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# MMM

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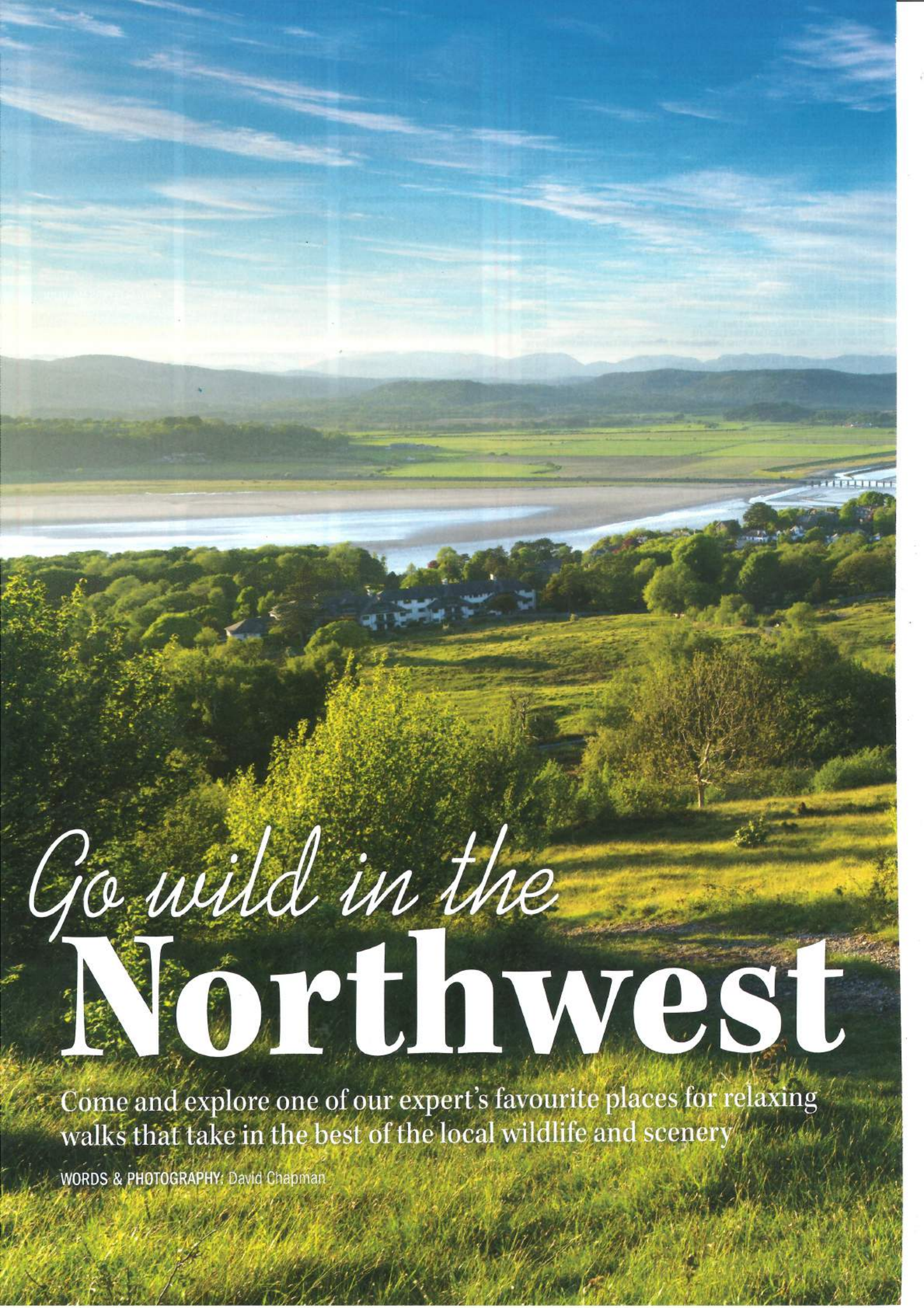
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*Go wild in the*  
**Northwest**

