

Walden Countryside – Risk Assessment

This is a general risk assessment for the three blocks of land managed as nature reserves/ agricultural small-holdings by Walden Countryside. There are two groups of regular users with somewhat different exposure to risks:

- Individuals or small groups making unsupervised visits to the land on a permissive public access basis.
- Volunteers entering the land as individuals or group members undertaking specific work for the benefit of the land, its wildlife or visitors. Examples are those who tend the sheep flock and those who join habitat management work parties.
- There are also other specific group events (for example children's clubs) that have their own risk assessments approved before the event can take place.

The nature of our land

It is all open countryside with mature trees, hedgerows, an orchard at one site, sheep pasture at two others, one pond at our largest site and a flowing brook at another. The inherent risks are therefore very similar to those applying to public footpaths across rural land in NW Essex but minus the risks associated with the use of toxic pesticides and other agricultural chemicals which are not used on our land.

General countryside risks

For most of these risks we do not feel the need to reduce them (which would be very costly and render the land very different to the traditional rural habitat we intend to maintain).

Examples of these risks are:

- Tripping as a result of an unseen rabbit hole or tree stump
- Eating an unidentified berry or fungus that turns out to be toxic
- Falling in the pond or brook
- Tick bites (and the risk of Lyme's disease)

Handicapped access

As with most rural walks there is no specific provision of handicapped access: the public must make their own decision as to whether it is sensible to visit the land in the light of any specific handicaps affecting members of their group.

Risks we attempt to minimise

Falling branches or trees

- We have the woodland and individual trees surveyed by a tree safety advisor at least every three years with more frequent inspections by our volunteers. Recommended tree surgery is carried out using professional contractors where it is too dangerous for volunteer labour.
- Felled timber is stacked safely or burnt on specific bonfire sites.

Electric fences

These carry warning signs when in use

Sheep

These are not normally any danger but we ask independent visitors not to enter the enclosed pastures when sheep are present.

- Our visitor leaflets advise anyone who is (or might be) pregnant to avoid direct contact with the sheep (to avoid the very low risk of contagious abortion)
- Our volunteer helpers work initially with experienced volunteers and know how to react if surrounded by a large group of sheep anxious to get at the food trough and to keep at a safe distance from the ram when he is present.

Storage of tools and dangerous substances

- Hand tools (and sometimes power tools) are stored in a locked barn together with containers of hazardous materials such as creosote.
- The barn is always locked when volunteer workers are not to supervise access but it is impossible to render such a building inaccessible to burglars.

Use of tools and dangerous substances

- Work parties are led by experienced persons who train new volunteers in the safe use of the equipment.
- The main work parties do not use power tools – these are restricted to small groups of experienced users who either use their own equipment or own equipment similar to that being used.
- When using any wood treatments or other possibly dangerous materials, volunteers are required to follow the manufacturers advice and wear appropriate protective clothing.
- There is always a first-aid kit and St Johns trained first-aider present together with mobile phone(s) to call aid if needed.
- A tractor is stored in the open at our main site. It is kept tocked with its keys locked inside a barn to avoid unauthorised use. It is fully insured for use by approved volunteer drivers.

Car Parking

Our largest nature reserve has a small car park onsite with gated but unlocked public access. Cars are parked at the owners risk. At the other sites, vehicular access is not allowed to the general public and cars must be parked on nearby roadside verges.

Visitor Guidance and facilities

The boundaries of our land are clearly marked by hedges or fences and leaflets provided for visitor use indicate the extent of the reserves and recommended walks. Where any doubt exists signs are erected to mark the boundary of land open to the public.

Our largest site has a composting toilet available for visitor use. It's design and access by steep steps render it unusable by handicapped people. Hand-washing facilities are normally available but are dependent on rainfall maintaining water levels in the water-butt.

Pandemic restrictions

These keep changing – our signboards and advice require that independent advisors restrict their numbers and proximity to each other to the currently permitted levels. Work parties and small educational groups often have different rules from those applying to household groups and we keep our volunteers and group leaders as aware as we can of the current regulations.