DISCOVERING LONDON

Secrets of a wet day out

The Wetland Centre provides a beautiful haven for the capital's wildlife, finds **Samantha Whitaker**



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In the heart of London, migrating birds have already begun checking in for their summer holiday at the London Wetland Centre. Located just 25 minutes from central London in Barnes, the beautiful 105-acre wildlife reserve and visitor attraction has been identified as the best urban site in Europe to watch wetland wildlife.

The project was the dream of Sir Peter Scott, described as conservation's 'patron saint' by Sir David Attenborough OM. His vision was to create a wild area for native birds, as the River Thames, which runs adjacent to it, acts as a 'flyway' for migrating birds. Today, the focus has shifted, and as well as attracting more than 180 bird species a year, the centre is home to 30 natural wetland plant communities, and hundreds of insects and mammals, including 19 species of dragonfly and seven species of bat.

The Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT) runs the centre with the aim of conserving the area and its wildlife, and bringing people closer to the wildlife. It attracts around 220,000 visitors a year, including more than 24,000 children from London schools. For a modest entrance fee, visitors can wander around and come face-to-face with ducks, geese and swans from around the world, including white-faced whistling ducks from South America. An adventure area with a water vole tunnel, duck race exhibit and zip line that follows the migration route of the Bewick's Swan separates the serious bird watchers from the lively children.

With so many areas and so much to see, it is difficult to know where to begin. As I approach, the hum of traffic is replaced by a symphony of tweets, twitters and quacks, giving the sensation that I have stepped out of London and into the countryside. A mallard glides across my path, skimming in to land in a pond. At the visitor centre, there is a glass viewing observatory and an interactive discovery centre with touch-screens and water games, and in the Pond Zone, a guide explains what lies beneath the calm waters. From the Peacock Tower, I climb three stories to view the entire site: there is an area of muddy reed beds, a large main lake, and a grazing marsh, which is artificially flooded in winter and then grazed by cows and sheep to create the right environment for snipe, redshank and lapwing.

Some of the most beautiful areas of the centre are linked by boardwalks and meandering paths, so visitors can stroll through wetland meadows, past smaller ponds, and explore five other bird hides. This walk varies greatly as the seasons change, with singing reed warblers, swallows and carpets of wildflowers in the summer; and thousands of ducks that have migrated from Russia and Siberia in the winter.

The centre offers a varied events programme, including free guided walks (twice a day) and hands-on activities for children and families. And if you need a rest after all that, there is a water's edge restaurant with tables inside and out. This year, the centre will be hosting the Love London Recycled Sculpture Show (from 4 June), as part of the Love London Green Festival. Created from everyday waste, the innovative sculptures will be placed all over the site, and there are already two frogs on show, made from crushed CDs and



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BREATH OF FRESH AIR: It is easy for visitors to find a quiet spot in the 105-acre reserve

VISITOR INFORMATION

The London Wetland Centre at Queen Elizabeth's Walk, Barnes, SW13 is open seven days a week. For opening times and prices see www.wwt.org.uk or call 020 8409 4400. Train to Barnes or Tube to Hammersmith then 33, 72 or 209 bus or 283 'duck bus'.

WWT membership provides free entry to all nine wetland centres in the UK and helps to support the conservation work of the charity.