

VIRIDOR WOOD

by Craig Higson and Rob Thorpe



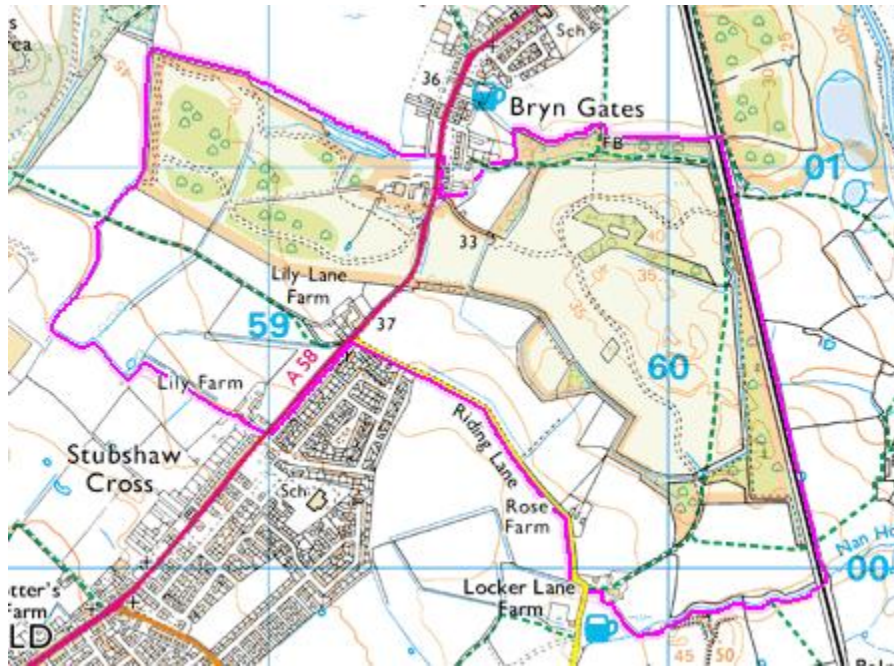
If you visit the sightings pages of the Manchester Birding forum you will have no doubt seen the name Viridor Wood, but few people outside of Wigan, possibly even Ashton in Makerfield, will have actually been there or even know where it is.

Viridor Wood is a Forestry Commission managed site located just north of Ashton in Makerfield, straddling both sides of the A58. Years ago the site apparently contained an old colliery, 10 years ago it was farmland before being purchased by the Forestry Commission and converted into its current guise. Although the site sees substantial use by dog walkers (it is after all a community woodland so what else should you expect) it is certainly quieter than either Pennington Flash or the adjacent Three Sisters, and I have visited many times without seeing more than a couple of people.

Travelling north from Ashton-in-Makerfield, the car park is located on the right hand side of the A58, just after Lily Lane Farm. There's room for about a dozen or so cars. From here you can access all areas of the site. Technically Viridor Wood is split into three distinct areas. The western section between the Three Sisters Recreation Area and the A58, the middle section to the east of the A58, and the eastern most section on the east of the railway and bordering the Abram Flashes. This guide will only be covering the first two sections as the section on the east of the railway is more in keeping with (and sightings generally reported under) Abram Flashes. However, the guide does include some areas of agricultural land on the western side which, although not technically part of 'Viridor Wood', certainly shouldn't be overlooked as they have considerable birdy potential.

The site contains a mix of rough grassland, young plantation woodland, remnant hedgerows and some more mature woodland. It is almost completely surrounded by agricultural land. A full circuit of the site is approximately 4.5km and could easily be done in an hour, but if you're birding you need to allow a good couple of hours to do it justice.

Sandwiched as it is between Three Sisters, Abram Flashes and Wigan Flashes (just a kilometre or so to the north) there are always plenty of birds flying over the site and it's always worth keeping one eye on the skies. Gulls fly over in flocks of varying size on a regular basis, wildfowl are not uncommon and species as diverse as Redshank, Oystercatcher, Common Tern, Hobby and Merlin have all been recorded flying over, along with the expected flyover species such as Carrion Crow and Rook.



