

Alford – rich in wildlife!

Alford's local environment and wildlife habitats

Alford lies at 150m above sea level in the Howe of Alford, Aberdeenshire, amidst farmland, woods and hills, close to the River Don and with expansive views. Most wildlife habitats are influenced by human land use, and farming and forestry are important in the area. Much of the Howe of Alford is agricultural land. Most farms are mixed, with livestock (mainly cattle and sheep), grass and cereals (usually barley and oats) and scattered woodlands; some farms have also created wildlife habitats such as hedges. Nearby hills rise to 533m, and higher ground is dominated by heather moorland and blanket bog, along with plantations of Scots pine, spruces and larch. All these habitats hold a wide range of interesting wildlife.



The diversity of habitats in this part of Donside offers many opportunities for wildlife, such as this flock of linnets using a winter wild bird crop on a farm in the Howe of Alford

Flowers and vegetation

The flora of the area is 'boreal' in nature – that is, containing many species more typical of Scandinavia than in other parts of the UK and the extensive moorlands and grasslands give an upland flavour to the plants here. Species such as the scarce Twinflower can be found in Scots pine woodlands and plantations, and overall there are hundreds of kinds of wildflower in the Alford area. A wide range of mosses, liverworts, lichens and fungi can also be seen.



Twinflower is a rare northern woodland plant found near Alford; chickweed wintergreen is also characteristic of our woodlands; heath spotted orchids are widespread in wet fields, as is hare's tail cotton-grass on moorlands and on local peat mosses.

Birds

Well over 100 species of bird can be seen around Alford during the year, with many more turning up as casual visitors. In summer, wading birds such as oystercatchers and lapwings are found, and skylarks, tree sparrows and other farmland birds are still quite common here. On nearby hills, red grouse, curlews, common gulls and meadow pipits nest (often attended by cuckoos). Our local woodlands hold a wide range of species, including willow warblers, crossbills, siskins and long-eared owls. Birds of prey such as buzzards are widespread, and ospreys can be seen fishing near Alford, taking their prey to nests further afield. In winter, flocks of pink-footed and greylag geese with whooper swans from Iceland are frequent, along with finches and gulls. In Alford, parties of screaming swifts can be seen on summer evenings.



Wading birds such as curlews, lapwings and oystercatchers still nest around Alford but are becoming increasingly scarce. Common gulls still breed in colonies on nearby moorlands and feed in large flocks on farmland, often following ploughing, harrowing and silage cutting.



Red grouse are resident on moorlands near Alford. Black grouse also occur in very small numbers.



Willow warblers (above left) are very common here in summer. Tree sparrows (left) are also widespread, often alongside house sparrows.

Crossbills (above) are found in local woodlands and can include the endemic Scottish crossbill.



Cuckoos are still widespread in local uplands. Swifts (top right) nest in Alford and are seen throughout the summer.



Buzzards are the commonest bird of prey, but peregrines and ospreys (right) nest nearby and can be seen, along with red kites, goshawks and sparrowhawks.

Whooper swans and flocks of thousands of pink-footed geese from Iceland spend the winter on fields near Alford.



A walk along the River Don will often find goosanders and usually dippers are seen.

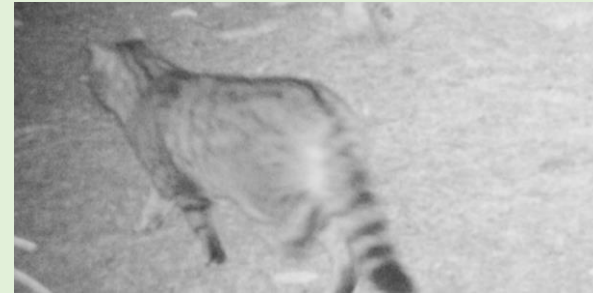


Mammals, fish, reptiles and amphibians

Alford is rich in mammals, with over 25 species found within a few miles of the village. Red squirrels are common in surrounding woods, especially Murray Park, and otters are present on every burn and river. Roe deer are abundant in woods, with many red deer on the hills. Scottish wildcats (or hybrids) are also present though rarely seen, and pine martens have slowly increased. Pipistrelles and Daubenton's bats are found in Haughton and Murray Parks. Brown trout, sea trout and salmon are present in the River Don. Among amphibians and reptiles, only common frog, common toad, palmate newt and common lizard are found regularly.



