



Finchampstead Ridges and Horseshoe Lake

Distance: 6 km=4 miles

easy walking

Region: Berkshire

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Refreshments: Horseshoe Lake

Map: Explorer 159 (Reading) *but the map in this guide should be sufficient*

Problems, changes? We depend on your feedback: feedback@fancyfreewalks.org

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Lakes, nature reserve, wildlife, water sports, woodland, heath, views

In Brief

This hugely engaging walk takes you through a varied set of terrain. Along the way you meet the silent bird watchers and lively family throngs at the Horseshoe Lake, then the solitary walkers in the woodlands and in the purple heather of the Ridges, to enjoy stunning views over the county.

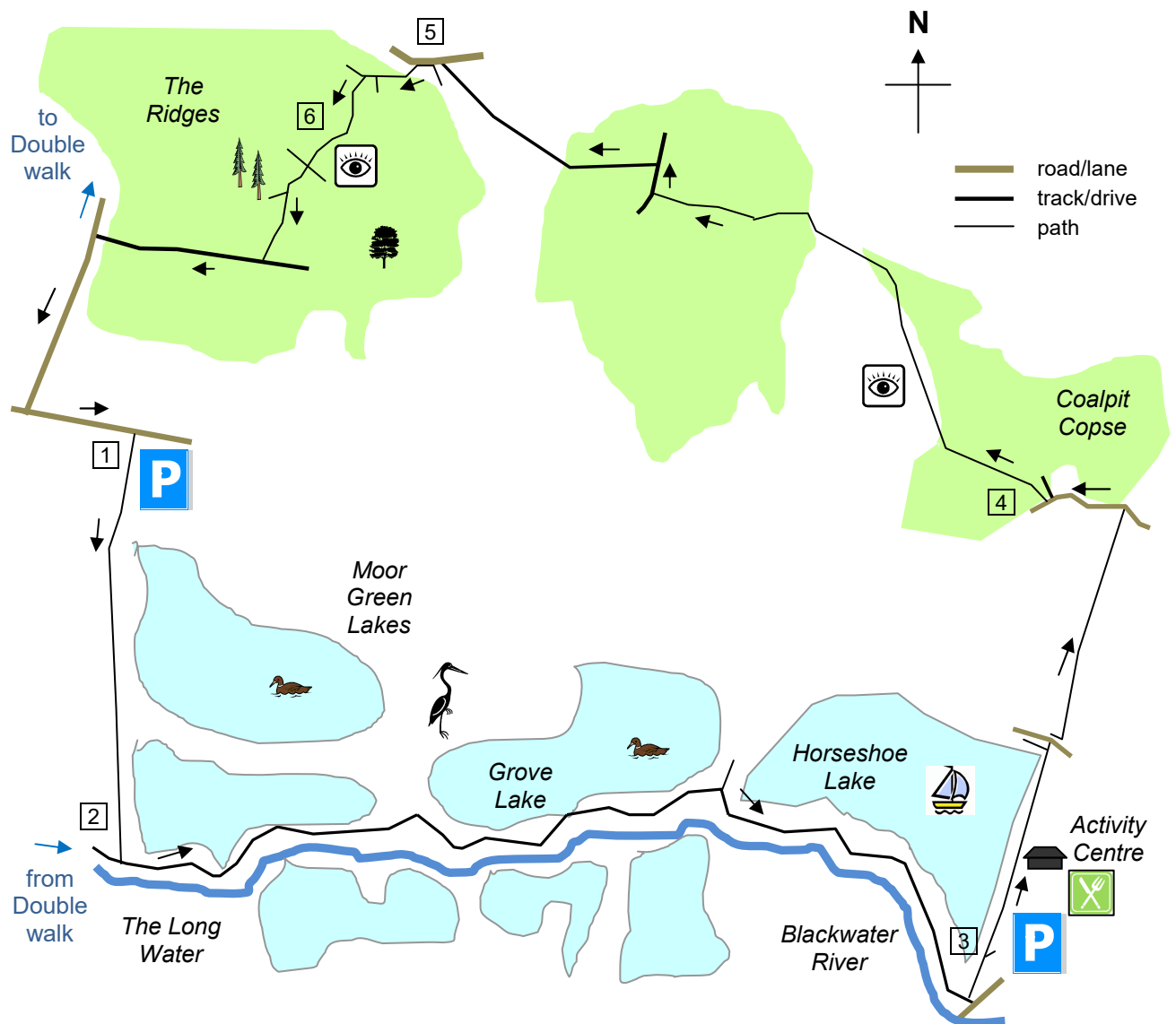
This walk is one of a pair around Finchampstead and can be combined with its sister walk *Finchampstead and the Long Water* to form a terrific 9½-mile Double walk. Links are provided in the text. If you are doing the Double walk, start at the Horseshoe Lake (see below).



