

The River Soar rises in the extreme south of Leicestershire and flows slowly northwards through a shallow valley. Fed by a number of streams and smaller rivers, it grows in size and joins with the River Trent on the Nottinghamshire border. The valley’s landscape has changed greatly over the last few thousand years and will continue to do so. The only question is how.

History of the landscape

In the distant past, when the climate was very cold, the present Soar valley area probably looked like the modern-day Arctic, with few trees and shrubs, frozen ground and animals such as reindeer and the now extinct mammoth. When the climate warmed about 10,000 years ago trees rapidly colonised from the south and clothed the landscape until people, who had previously lived as hunter-gatherers, tamed the valley by cutting most of the trees down, creating farmland. The forest, while it existed, had spectacular animals in it such as the now extinct aurochs (a very large ancestor of modern cattle) and probably wolves, bears, wild boar, beavers and lynx.



Information on some of these sites can be found from:

Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust www.lrwt.org.uk
Soar and Wreake Valley Living Landscape www.lrwt.org.uk/what-we-do/living-landscapes
Leicestershire and Rutland Ornithological Society www.lros.org.uk
Leicestershire County Council www.leics.gov.uk
LRWT nature reserves are maintained in as wild a state as possible so paths may be rough and wet at times and there are no toilets. Cycling, fishing, horse riding and similar activities are not allowed. Cossington Meadows, Mountsorrel & Rothley Marshes, Syston Lake, and Wanlip Meadows, are still developing. This will take time, especially as most vegetation is being allowed to develop naturally, rather than through planting.

Old Rectory Marsh: LRWT (Michael Jeeves)
Kingfisher: dannygreenphotography.com
Otter: Darrin Smith
Short-eared owl at Cossington Meadows nature reserve: Andy McKay
Common grass snake: Rob Field
Rare breed Welsh Black cattle at Cossington Meadows nature reserve: LRWT (Chris Hill)
Purple loosestrife at Narborough Bog nature reserve: LRWT (Beverley Heath)
Small tortoiseshell butterfly: djsphotography.co.uk
Banded demoiselle: mattcolephotography.co.uk
Narborough Bog nature reserve: LRWT (Beverley Heath)
Little egret: Paul Roux
River Soar at Rayns Island: LRWT (Michael Jeeves)
Bridge at Croft Pasture nature reserve: LRWT (Nathalie Cossa)
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For centuries the river ‘floodplain’ (the area that is liable to become covered in water when the river swells and bursts its banks after heavy rain) was covered in an open landscape of large meadows where hay was grown and cattle and other domesticated animals grazed. Change was gradual, but the ‘Enclosure’ movement from the 16th century onwards spelt the end of most of the open landscape. In its place was a network of small fields, bounded by hedges that had historically probably been confined to places such as parish boundaries.

The Industrial Revolution triggered an era of much more rapid change in the Soar landscape. The town of Leicester, established on the banks of the river by the Romans, expanded massively to become the present city. Other settlements such as the town of Loughborough also grew in size. The river was ‘canalised’ to enable boats to navigate it, railways and roads were built and gravel pits quarried. Canalisation further tamed the river through construction of structures such as locks that held back water, but the flood alleviation schemes of the late twentieth century were perhaps even more controlling.

The river bed was dredged to encourage flow of water and banks were built to stop the river from spilling over the floodplain. The impact on wildlife of all of this, together with changes in farming practices that included the introduction of chemical fertilisers, was devastating.

The future landscape

Restoring wildlife and wild places to the floodplains of the Soar and Wreake is a priority for the Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust and encouraging progress has been made to date with this Living Landscape scheme. Our goal here is to enable the floodplain to function more naturally, which has huge benefits for nature and for people. The Trust has acquired over 433 acres of land on the Soar floodplain since 2004, offered advice to landowners and carried out extensive habitat restoration work. The floodplain and its wildlife continue to be threatened by the prospect of more development and also human-induced climate change. The latter may result in increased flooding and then be countered by engineering measures that could damage wildlife and wild places in the valley. Instead, the use of the natural floodplain to ‘store’ water at times of heavy rainfall would both help to reduce the impact of flooding on people’s homes and create good habitats for wildlife too.

There are still some special places in the Soar valley and efforts are already being made to link them with new nature reserves and other sympathetically managed land. The river

joins them all together, forming a corridor that wildlife can move along. It is probable that many of these places would not survive in isolation. They are dependent upon the floodplain to function naturally, to prevent them drying out and to bring in plant seeds, fish and other animals in the flood water. Some of our wildlife, such as the rare black poplar tree, need natural processes such as flooding to create wet bare ground so the tree’s seeds are able to germinate.