Red squirrels are common in woodlands. Mountain hares (above) live on the highest moors such as the Correen Hills, but brown hares are widespread on local farmland.



Increasingly, passive trail cameras are used to monitor wildlife. These are very useful for nocturnal animals such as pine martens (below, visiting a feeder), which are now widespread in the area. Cats may also be photographed. The Alford area still holds some cats which can resemble Scottish wildcats, but which are probably all hybrids with escaped domestic cats. They still live like 'wild' cats though!

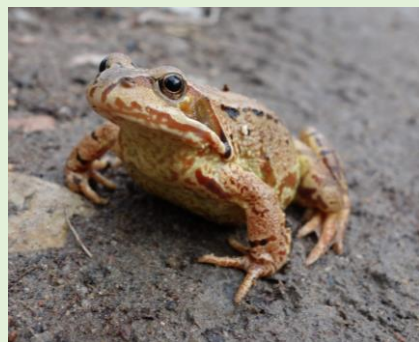


A typical view of roe deer (above) on local farmland – they are found almost everywhere in singles or small groups. By contrast, red deer (below) live mostly in woodlands and on the hills. They have increased greatly in recent years and numbers in the Alford deer management area are now well in excess of one thousand animals. Herds of tens or hundreds can be seen in some places.





Common lizards are widespread in the area and can often be seen on roads, banks and fence posts. Toads and frogs are also still abundant, though adders are now very scarce in the hills.



Find out more about wildlife and record your sightings

You can find out more about wildlife in the area by visiting the website for the North East Scotland Biological Records Centre nesbrec.org and also send in your wildlife sightings to NESBReC or via the national iRecord scheme <https://irecord.org.uk>. Many animals and plants in the Alford area are scarce and declining. Find out about how to take action locally for biodiversity in North East Scotland at [nesbiodiversity](https://nesbiodiversity.org). This website, or NESBReC can put you in touch with many local recorders for wildlife and with specialists who can give advice. A wider picture of wildlife distribution in Scotland can be found at [Home - NBN Atlas Scotland](https://home-nbn-atlas-scotland.org).

Wildlife organisations – links and contacts:

Nature Scot [NatureScot](https://nature.scot.nhs.uk) – the government nature conservation body has an office for North East Scotland in Aberdeen.

RSPB Scotland – [RSPB Scotland](https://www.rspb.org.uk) – has an office in Aberdeen and manages nature reserves in the north-east and can give general bird advice.

Scottish Wildlife Trust – [Scottish Wildlife Trust](https://www.scottishwildlifetrust.org.uk) – manages nature reserves in the north-east and can give general wildlife advice

For butterflies – contact [Scottish Office | Butterfly Conservation \(butterfly-conservation.org\)](https://butterfly-conservation.org) and for other invertebrates, contact [Buglife Scotland – Buglife](https://buglife.org.uk).

For botanical information, visit the [Botanical Society of Britain & Ireland \(bsbi.org\)](https://www.bsbi.org)

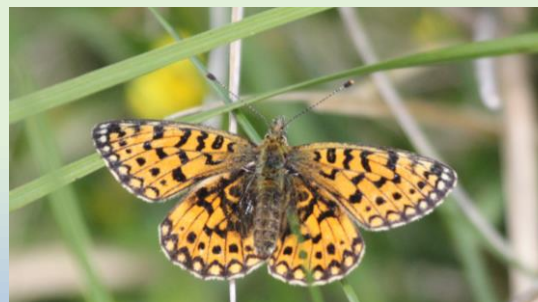
Find out about wildlife and recreation in local woodlands from Forestry & Land Scotland – [Home - Forestry and Land Scotland](https://www.forestry.gov.uk) – which has local offices at Tillyfourie and Huntly.

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Text and all photographs: Ian Francis (most photos taken in the Alford area).

Invertebrates

Thousands of species of invertebrates are present in the area, but in general there is little information about their local status. However, many butterflies and moths have been recorded, along with a limited range of dragonfly species. Some species are moving into the area as the climate warms, with butterflies like the comma and dragonflies such as the common darter spreading in. There is a great opportunity for local people and visitors to record insects and other invertebrates – see the box below.



The commonest local members of the dragonfly family are the common hawk (top left) and the common blue damselfly. A very characteristic butterfly of late summer around Alford is the Scotch argus (left), and a frequent butterfly in marshy grasslands is the small pearl-bordered fritillary (lower left). The rare five-spot ladybird has been recorded from shingles on the River Don not far from Alford.