Above: Viridor Wood site boundary map

The western section

To access the western part of the site you will need to cross the busy A58 road from the car park. The footpath is immediately opposite. It's worth walking the 50 metres or so to join the main footpath and get away from the traffic noise before stopping to scan over the paddocks on your left hand side. These paddocks often contain Meadow Pipits, Skylarks and Pied Wagtails. Flocks of Goldfinches can sometimes be seen feeding on the dead seed heads, and birds such as Grey and Yellow Wagtails, Wheatear, Stonechat and Whinchat have been seen in and around the paddocks.



Above: Horse Paddocks

Swallows and House Martins are ever present during the summer months around the farm buildings. The area of grassland immediately adjacent to the main A58, where you crossed the road, shouldn't be dismissed either. Barn Owl has been seen hunting here on more than one occasion.

Following the circuit in a clockwise direction, the footpath basically follows a loop around an area of plantation woodland, which itself is surrounded by coarse grassland and relict hedgerows. In spring and summer Willow Warblers are plentiful, whilst year round Long-tailed, Blue and Great Tits, Bullfinch, Lesser Redpoll and Chaffinch can all be seen quite easily. Grasshopper Warblers often frequent the open grassland all around the site, and it's worth scanning the fields and fence - lines around the horse fields for Whinchats and Stonechats whenever there is an opportunity.

At the extreme western end of the site the path turns right, running parallel with an open pasture. Buzzards can frequently be seen circling above here and the woodlands of Three Sisters, and the sparse bushes along the ditch line have contained Reed Warbler in the past. Yellowhammers often sing from the tops of these bushes in spring and early summer. Eventually you will arrive at a path junction where you can bear left onto the Three Sisters, but continue to the right to follow the mature hedgerow along the boundary of the site. Bordering the agricultural fields, there is inevitably the odd Pheasant to be seen, and Grey Partridges can frequently be heard if not seen. Wood Pigeons are plentiful and there is often the odd Stock Dove flying over. The hedgerow contains a mix of trees, many bearing fruit, and during winter Redwings and Fieldfares can sometimes be seen feeding on the hawthorns if the resident thrushes have left anything behind.

The path eventually crosses a small stream beneath some mature Oaks, and bears left onto a favourite bit of the site. Another mature mixed hedgerow (Big Hedge as the few regulars have christened it) on the left of the path extends for the next couple of hundred metres or so and is bordered by a pond at one point. This hedge feels 'birdy' and birds often flit between the hedge, the plantation woodland and the grassland on the other side of the path. A Sedge Warbler on passage was skulking here once, and Blackcaps love the scrubby wet woodland at the end of the pond. The hedge contains a few conifers and Goldcrests can often be heard if not seen in these.



Above: The 'Big Hedge'

When you arrive at the next path junction, it's worth scanning the open ground to your right as Short - eared Owl has been seen in this area. You then have three options, turn left to investigate the farm buildings of Mortons Dairy, which often have a Kestrel hanging around, turn right down the long straight path to re-join your route at an earlier point, or continue straight ahead to meet yet another section of hedgerow which again looks birdy. There is usually a flock of Goldfinches in this spot, along with Whitethroats in summer and the inevitable Blackbird, Song Thrush, Robin and Dunnock, but it looks like it should hold much more. The path then turns right, back towards the entrance.



Above; 'L' shaped hedge near Mortons

Lily Lane farm

This area of farmland borders right on to Viridor Wood and can be viewed from within the site boundary. However, a footpath bisects the main fields and a walk along this path will invariably provide much better views of the birds that frequent the area. To access the path, walk from the car park back towards Ashton and Lily Lane farm.

The footpath entrance is located almost immediately opposite the speed camera. Technically the path runs from the A58 to the Three Sisters and does not link directly onto Viridor Wood.

Once through the stile, you are immediately into farmland. The woodland block to the left is worth scanning as Little Owl and Spotted Flycatcher have both been recorded here. The arable fields and horse paddocks regularly contain flocks of Pipits, Wagtails, Buntings, Finches and Thrushes, and attract insectivorous migrants during late spring and early autumn. It's worth spending time scanning each field as you walk the length of the path and a 'scope would certainly be an asset at times. Once at the far end you can either turn around or continue on into the Three Sisters, where a right turn will eventually allow you to re-enter Viridor Wood.



