

Meet the Locals – Autumn/Winter

The Mourne Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) includes a remarkable range of habitats, from marine and coastal environments stretching between Carlingford Lough and Dundrum Bay to the uplands of the Mourne Mountains and Slieve Croob, with areas of lowland farming in between. They support a wealth of wildlife – a biodiversity that enriches the area as a place to live, work and relax.

Nuts, apples, seeds, fruits and berries are in abundance and the colour of our foliage changing before falling all are very visible signs that our landscape is changing for the winter. Many of our birds and animals take advantage of this harvest and build up reserves of fat for migration or hibernation.

We are now experiencing much shorter days which can often be accompanied by spectacular sunsets, starry nights, morning mists.

Whilst making your way around the Mournes, see if you can spot some of the following well-known and much-loved locals:

Red Kite



A large bird of prey, which soars through the sky with its large wings and its characteristic forked tail. RSPB started a programme of re-introduction for Red Kites within the Mourne Area in 2008. Details of the progress of this project so far can be found on the RSPB website.

www.rspb.org.uk/whatwedo/projects/details/272999-northern-ireland-red-kites

Where? Red Kites are difficult to spot but around Slieve Croob is the most likely area. There are also reports that there are 2 breeding pairs in Mourne Park.

Red Squirrel



The red squirrel is a small native mammal which lives in areas of woodland and coniferous forest. They are bright red to dark brown in colour with tufted ears which are especially prominent in winter. With the introduction of the grey squirrel to the UK the numbers of reds have significantly declined, however Tollymore Red Squirrel Group has been working successfully within the local area to increase the numbers in recent years.

Where? Tollymore Forest Park, Castlewellan Forest Park, Rostrevor Forest and Donard Wood.

Pine Marten



This is a rare and agile member of the weasel family which is about the same size as a domestic cat. They feed on berries and fruit, mice and small rabbits and tend to make dens out of tree cavities and rock crevices. Recent studies suggest there is a breeding population present in the Mourne.

Where? Mourne's Conifer Forests

Curlew



The curlew is a large speckled/streaked brown wading bird with a long decurved beak. Males and females are similar in adult plumage. They are a ground nesting bird, with nests and eggs being especially vulnerable to predators such as foxes and crows...

Where? Over winter you can see them at Dundrum Bay and Annalong.

Atlantic Salmon



This rather large fish has the ability to swim against strong currents and leap waterfalls as it migrates up many of the Mourne's rivers when returning to spawning grounds. It grows from an egg to smolt before leaving the river and matures in the sea as it travels across from as far away as Greenland before returning to the waters from which it was born in.

Where? Footstick Bridge in Tollymore Forest Park is a great place to see the leaping salmon.

When? Spends most of its life in the sea but travels to fast flowing rivers to breed. It tends to move upstream from November to February.

Seals



Common (or harbour) seals are seen off the Mourne coast basking on rocks or 'bottling' nose-up in the water. They are sometimes joined by the larger grey seal, which has a longer face. Please avoid disturbing them.

Where? Off the coast of Murlough and Ballymartin.

Brent Goose



Up to 14,000 Brent geese fly from Arctic Canada to Strangford Lough every year which takes approximately 1 week during winter. Brent geese arrive to take advantage of the abundant eel grass found on mudflats. While some fly on to other parts of Ireland, the majority remain close to Strangford Lough.

Where? Dundrum Inner Bay

Juniper



This native plant grows on well-lit, well-drained soils. Mourne Juniper is a unique form of the shrub and grows in the less accessible parts of the mountains. Mourne Heritage Trust is currently running a programme propagating and planting juniper to increase the population of this priority species in the Mournes.

Where? Nature Trail in the Silent Valley Mountain Park. The Castles, Spellack, Hare's Gap and Slieve Beg.

Cotton Grass / Bog Cotton



In fruit it produces plumes of white cotton-like hairs and the reddish leaves of cotton grass mark the wet peaty ground of blanket bog. Cotton grass has tough leaves which do not rot away allowing a build up to form peat.

Where? Found in abundance in blanket bogs and low valleys throughout the Mournes.

Dune Grasses



There are three different types of grasses which are important in trapping sand resulting in sand dune formation. Sand couch grass is the floppiest and grows at the top of the beach where it can be covered by the tide and Sea Lyme-grass has sharp sword like leaves whereas Marram grass, builds the largest and tallest dunes.

Where? Sand Couch and Sea Lyme anywhere along the coast. Marram grass in Dundrum Bay and Cranfield.

If you would like to know more about the Mournes' habitat and diversity, please follow the link <http://www.mournelive.com/biodiversity>

We are always interested in receiving new pictures of our locals at home. If you capture something special, and are willing to allow the use of your image by us, please upload your image and email it to us mandy.mcavoy@mourne.co.uk