Come and explore one of our expert's favourite places for relaxing walks that take in the best of the local wildlife and scenery

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: David Chapman



Looking down over the Kent Estuary and distant Cumbrian fells from Arnside Knott

*Trip summary***OUR MOTORHOME**

2015 Auto-Sleeper Nuevo on Peugeot Boxer 2.2-litre. We love the simple layout and it's comfortable and packed with lots of mod cons

**THE JOURNEY**

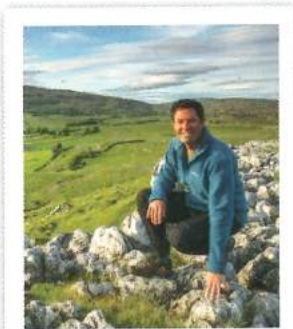
In May, we headed up the M6 to Silverdale from Blackpool to spend a week split between two sites in the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty before moving on to the Yorkshire Dales

**THE COSTS**

Fuel average 30mpg.....	£13
Site fees.....	£125

**2015 Auto-Sleeper Nuevo****70 miles****Total £138**

“Gait Barrows is **renowned** for its **abundant** butterflies and flowers. I was very keen to see the **superb** lady's slipper orchid”

*David Chapman...*

... is a writer and photographer specialising in the wildlife of the UK



**ABOVE** This fly orchid was on the roadside verge in Sandside

**W**hen I suggested a *Go Wild* article on the Arnside and Silverdale AONB (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty) to my wife, Sarah, she looked at me and said, “There can't be enough wildlife in an area as small as that for a whole article!”

Well, this AONB, straddling the border of Lancashire and Cumbria, has always been one of my favourites. It's great for wildlife, so I took Sarah's comment as a challenge...

Being a compact area, we could go everywhere on foot (with the exception of the day we moved between sites). I had chosen two sites from which the whole area could be reached by walking no more than about five miles.

One of the most notable nature reserves of the area is RSPB Leighton Moss, which has a fantastic reputation. It's only a 15-minute walk from the Hawes Villa campsite to the Leighton Moss visitor centre, so we had a few coffees and cakes there in between exploring the many hides and paths around the reserve.

The bird on the emblem of the Arnside and Silverdale AONB is a bittern and it is at Leighton Moss that bitterns might be found, though they are not as regular as they once were. It appears that they no longer breed here and, although they overwinter in large numbers, there is only the odd bird that stays into spring.

The reason for the decline at Leighton Moss is that the reedbed here is a very old one. Bitterns like young reedbeds with plenty of waterways and fresh growth.

With this in mind, the RSPB has purchased two plots of land in the region and is creating reedbeds specifically for the bitterns. One of these is at Ings Point and the other on Silverdale Moss. Neither were open at the time of our visit.

Leighton Moss does have a staggering amount of wildlife and seven hides from which to watch. I would happily spend a week here! On the main reserve I had several sightings of marsh harriers, an otter, several red deer, lots of black-tailed godwits, bearded tits, Cetti's warblers and even a couple of cattle egrets.

Whilst I was there a total of three ospreys visited the reserve but I failed to connect with any of them. These birds nest outside the AONB at Foulshaw Moss, but regularly visit Leighton Moss to find fish. Other birds common to the reserve include plenty of ducks, geese and a wide range of warblers.

Talking of warblers, I visited the saltmarsh section of the reserve by making a walk, which cut across the marsh from Heald Brow, near Silverdale. On the path to the Eric Morecambe hide (yes, he was a keen birdwatcher) I saw nine species of warbler: sedge warbler, reed warbler, whitethroat, lesser whitethroat, grasshopper warbler, willow warbler, chiffchaff, Cetti's warbler and blackcap.