There are very few nettles or other undergrowth on this walk, so shorts are wearable. About one half of the walk is through woodland which might be damper than on this July day when all was dry. With no stiles or main roads, this walk will be ideal for your dog.

The walk begins at the **Moor Green Lakes** car park, just off Lower Sandhurst Road, Finchampstead, near Wokingham, Berkshire, postcode **RG40 3TH**, www.w3w.co/banana.foggy.radiating. This is a neat, spacious car park where cars can form two lines, parked at rightangles. It closes at dusk, e.g. 8pm in July (the time is always clearly marked). Another good start is the **Horseshoe Lake** car park, near Sandhurst, www.w3w.co/milk.dish.spins, postcode **GU47 8JW**. This is *not* the large parking area by the Activity Centre, which closes when sessions are ended, but the smaller public car park near the entrance in Mill Lane, which seems to be always open. This one may be more popular and therefore full when you arrive. Some people park on the road. For more details, see at the end of this text (→ **Getting There**).

The Walk



- 1 Beginning the walk at the Moor Green Lakes car park, go to the back and take the **left**-hand of the two parallel paths leading off (the footpath). You pass a nice new slanting map board with a diagram of all the lakes. Your path soon gives views of the Colebrook North Lake and there is a bird watching station along the way. After some woodland and a view of the Colebrook South Lake you cross a sturdy wooden bridge with rails and finally arrive, after 700m, at a fingerposted T-junction. Turn **left** along the main lakeside path..



Link point. *The Finchampstead Double joins this walk at this point.*

- 2 Keep preferably to the right-hand path, to be nearer the Blackwater River, In just over 100m, **avoid** a right turn over a bridge, thus keeping your direction on the same side of the river (and incidentally staying in Berkshire). You are on a remarkable wide deeply wooded trail which runs between the Blackwater River (aka the Long Water) with smaller lakes beyond and, on the left, a series of lakes: the Grove Lake and the Horseshoe Lake. After a total of 1km along the lakeside path, you pass a

bird viewing hide and, shortly after you reach a junction with a (broken) gate and path on your left, which takes walkers between the lakes. **Ignore** this path and keep **right**, staying on the main wide path. You follow a bendy course of willows and oaks, with the occasional sunlit section. There are some benches and also perches by the river bank where you can sit and contemplate the stream. Finally, some 700m from that last junction, you approach a pair of metal gates with a tarmac lane visible beyond. Just before the gates, turn **left** on a footpath between two wooden posts, going over a bridge-with-rail. Fork **left** to avoid the path into the Horseshoe Lake car park.



If you are beginning the walk at the **Horseshoe Lake** car park, exit on a path at the end of the car park and turn sharp **right** on a footpath.

At 9 ha=22 acres, Horseshoe Lake is the largest of this vast series of lakes that flank the Blackwater River. It is named after the shape of the little island in the middle. The Activity Centre also organises family fun, BBQs and open days.

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Your path goes along the shore line where on a popular day the Activity Centre teems with kayakers, paddle boarders and canoeists, or simply happy families enjoying the view across the lake and possibly the food in the “Italian” café. (The parking area here is gated and exclusive to the Centre which is why it is not for walkers.) Another 200m from the Centre, the main path bends left. **Leave** it here to go straight ahead through a wooden swing-gate and bridge-with-rail, reaching a tarmac lane (Lower Sandhurst). Cross the lane to a footpath opposite, zigzagging right-left through a modern kissing-gate, walking along the left-hand side of a large horse pasture. Passing through two more kissing-gates, you come through a fourth kissing-gate to emerge on quiet Ambarrow Lane. Turn **left** on the lane. In 100m, **ignore** a private drive on your right, marked *Ambarrow Lodge* etc. But **only 5m** after that, turn **right**, past a large metal gate, onto a signed footpath into the woods of Coalpit Copse.



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Follow this straight easy path through beautiful woodland. After 200m the path swings right to skirt the edge of the wood, with a view left of a sloping meadow capped by a central wood. There is a boardwalk part-way, purpose unknown since the course is dry. After 300m, a wild meadow is revealed ahead and your path curves left to run beneath a line of oaks. More deep woodland follows, taking your path up a bank to reveal a steep wooded gully to your left. The path is now wide and winding, following a ranch-style fence on your left. The dense leaf woodland soon changes to a fine stand of Scots pines. Finally the path ends at a bridge-with-rails, out to a gravel drive. Turn **right** on the drive for less than 50m to the corner of a fence. Turn **left** here on a wide footpath which runs behind the fences of some spacious properties. In wetter times this dirt path will become quite muddy. In 150m, the path curves around a house entrance and now becomes a dirt and gravel driveway, coming out after 250m to the main road.

