

Steps Hill, Ivinghoe Beacon & Incombe Hole – just beyond the western edge of Hertfordshire

Steve Chilton visited on 14 June

It doesn't matter where you choose to walk from the main car park at Steps Hill, the views will always be spectacular and birds, butterflies, flowers and other wildlife are plentiful and varied.



I walked down the road (north but downhill) to the point where the Ridgeway crosses it and headed up towards Ivinghoe Beacon. From here there are breathtaking views of the Vale of Aylesbury, the Gade Valley and across to the Lion carved into the chalk hillside at Whipsnade.

The lower slopes of the hills are a paradise for orchid lovers. The first species you see will probably be Fragrant Orchid.

They are abundant and often grow close to the path. Smell them – they really are fragrant. Look out for an occasional white form of the plant, I found one lovely spike.





Common Spotted Orchids seemed to favour the steeper slopes and less accessible areas where they grow in quite dense colonies.

The colours ranged from white with pale pink markings to a deep purple with much darker markings. They also varied in structure but all had the distinctive spotted leaves.



Pyramidal Orchids were just coming into flower. They were more widely distributed and less abundant than their fragrant relatives but the deep pink colour made the tight little cones fairly easy to find.

Much more difficult to find were the green-flowered Common Twayblade (right). They are there though and it is well worth the effort of searching for them.

Other flowers I found in that area included Kidney Vetch, Lady's Bedstraw, Silverweed, Common Rock Rose, Ribwort Plantain, Common Birdsfoot Trefoil, Yellow Rattle and Greater Knapweed.

The hills are worth visiting just for the amazing variety of beautiful grasses. Of those, I managed to identify and photograph the wonderful Quaking Grass, see below.

I retraced my steps, crossed the road and followed a path which runs anti-clockwise around the base of Steps Hill before climbing up above Incombe Hole.

Buzzards passed overhead, Meadow Pipits performed their parachute display and Yellowhammers sang their 'little bit of cheese' song from the top branches of shrubs.

Linnets, Skylarks, Blackcaps, Whitethroats and Willow Warblers also sang as did a single Chiffchaff when I went through a small wooded area.

Butterflies were restless but I identified Common Blue, Grizzled Skipper, Large White, Orange Tip, Brimstone, Meadow Brown, Ringlet and Speckled Wood. Another Skipper species was probably Small or Essex but I couldn't get close enough to be sure.

At the base of Steps Hill the path runs alongside a cultivated field where there were several large orange butterflies. I suspect that they were Dark Green Fritillaries. There were also lots of day flying moths but I failed to identify or photograph any of them.

On the climb up to Incombe Hole there were Dog Rose, Wild Thyme, White Campion and Dropwort in flower.

The final two species of wild flower which caught my eye were Meadow Cranesbill which was growing in an area of scrub beside a parking area and Deadly Nightshade which I found at the side of the road opposite the entrance to the main car park.

As I drove back towards Hertfordshire two Red Kites and a Kestrel flew over my car to complete a very enjoyable day.

Steps Hill, Ivinghoe Beacon & Incombe Hole are all situated just over the Hertfordshire border in Buckinghamshire. From the B489 Dunstable to Ivinghoe road take the left hand turn towards Ringshall and the car park is on the left after one mile, Grid Ref SP962160.

Also nearby, within Hertfordshire and worth visiting are Tring Reservoirs (Wilstone, SP903135, HMWT nature reserve), the Aylesbury arm of the Grand Union canal (SP896142) for dragonflies and the woodlands in Ashridge Park (SP970121, National Trust).