At Heald Brow I also saw garden warblers and redstarts. This hints at the richness of this area for breeding migrant birds. By chance there were also three spoonbills on the scrape in front of the Eric Morecambe hide and a spotted redshank. Eric would >



### TOP TIPS

We found height restrictions on **Warton Crag** quarry car park and the railway bridge on the track to the car park at the Leighton Moss saltmarsh hides

If visiting Warton Crag there is roadside parking but I recommend walking. For the saltmarsh hides at **Leighton Moss** I recommend walking the path from Heald Brow rather than taking the road from the Leighton Moss visitor centre

There are some very good leaflets about wildlife in the area available from the AONB office at Arnside railway station and others are available from Leighton Moss

have been a very happy man!

Despite the wonders of Leighton Moss it wasn't really birdwatching that attracted me to visit in late May. This AONB is very important for butterflies and flowers.

Throughout the area there are plenty of early purple orchids and at The Lots, a National Trust meadow, there is a large colony of the much rarer green-winged orchids, distinguished by the green veining in the 'wings' over the central petal of each flower. One of the most amazing spectacles we came across was a wood crammed full of ramsons at Fleagarth, near Heald Brow.

This is a limestone area so there are many lime-loving flowers to be found. For instance, cowslips are abundant in May. On the limestone pavements it is possible to see some quite special flowers including Solomon's seal, rockrose, lily of the valley and a few very rare species.

One of the best limestone pavements in the area is at Gait Barrows, a National Nature Reserve just a stone's throw from Hawes Villa campsite – and this was the main reason for me choosing that site. Gait Barrows is renowned for its abundant butterflies and flowers. I was very keen to see the superb lady's slipper orchid.

This spectacular orchid is a mega-rarity in the UK and a real gem. It was once more common but some Victorian gardeners dug them up to stock their own gardens and

they died out in the wild, except for one location in Yorkshire.

Many attempts were made to grow plants from its seeds, but all efforts failed. Then another wild plant was found and, eventually, botanists discovered an extremely involved way of getting the seeds to germinate.

Plants have now been reintroduced to a few limestone sites including Gait Barrows and here people are welcome to come and see them in their natural environment. There are even signs directing people to the flowers. Timing is everything with flowers and, though seasons vary, I suggest the last two weeks of May and the first week of June are best for lady's slipper orchids.

This reserve has a wonderful selection of flowers including a huge amount of lily of the valley and some great old yew trees and juniper bushes. It also has a selection of scarce butterflies including, in May, the pearl-bordered fritillary, duke of burgundy fritillary and dingy skipper.

Later in the year it is possible to see high brown fritillary, though it would seem that most of these species are declining even at this site where every care is taken to provide exactly what they need. It is thought that climate is likely to be having an impact on their success.

At the foot of the reserve is the largest natural lake in Lancashire, rather

“The shape of the south side of the crag is **incredible**: the limestone pavements jut out to create **giant steps**”

confusingly called Hawes Water (since there is a lake of the same name in Cumbria). The Hawes Villa site has special access to a jetty, which affords lovely views over this reed-fringed lake and, though leaflets suggest marsh harrier and bittern occur here, I saw only reed buntings, reed and sedge warblers and I heard the distinctive squealing of water rails. Of greater significance, I did find plenty of bird's eye primroses along the rushy edges near the boardwalk on the east side of the lake.

At nearby Little Hawes Water, which is essentially a large patch of rushes, I saw a roe deer on two occasions. I know from previous visits that there are a lot of northern marsh and common spotted orchids here in June.

Probably the other best limestone

outcrop is at Warton Crag.

Parking isn't great with a height restriction on the quarry car park, but there are a range of possible options for creating a walk from Hawes Villa.

