

Turn left as you leave The Casterbridge and walk a few yards east to Swan Bridge, the bridge over the Mill Stream. On the far side of the bridge take the footpath beside the canalised watercourse to the left (north).



After a minute's walk, passing three footbridges, there is a small nature reserve on the right. Take a short detour around the circular reserve footpath, most of it is boardwalk. The reserve has many of the characteristics of carr woodland, as do two other parcels of trees on the early stages of this walk.

Continue along the waterside path. The far bank here was, until recently, the haunt of semi-urban water voles and in places their tunnels can still be seen where banks are eroding. This section is popular with duck feeders and so the far bank and the river bed show signs of unnaturally rank growth and distorted flora due to the dual effects of heavy grazing and excess droppings.

The path runs past allotment gardens on the right and then a small, long overgrown, orchard. After the sharp right turn the high bank on the far side of the stream was the site of a mediaeval castle, now it is surmounted by Dorchester Prison. The wet, wooded area on your right contained allotment gardens until the 1970's. This section usually provides a good selection of the bolder water, garden and woodland-edge birds.

In a little while the path you have been following meets another. Turn to the right, past a small, circular pond.



From here you walk away from the town alongside a meadow until the tarmac path turns left over a footbridge, do not cross this bridge but continue on the gravel path to the older, iron, footbridge known as Blue Bridge.



Three streams converge at Blue Bridge. Looking upstream, the River Cerne enters from the right, the River Frome is the central channel and the water on the left comes from what is now a flood relief channel from the Mill Stream. These are less disturbed waterways and it is worth keeping a sharp lookout for shy species.

Follow the track beyond the bridge to a ford and footbridge; this might be dry in summer. It is always worth pausing here to survey the adjacent fields before following the track into the tree shade where your ears may detect more than your eyes.

Continue along the track to another shallow ford and a low footbridge. This too might be dry depending on recent rainfall.

Immediately after this second bridge you have a choice: *There is a short cut directly across the field to the right (east), keep close to the wire fence and you will find a kissing gate in the far hedge. This field path is the better route for those seeking a pleasant walk rather than wishing to maximise the bird watching potential. Turn right after the kissing*

gate and you will see the house with the round chimneys in front of you (see below.)

Those following the full route should continue up the track until it joins another, larger track. Turn right and follow this track to Slyer's Lane. Turn right onto Slyer's Lane; take care as there is no footpath on this stretch of road. Walk up a short hill and along a hedge bordered lane for a quarter of a mile to another, unmarked, track on the right. Take this track and, at the bottom of a slight hill you will see a house with round, stone, chimneys.



The longer route goes around an area of parkland where magnificent, decaying, trees attract some different species and where, as you climb a little way out of the valley, a range of dry farmland species may be observed.

Follow the track to the left, just past the house with the round chimneys it narrows to a footpath between a field edge and a small wood which once, before a fire early in the 20th Century, was the garden and orchard of a large house. Mammal watchers should be particularly alert for signs of deer in this area.

The path continues through a gate, along the edge of a field and then through another gate to a turning area in front of Coker's Frome farmyard. Your way runs straight ahead through a farm gate and along a well made track. Look to your right here, there is a still pond in the middle of the field and a different range of waterfowl may be seen.

At the next set of gates turn to your right down a track which soon turns left into a driveway whilst your path lies through a gate



and continues along the side of the field.

At the end of the field the path turns sharply left around the front of a cottage and

then right over a footbridge. Facing the front of the cottage is a disused iron water meadow sluice that has, built into its structure but obscured now by brambles, an eel trap, a device by which water from the meadows could be diverted through a metal rack to collect migrating eels.



The path goes through a mixture of scrub and oak covert to an iron bridge alongside a ware of iron hatches, there are five of them left although this spot is still called 'Ten Hatches' after the full set which once controlled both channels here.



In a little way you come to Grey's Bridge and the main road.

The route of the Dorchester Loop bird watching reports follows the main road into town alongside suburban gardens until completing the circle at Swan Bridge.

You may like to detour along a quieter route. Cross the road to the footpath on the east side of Grey's Bridge, read the admonition on the cast iron plate as you pass and then turn away from the main road along King's Road next to the children's playground.

A short way along the road, immediately after the tyre depot, cross the road and take an urban footpath called 'Hardy Avenue'. This footpath opens into a street, go straight ahead towards the church tower on the hill. Before you get there you come to a T junction and turn right. Almost at once the road turns right into a cul-de-sac called 'River Crescent' but you can carry straight on along another waterside footpath.



This path will take you back to Swan Bridge and The Casterbridge. On warm summer nights this is a good place to come to watch bats hunting moths around the street lamps.

Derek Moody © 2009

You are responsible for your own safety. The route shown is only a suggestion. Follow the countryside code and take due care when walking on roads and alongside water, especially so after wet weather. Information here was checked at time of writing but the countryside changes continually. Neither Derek Moody nor The Casterbridge are liable for loss or injury incurred on this walk.

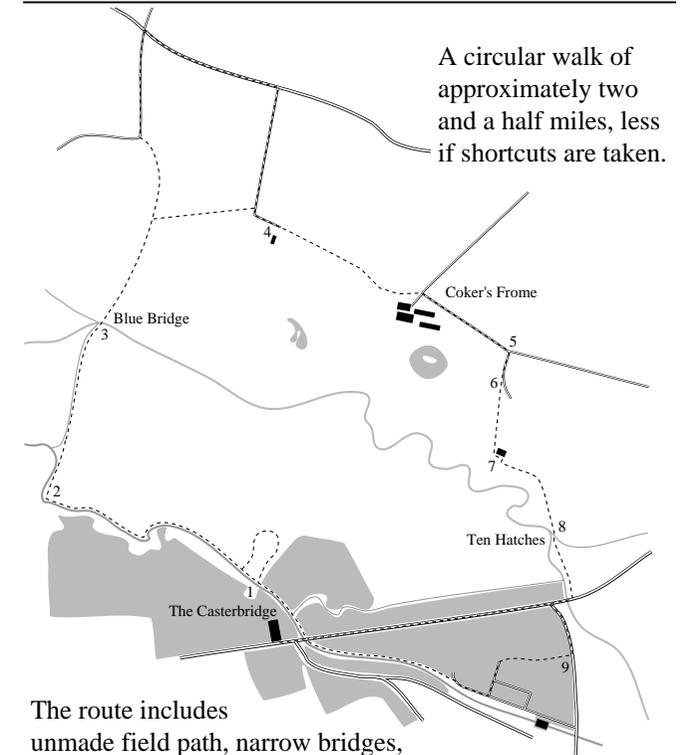
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*This is the route of the **Dorchester Loop** bird watching reports. Most of the walk follows "Ratty's Trail", a County Council waymarked walk. Unfortunately you are no longer likely to see Ratty, the water vole, on this walk as the local population was wiped out by mink in 2002-2003.*



The route includes unmade field path, narrow bridges, kissing gates, a section of country lane without a footpath and farm tracks. It is unsuitable for wheelchairs.