Starts: Suffolk Broads Wildlife Centre, Carlton Marshes Nature Reserve
Parking: Suffolk Broads Wildlife Centre
Distance & time required: 2 1/2 miles (4 km), 1 1/2 - 2 hours

This walk explores a varied and attractive part of the Waveney Valley. It takes you through Carlton Marshes Nature Reserve, along the edge of the grazing marshes and arable fields, to the riverbank and back. This is a lovely walk to do at any time of year, with each season providing a different atmosphere, landscape and wildlife.

Carlton Marshes is one of many reserves owned and managed by the Suffolk Wildlife Trust. The reserve is like the Broads in miniature. You’ll find all the features of the Broads landscape here, including grazing marshes, dykes, reed-beds, fens and carr or wet woodland. With such a variety of habitats, the reserve has a wonderful range of wetland birds, plants and insects.

As you walk along, you’ll notice that most of the reserve is grazing marsh. The marshes have been used as summer grazing for cattle since medieval times. This has created ideal conditions for wetland plants on the marshes and in the drainage ditches or dykes which bisect them. Not only nationally rare plants such as frogbit and arrowhead but also the colourful yellow rattle, pink ragged robin and purple loosestrife are among the many flowers you can see in summer.

The marshes are also home to a variety of marshland birds all year round. Snipe, redshank and lapwing nest here and in winter you might catch a glimpse of a short-eared owl or a hen harrier, swooping low over the marshes, looking for food.

Most of the land surrounding Carlton Marshes has been drained to grow arable crops. Farming has shaped the Broads landscape over the centuries and as farming methods change, so the landscape and its wildlife also change. Notice the contrast between the grazing marsh landscape and the arable fields.

The drained grazing marshes are extremely fertile and between the Second World War and the early 1980s, about one fifth of the Broads marshes were converted to arable. This policy has now been reversed because of the landscape and wildlife value of the marshes.

Notice the reed fringing the River Waveney. In the early 20th century, most of the Broads rivers would have been ‘fringed’ like this. Unfortunately, today, many riverbanks have become badly eroded with little or no reed. Poor quality water and boat wash from the thousands of motor cruisers which annually navigate the rivers have caused this decline. The Broads Authority, the Environment Agency and other organisations are gradually tackling the problems of riverbank erosion so that reed fringing can be re-established.

The path now follows the Angles Way. Immediately on your left, Pelto’s Marsh is used to grow arable crops like corn or sugar beet. Arable crops are usually rotated on a yearly basis so that the soil doesn’t become exhausted.

Further along on your left, there are good views out over the reed beds of White Cast Marshes. Reed beds contain a whole world of wildlife within them. They provide food and nest sites for many common birds and some rare ones. Many species of insects including moths, butterflies and dragonflies, as well as a large variety of flowering plants, are also found here.

Historically there were many reed beds or fens in the Broads. Fen crops like reed and sedge were harvested and used for thatching. However, changes in farming practices meant that large areas of fen were drained to grow arable crops. Today, many of the remaining fens are part of nature reserves like Carlton Marshes. The Broads Authority is also working with landowners to conserve remaining fens on private land.

The path now continues back to the Suffolk Broads Wildlife Centre which has an interesting display on the history and wildlife of the Broads. Teas and coffees are also available when the Centre is open.