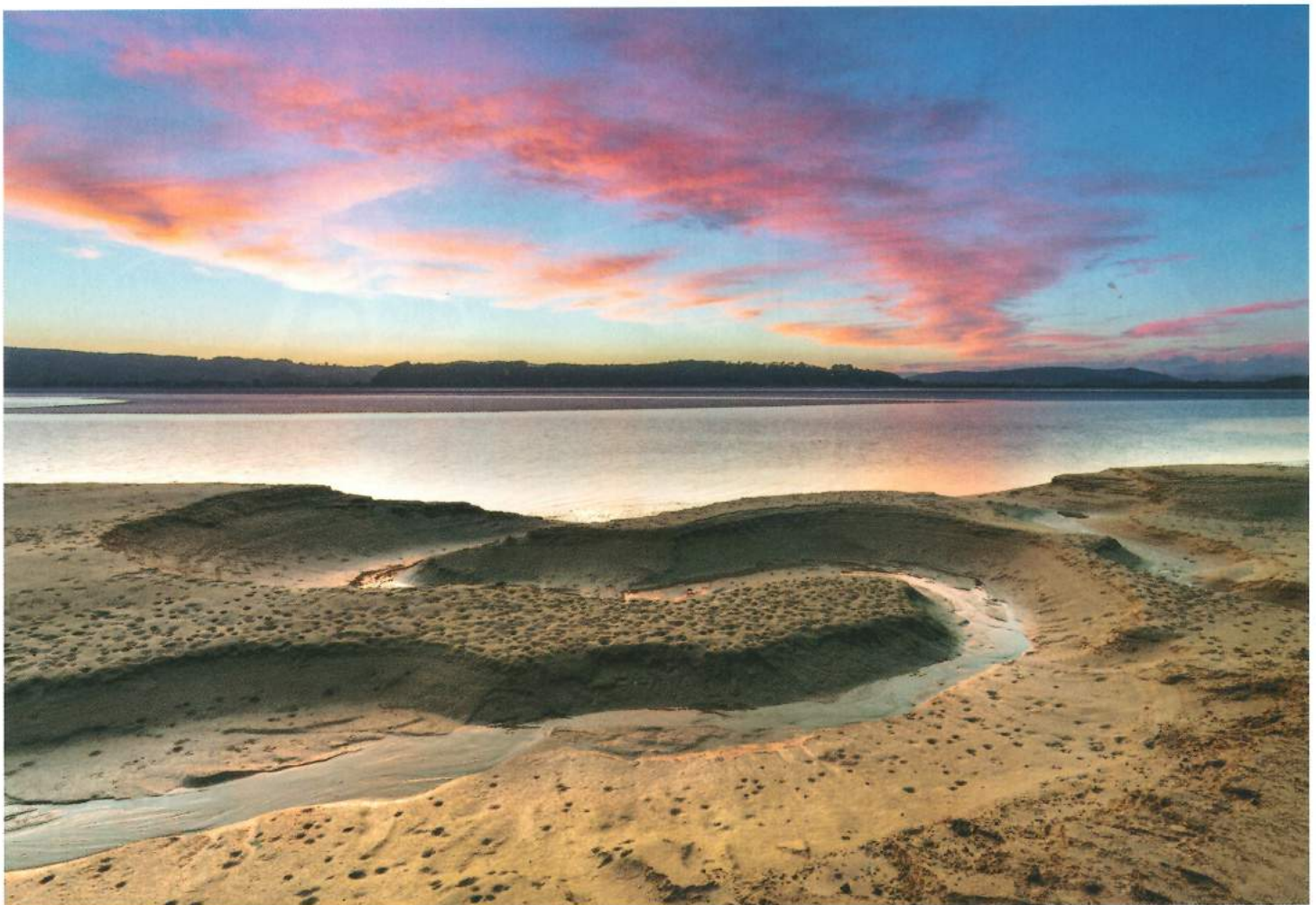
Warton Crag is thought to be the best location in the area for pearl-bordered fritillaries and the habitat is being actively managed to support them and high brown fritillaries by coppicing woodland to help violets flourish. The most numerous butterfly we saw was the small heath and we also found a couple of brimstones.

The shape of the south side of the crag is incredible; the limestone pavements jut out to create giant steps. From the top of each step a new and often far-reaching vista unfolds. Only the summit, where you can't see the view for the trees, is a little disappointing.

