

Craig-y-Lodge Trail



Waymarked ●

Distance **2.4km/1.5m**

Ease of walking

Undulating, some muddy sections

Starting place

Track next to the Visitor Centre



Follow the track towards the small stone building; you will pass an old Scots pine a favourite tree of C.R.M Talbot, he planted many across his estate. They are a favourite of small birds species such as the goldcrest and tits; a crossbill was once seen in the very large tree.

Behind the stone building, a large plane tree spreads its branches to the ground; its large leaves fluttering in the breeze. Shortly after passing this tree there is a track which leads off to your right to pass a silt trap. Take this route.

Once a carriageway for a pony and trap, the track weaves its way up between the tall conifers of Home Plantation and the dense jungle of rhododendron. Amidst this dark green block of woodland a few broad-leaved trees add their character. Beech and oak together with pine provide a rich and variable food supply for many animals and birds. A quiet walk through this woodland could reveal deer browsing for acorns and other seeds, only to dash off when alarmed; rabbits seeking out grasses near the safety of dense undergrowth are always wary. Many birds share this woodland habitat; jays chatter and squabble vociferously; great spotted woodpecker drum upon bark; flocks of tits and goldcrests troop from one tree top to the next; treecreepers mouse their way quietly up the tree trunk; whereas the more noisy nuthatch works its way downwards searching crevices for insects.

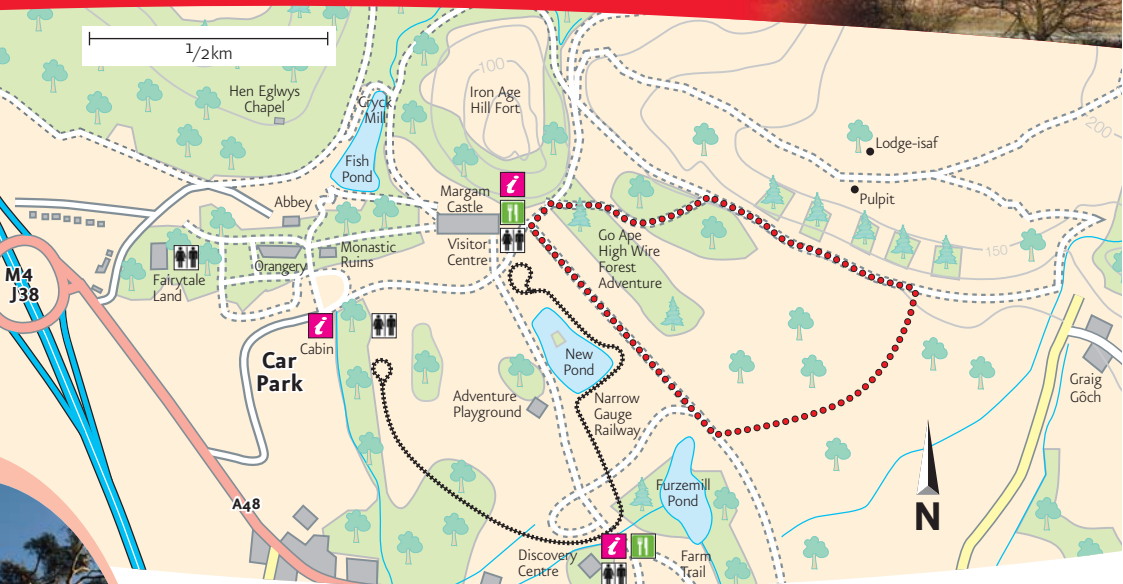
Continue along through an avenue of rhododendron so dense, that in places the top leaves of bushes on either side of the track touch to form a tunnel.

This plant, which has now become a problem in many estates was commonly used by CRM Talbot, being favoured in Victorian estates throughout the country. It was prized for its evergreen foliage and large pink flower. The plant isn't a native but of Asiatic origin, it provides shelter for the deer herds but has very vigorous growth and is difficult to remove. For four or five weeks of the year, during May and June the rhododendron put on a spectacular display of coloured blooms and are a delight. Walking out from the shadow of them a scrubland scene meets your eyes; it is wise not to walk off the track here as underfoot the ground is rough and wet. Tussock-grass stands high above a waterlogged ground, ideal for shrubby trees like willow.

In winter there is ideal cover for the mud-probing snipe. A sparrowhawk may skim low over the bushes ready to dive upon some small unsuspecting bird. You may see it fly to its favoured perch with a bird in its talons, there to feast.

On drier ground at the sides of the track, bracken grows, waist high and seemingly impenetrable. Fallow deer use its cover to hide their newly borne young in June and July and to protect them from the chilling rain or wind. Foxgloves with their attendant bees add colour to the bracken. Smaller flowers grow here including cinquefoil, speedwells and ragwort.

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On a clear day the views across the channel to North Devon are stunning. The high sandstone escarpment has five distinct blocks of trees planted upon its scarp face. Sir Evans Bevan planted these Sitka spruce in the 1940's: the spruce now provide shelter from the wind and rain for many deer. Ravens and birds of prey can often be seen catching the thermals rising above the slope.

Eventually, this trail meets up with the Pulpit trail and the Cwm Philip trail. Together, they run down to cross an expanse of open grassland. Note the hummocky nature of this terrain, with its covering of glacial pebbles, sand and clay that were deposited by an ice sheet during the last Ice Age. Gravel pits close to Craig-Goch Farm show off the nature of these materials; building aggregates were once extracted from the site.

Many deer may be seen grazing here and skylark sing high above to add a touch of spring even on a cool, wet day. Drainage ditches criss-cross the land. Should you walk off the track be careful, for these ditches are often hidden by thick clumps of tussock grass and bracken. Muddy ditches are great for frogs; herons can often be seen patrolling the ditch banks on the look out of these unwary creatures.

Stonechat and whinchat flit from one vantage point to another, nesting in the dense vegetation. The soggy grasslands provide ample feeding for lapwing and even curlew, especially during the Winter months.

The path passes close to a curious Victorian feature.

It is raised circular piece of ground surrounded by a ditch and a bank whose perimeter was once planted with trees. Its function can only be guessed at. What do you think it would have been used for?

Upon reaching the Park road, your way leads to the right past the two lakes, Furzemill and Newpond. Furzemill, as its name implies, was a man-made lake whose waters were used to power a mill to grind furze (gorse). Appearing upon maps of the 18th Century, Furzemill Lake may be even older. It is now a Nature Reserve, the deer are excluded from the area. Once, but no longer, it was a heronry and you may still see these birds stalking the shallow margins of the water. Herons now prefer the denser woodland of Nursery Dywyll in which to nest.

Newpond, by contrast, is more open. Mute swan, coot, mallard and moorhen find ideal nesting sites on the island, the surrounding water providing safety from most predators. Winter sees the arrival of such wild fowl as pochard, gadwell and tufted duck. Ancient oaks and pines are scattered around the grassy strip of land on either side of the road leading past Newpond. Large holes in the trees provide roosts and nesting sites for owls. Look out for squirrels.

Margam Castle next comes into view with the steel works in the distance. It was the profits from the works that CRM Talbot used to build for himself the elegant country house that we can see today.