The valley is also a place for people to live, work and enjoy themselves, but it must be used sustainably if it is to stay that way. The Trust’s hope is that, by establishing nature reserves and through working with other landowners, local people, national and local government, the Soar floodplain can become a place where wildlife and people will thrive in a healthy environment.



To achieve this we need to:

- Prevent further building on the floodplain; influence the design of future development
- Allow the river and its floodplain to function as one through re-connection of isolated wetland habitats to the river
- Provide farmers and other landowners with support to enable them to continue grazing meadows and taking hay in the traditional way, using as few chemicals as possible
- Acquire more nature reserve land
- Manage publicly owned land in an environmentally sensitive way
- Allow some areas to become wilder, with more woodland
- Maintain a few places as wildlife refuges
- Ensure that the river is as clean as possible



Leicestershire & Rutland Wildlife Trust

Rewilding the Soar Valley

Creating a Living Landscape on the floodplain of Leicestershire’s longest river

The Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust works to protect and enhance Leicestershire and Rutland’s wildlife and wild places. The Trust is the largest non-governmental organisation dedicated to the conservation of wildlife in the two counties. The Trust has more than 15,800 members, manages 35 nature reserves covering more than 1,232 ha (3,044 acres), including 433 acres in the Soar Valley acquired since 2004. Helping people to enjoy and have access to wildlife is increasingly part of the Trust’s work and we provide advice to landowners on conservation issues.

The Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust is part of a network of 47 Wildlife Trusts forming the Wildlife Trust partnership, the UK’s leading conservation charity exclusively dedicated to conserving all wildlife.

Help us to ensure a brighter future for our wildlife.

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Places to visit in the Soar Valley Living Landscape



Loughborough Big Meadow

The only remaining Lammas meadow in the East Midlands, Loughborough Big Meadow is also the region's largest lowland grassland unaffected by modern farming methods. Much of it is a Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust nature reserve. The meadow is at its best in May and June, when flowers such as great burnet and meadow saxifrage can be seen. Narrow-leaved water-dropwort, a rare species in Britain, is the reserve's most notable plant.

Mountsorrel & Rothley Marshes

This Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust nature reserve covers a large area of marsh, rough grassland, woodland, pools and ditches. The area supports a variety of wetland birds including snipe, little egret and grey heron, as well as various dragonflies and damselflies and the nationally scarce plant, tubular water-dropwort.

Cossington Meadows

This is an extensive Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust nature reserve, consisting of former gravel pits restored to a complex of open water, reedbeds, grassland, marsh, woodland and scrub. All of these habitats are attractive to a range of wildlife, the most conspicuous of which are birds. There is access on a network of public footpaths and viewing areas across the wetlands. Rare breed Welsh Black and Shetland cattle are amongst the animals that graze the reserve.

Syston Lake

Another restored gravel pit owned by Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust, this reserve includes a small lake and wet grassland, on the outskirts of Syston village.

Watermead Country Park

The park has several deep lakes resulting from gravel extraction, as well as a large reedbed, woodland, scrub and grassland. Wildlife present is very varied. There are visitor and recreational facilities such as hides, toilets, surfaced paths, cycling, sailing and fishing. The park is managed by Leicestershire County Council and Leicester City Council.

Wanlip Meadows

An area of restored gravel pits, this Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust nature reserve contains wet grassland, swamp and shallow pools that are extremely attractive to birds, especially on migration. The largest pool (or scrape) can be viewed from a tower hide in Watermead Country Park. The site is grazed in summer by longhorn cattle.

Aylestone Meadows

Situated in the City of Leicester, this Local Nature Reserve is managed by Leicester City Council and contains species-rich grassland, wetland and scrub habitats. A variety of wildlife can be seen and some uncommon plants such as tubular water-dropwort have been recorded. Part of the site is grazed by longhorn cattle.

Narborough Bog

One of the oldest Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust nature reserves, it has woodland, reedbed and grassland habitats. Attractive plants such as meadow-rue and meadow saxifrage are present, along with many birds and insects.

Croft Pasture

The River Soar, here little more than a stream, flows through this Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust nature reserve. There are rare plants on rocky outcrops, some of which form small cliffs, that are the remains of a massive gorge present millions of years ago.