The flora is similar to Gait Barrows but with more bluebells in the damper patches and a fantastic show of May blossom. Birdlife is also similar in that we saw garden warblers and redstarts in the scrubby areas, but there is the added bonus of two very ►

**FAR LEFT CLOCKWISE** A cluster of the rare green-winged orchids at The Lots, Silverdale; the impressive Skytower viewing platform at Leighton Moss; a black-tailed godwit in partial summer plumages at Leighton Moss

**BELOW** Sunset on the Kent Estuary near Arnside





“It’s **astonishing** how such a small **unpromising** spot can offer so much **beauty** to wonder at”

special nests in the quarry.

The raven’s nest was no longer in use; that family had been successful in raising three young and we watched them flying over the crag, croaking and honking as they went. Still under occupation was the peregrine’s nest; high on the quarry face, it took a telescope to get a good view. Fortunately there were plenty of people watching them from the car park.

For the second part of our week we moved to the New Barns Caravan Park near Arnside. This, too, had a great location, adjacent to the Kent Estuary and Arnside Knott, but unfortunately, it doesn’t have any touring pitches now.

The Knott is regarded as being another great place for butterflies, most notably the high brown fritillaries in early July. The woodland around Heathwaite and at nearby Eaves Wood is very rich in common breeding birds such as tree creeper,

nuthatch, marsh tit and both great spotted and green woodpeckers.

We took one day out to walk along the estuary through Arnside, Sandside as far as Dallam – where we cut inland to Beetham – and back via Fairy Steps and Arnside Tower.

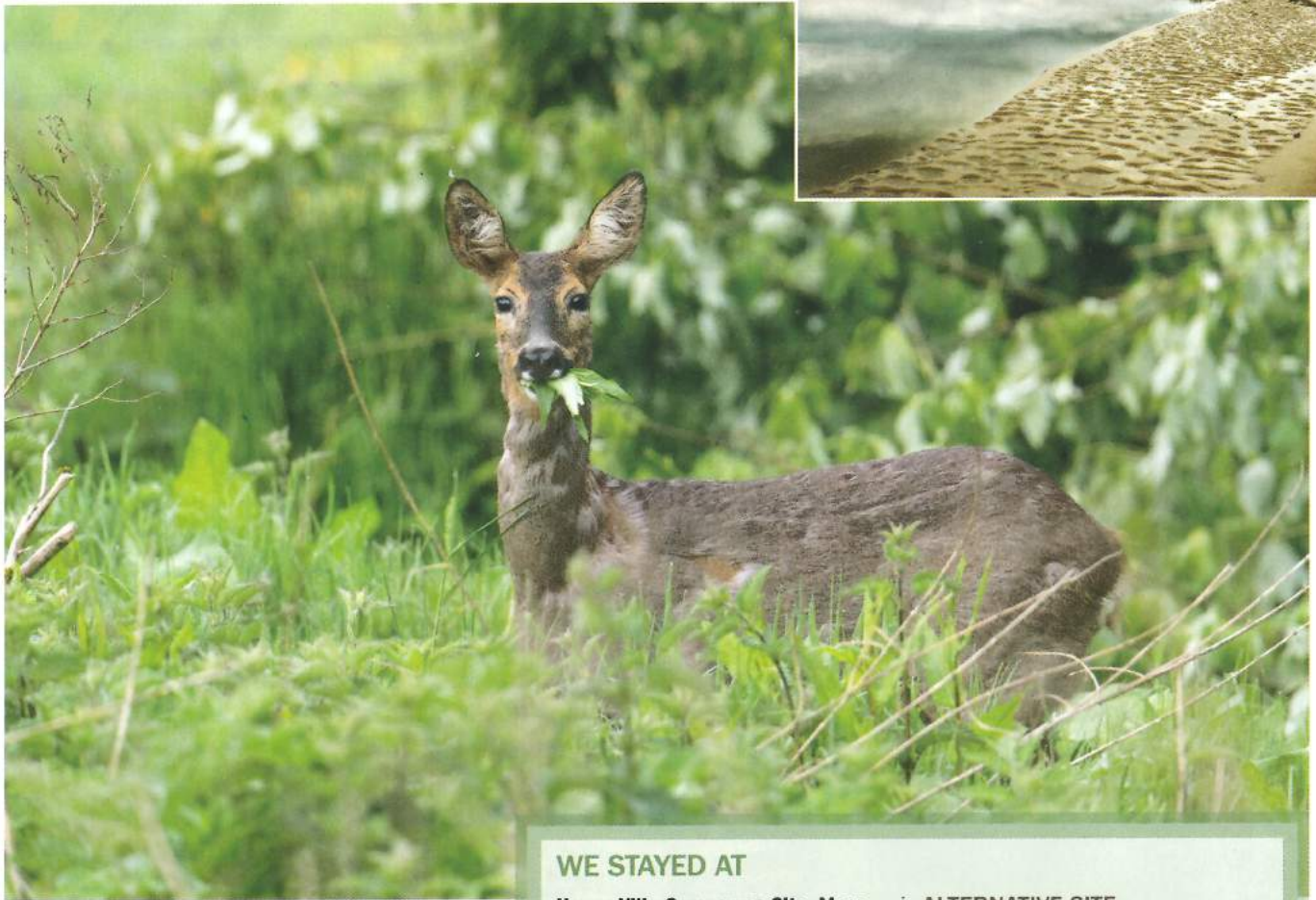
The estuary is fairly quiet in the spring, but we saw a few common waders including curlews, redshanks, oystercatchers, lapwings and a couple of whimbrels. This is sometimes known as the ‘May bird’ because of its occurrence at this time of year.