To your right (but not on your route) is Wellingtonia Avenue, celebrated for its over one hundred giant sequoia trees brought over from America. They were planted by the “second” John Walter as a tribute to the Iron Duke. The three John Walters were each editor of The Times (the first of them founded the newspaper) and they contributed a great amount to Finchampstead.

Without joining the road, keep straight on for just 15m across a gravel patch and keep **left** at a National Trust sign. Welcome to *Finchampstead Ridges!*

The Ridges are a vast shelf of elevated land formed when the glaciers retreated after the last Ice Age after pushing the land southwards. (You saw a continuation of the same "shelf" in the preceding wood.) Because of the very acid soil, the Ridges are loved for their glowing heather, silver birch and pines. Historically, this land was a royal hunting realm. Henry VII arranged for his son Arthur to meet his future bride¹ Catherine of Aragon here. The younger son Henry (yes, that one) was looking amorously at the younger daughter of the local squire but the elder daughter was smitten by the tall handsome Henry and threw herself from a balcony. The Ridges are owned by the National Trust. They are just one of the features that make Finchampstead one of the most desirable places to live in the UK. More about the village will be found in the sister walk.

- 5 Take the narrow winding path onto the heath and, in 10m, keep **left** to avoid a minor right fork. The heath quickly opens out to reveal a quite wonderful expanse of purple heather, a beneficiary of the acid soil. After 80m you reach a seat with the chance to rest and admire. **Behind the seat is a marker post with a red stripe marking one of the nature trails leading down into the valley; but this is *not* your preferred route today.** Continue on the original path for another 20m to come to a wide fork. Take the **left** fork, wheeling off through bracken and trees. In 30m or so you reach a junction of many paths in a clearing. Keep **left** to arrive at a high promontory with a slanting picture/history board **[Jul 2024: completely broken]**, two seats and a magnificent circle of Scots pines. Moving forward, you gain a view across the county and beyond.

- 6 Facing the view, turn **right** on a path that descends very gradually on a diagonal course. Within 100m, go straight over a crossing path, now on a wider route under tall Scots pines. In 60m, at a marshy spot, ignore a path on the right and keep **left**, thus keeping your direction. Keep to this gradually descending path through thick woodland. After 120m the path ends at a bridleway. Turn **right** and follow this wide path for 300m to reach a road, Dell Road (unnamed at this point).



Link point. If you are doing the Double walk, turn **right** on the road and switch over to the sister walk *Finchampstead and the Long Water* at the Link point in section **1**. Otherwise ...

Turn **left** on the road to reach a T-junction in 300m. Turn **left** here on Lower Sandhurst Road to reach, after 170m, the Moor Green Lakes car park where the walk began.

¹ In case you were wondering, yes, Arthur died before consummation and his bride passed to Henry. It is rumoured that the marriage was doomed because the over-eager Arthur saw his bride unveiled as she rode in her coach on the Ridges.

Getting there

By car: If coming from the M3: come off at **Exit 4** (*Guildford, Farnham, Aldershot*); at the first roundabout, keep **left** for **A331 Camberley**, going under the M3. Immediately, at the next roundabout, bear **right** on **A331 Reading, Wokingham, Camberley**. In 1.3 miles, at the next complex roundabout, keep ahead on **A321 Wokingham, Sandhurst**. Go straight over the next small roundabout and, in 1.2 miles, at the next traffic lights, turn **left** on **A321 Sandhurst**. The road twists through the town and in nearly 1 mile runs parallel to the railway on your left. Shortly after you pass the *Village Inn*, turn **left** under the railway, staying on the main A321. In ½ mile, at a major junction, keep **right** (ignoring the left turn for Yateley). In 100 yds, take the first turning **left Lower Church Road** (signed for the Primary School). In 0.4 mile you reach a T-junction:

For the Moor Green Lakes car park, turn **right** on Lower Sandhurst Road. Follow this lane for 1¼ mile, keeping left at a junction. The car park appears unexpectedly on your **left**.

For the Horseshoe Lake car park, turn **left** on Mill Lane. The car park is 300 yds on the **right**.

By bus/train: bus 125 runs from Wokingham Station to Finchampstead. Check the timetables. Wokingham lies on the Waterloo-to-Reading line and also on the North Downs Line from Dorking and Guildford.

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