

Weasel run



For many birders who visit the Exmouth Local Nature Reserve in the cold winter months, the weasel run is a pretty unremarkable stretch of the East Devon way. But in the summer, while the estuary waits for its 25,000 winter birds to return, the weasel run blooms with a burst of vivid colour.

Running along the eastern edge of the nature reserve, the weasel run has an interesting mix of plants and the path is lined with a regal procession of gold, green and purple. Amongst the nodding flowerheads

clouds of insects buzz in the sunlight, busy drinking the energy rich nectar and, in return, pollinating the plants they visit.

From the bird viewpoint on the weasel run you get the best views across the eelgrass beds of the Exmouth Local Nature Reserve. The eelgrass beds here are some of the biggest in the Southwest and of international importance.

Eelgrass is what gives the mudflats a green haze in the summer months, and grows on the muddy sandy areas on the East of the reserve. The plant is not a seaweed, but is actually a flowering plant, the only flower that can grow completely submerged in salt water. The long snake-like leaves are what attract the vast numbers of ducks and geese to the estuary mud in the winter, as the preferred food of the brent geese and wigeon. After the geese have completely eaten the eelgrass they move onto the surrounding fields to feed on the grass found there.



The estuary bankside is blossoming now, with wild carrot standing upright above cascades of mayweed. Above this blooms the fantastic toadflax. Looking like something from a science fiction film, the yellow dragon-like flower has a flowing tendril on the bottom lip. When an insect reaches within the flower for the nectar, the mechanics of the flower ensure that pollen is deposited on the back of the insect.

A purple haze lines the path, created by the blooms of rosebay – or fire weed – and black knapweed. Both of these are great nectar flowers and attract their host of pollinating insects. Down amongst the leaves is a rufous glow of red bartsia, and bright yellow St John's wort. Another yellow flower to look out for at the end of the path is the spikes of agrimony.

As summer pushes on and the estuary fills with its winter birds, the bramble will fruit providing a very useful source of pre-winter food for the smaller birds.

The winter may provide an internationally recognised bird spectacle on the nature reserve, but for the weasel run, it is the summer when its true colours are on show.