Above: Fields viewed from Viridor Wood itself

The eastern section

From the car park take the path heading north east. There's generally not much in this area, although Stonechats have been seen in and around the car park and there is usually a Whitethroat or two in summer. Once you've checked the area head along until you meet a T junction and turn right. This leads up the hill towards a block of woodland.

Again the woodland on the right contains all the usual suspects, and it is possible to walk into this area, flushing the odd Woodcock or Snipe in the winter months, but the main interest starts a bit further along. At the top of the path turn right towards the 'Totem Poles'. The open grassland always has plenty of Skylarks present, Barn Owls have been reported here on several occasions and Short-eared Owl, Long-eared Owl and a calling Quail have also been recorded. Grasshopper Warblers often reel from these areas in spring, while Willow Warblers and Chiffchaffs sing from the plantation and the more mature woodland. Tawny Owl has been seen around the mature woodland block and there are often species such as Greenfinch, Chaffinch and Bullfinch flitting around.



Above: Totem area

To the right the path overlooks plantation woodland with some patches of more mature trees and grassland. The ditch along the southern boundary here is a good place for Sedge Warbler, and Woodcock have been recorded flying over this area.

In the distance to the south there are a number of agricultural fields, which hold similar species to those on the western side of the site but are difficult to observe from the main path. The Riding Lane section below gives directions for better views of these fields. The path continues until a junction is reached. On the right is a slightly boggy area that often holds reeling Grasshopper Warbler as well as the occasional Sedge Warbler. The path splits here and it is often worth the short diversion through the stile and onto the agricultural land beyond. If you're feeling a bit peckish, this path conveniently leads to the Harrow Inn which serves pub lunches! This path will also take you back along Riding Lane, to obtain better views over the agricultural fields seen from the path, and back to the car park as an alternative route.

The path now turns left (North), and runs almost dead straight alongside the railway line. The stretch of woodland here often holds Great Spotted Woodpecker, Jay, Willow Tit and Siskin. At the end of this long straight section the path splits again. Turning right and under the railway bridge takes you onto the Abram Flashes area, turning left takes you back up a gentle slope with more open grassland on either side. Again Grasshopper Warblers are regular here and Stonechats have been seen around this area. Continuing on this path will eventually lead back to the car park.



Above: Railway woodland/path

Riding Lane

Running east from the A58 at Lily Lane Farm, Riding Lane lies just to the south of the eastern section of Viridor and is bordered by agricultural fields which are easily viewed from the lane itself.

The large field to the south of Riding Lane is quite rocky and, when bare during the autumn, winter and spring, can attract some interesting birds. Good numbers of Chaffinch and Yellowhammer can be found here, along with Pied Wagtails and year round Skylark. Grey Partridge, Stock Dove and Linnet are regular, and Wheatear can be seen during the spring and autumn passage. Lapwing display in the spring, and even Ringed Plover and Oystercatcher have been recorded.

The field to the north of Riding Lane, backing on to Viridor, is rather less productive, but Lesser Whitethroat can be found in the hedge at its eastern end. Slightly further to the east is Rose Farm and its adjoining horse paddock. In which Stonechat, Whinchat and Wheatear have all been recorded.

Viridor Wood may not be a prime birding destination, and to date it has held no rarities. In fact, on first inspection the site may not appear to hold much attraction to most birders. The only list for the site that I am aware of is published on here and stands at 89, which is very respectable given the lack of open water on the site, but does not compare with other sites in the borough. However a

visit to Viridor can provide a pleasant couple of hours birding, throwing up the odd surprise, and a visit to the site could easily be combined with a visit to Three Sisters Recreation Area, Wigan or Abram Flashes or indeed Pennington Flash. None of which are more than 20 minutes away. Check out the Viridor sightings on the forum for a taste of what a few hours birding here could bring.



VIRIDOR WOOD WEST MAP



VIRIDOR WOOD EAST MAP

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