads. There is designated parking for the beach at Welcombe Mouth at SS213181. You can get here by following the minor roads from the village of Welcombe. To start nearer the entrance to Marsland valley, the Devon Wildlife Trust recommends parking on a track at SS217169. This is on the south side of Marsland valley. The best way to reach there is to turn off the A39 at the hamlet of Crimp at SS255155, follow the minor road through to the village of Shop, turn north, go over a cross-roads and then fork left. After a little over a mile from the fork, stop at a sharp left-hand bend. You should be able to park in the track on the right. Parking elsewhere is difficult but there may be space for a car on the north side of Marsland valley at SS222176 where there is a footpath entrance to Marsland valley.

There are no facilities for visitors but there is a pub called the Old Smithy at Darracott just south of Welcombe village.