Little egrets were active and well as plenty of grey herons.

The most entertaining bird was the shelduck. Even this late in the spring I watched a flock of males mobbing one poor female. They squabbled with each other, tried to impress her with incessant head-bobbing and either ran, swam or flew after her in an attempt to win her over. She was having none of it! >

**ABOVE** Looking over the mudflats from Jack Scout, National Trust land near Silverdale

**INSET** This pair of little egrets were having a fight over their territory



At the eastern end of Sandside, opposite the entrance to a small industrial estate, the footpath leads down to a saltmarsh. On the verge just before the start of the path there is a wonderful range of plants and insects.

In late May this patch was full of flowers including the distinctive twayblade (a type of orchid). I found several burnet moth caterpillars eating the leaves of bird's foot trefoil and there were plenty of bumblebees feeding on the various flowers.

A greater prize than any of those was the beautiful and intricate fly orchid, of which I believe there can be many flower spikes in good years. It's astonishing how such a small unpromising spot can offer so much beauty to wonder at.

The third species of deer for the AONB was spotted in the deer park at Dallam. These fallow deer are captive but it is nice to see them and even nicer to have a lovely lunch at the Old Post Office in the village of Beetham at the climax of a long walk.

#### WE STAYED AT

**Hawes Villa Campervan Site, Moss Lane, Silverdale, Carnforth, Cumbria LA5 0SS**

☎ 07867 644054 or 07971 839678

🌐 [hawesvilla.com](http://hawesvilla.com)

📅 All year

💰 Two adults, pitch and electric: From £14

#### ALTERNATIVE SITE

**Silverdale Holiday Park, Middlebarrow Plain, Cove Road, Silverdale LA5 0SH**



☎ 01524 701508

🌐 [holgates.co.uk/silverdale](http://holgates.co.uk/silverdale)

📅 All year

💰 Two adults, pitch and electric: £37.50

**ABOVE** This roe deer was next to the New Barns Caravan Park

**INSET** Arnside looks out over the Kent Estuary

Our return route was through Fairy Steps. It is a very relaxed place which boasts, as a tourist attraction, a narrow gap between two slabs of limestone. The story goes that if you can descend the steps without touching the sides the fairies will grant you a wish. Maybe I could have done it before lunch!

We had a busy week and I've detailed some of the best bits. According to my smartphone app I walked 70 miles. We saw a huge range and quantity of wildlife. Was there enough wildlife to write an article? You will have to be the judge of that... **MMM**

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