

WALKING IN NORTHUMBERLAND



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Other Cicerone guides by the author

Walking in Cumbria's Eden Valley

Lake District: High Level and Fell Walks

Lake District: Low Level and Lake Walks

WALKING IN NORTHUMBERLAND

Vivienne Crow

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Front cover: Dunstanburgh Castle (Walk 2)

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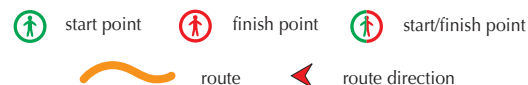
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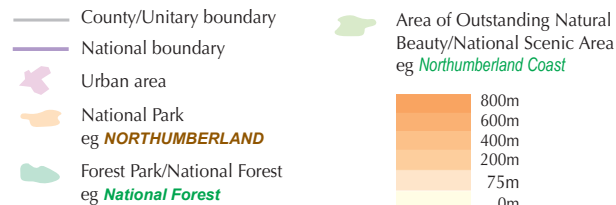
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Route symbols on OS map extracts

(for OS legend see printed OS maps)



Features on the overview map



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Much of the walk above Allenheads follows shooters' tracks (Walk 34)

INTRODUCTION



Northumberland – a land of open spaces and big skies

There's something very special about walking in Northumberland. It's got a lot to do with all the history in the landscape – from cliff-top castles and world-class Roman remains to long-abandoned prehistoric settlements hidden in the hills. It's also got something to do with those big northern skies, largely free of pollution, unfettered by man-made constructions and opening up views that stretch on for miles and miles and miles... It's undoubtedly got a lot to do with the landscape itself: remote hills, seemingly endless beaches, wild moors, dramatic geological features and valleys that are so mesmerizingly beautiful they defy description. It's surely related to the wildlife, too – from the feral goats

and the upland birds that are sometimes the walkers' sole companions to the ancient woods and vast expanses of heather moorland that burst into vibrant purple bloom every summer.

Stretching from Berwick-upon-Tweed in the northeast to Haltwhistle in the southwest – two places that, even as the crow flies, are about 95km apart – Northumberland covers more than 5000km². It's not quite the biggest county in England, but as you wander its hills and valleys and beaches it feels like it. There are wide, open spaces here like no others found south of the border. Unsurprisingly, this is England's most sparsely populated county – with just 62 people per km². To put that into perspective,

it compares with 73 in neighbouring Cumbria with its vast areas of uninhabited fell and moorland, or, at the other extreme, 3142 in the West Midlands and 5521 in Greater London. Want to escape from it all? This is the place to come!

Roughly 25 per cent of the county, including Hadrian's Wall and the Cheviot Hills, is protected within the boundaries of the Northumberland National Park. The county also has two designated Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty – the Northumberland Coast and the North Pennines.

This book covers the whole county. The routes range from easy ambles on the coast and gentle woodland trails to long days out on the lonely hills: hopefully, something for all types of walker – and all types of weather.

WEATHER

Like the rest of the UK, Northumberland experiences plenty of meteorological variety but, being on the east side of an island dominated by moisture-laden southwesterlies, it tends to be drier and generally more benign than the western side. Having said that, the Pennines and the Cheviot Hills get more than their fair share of strong winds, heavy rain and snow. And, in winter, the easterly winds that periodically come in off the North Sea are enough to bring tears to your eyes. During summer, the coast is prone to sea fog, or haar, an annoyance that will normally burn off quickly, but can linger all day if there's a steady wind coming off the North Sea to keep replenishing the banks of moisture.



It's shorts weather above Rothbury!

Now for the statistics. July and August are the warmest months, with a mean daily maximum temperature of about 18°C. The coldest months are January and February with a mean daily minimum of 1.5°C. According to rainfall totals for Boulmer on the coast, the wettest period is from October to December, while April to July are the driest months. Obviously these figures will differ according to altitude, as well as latitude and longitude; and don't forget, they're averages.

Snow is even more widely varied from one part of the county to another – with the white stuff rarely lying for long on the coast while, in the North Pennines, it'd be an unusual winter if there weren't occasional road closures. Generally speaking, January and February see the most, although snow can fall any time from late October to late April in the North Pennines and, to a lesser extent, in the Cheviot Hills.

The weather becomes an important consideration when heading on to the high ground, particularly in winter. Check forecasts before setting out, and prepare accordingly. The Mountain Weather Information Service (www.mwis.org.uk) covers the higher Cheviot Hills in its Southern Uplands forecast for Scotland, while the Meteorological Office (www.metoffice.gov.uk) provides detailed predictions for locations throughout the county.

GEOLOGY

Northumberland's size gives rise to a varied and complex underlying geology. In its most simplistic form, it could be summed up as a mixture of largely Carboniferous sedimentary rocks and volcanic rocks, both intrusive and extrusive, all topped by Quaternary deposits, including those of the last glacial period.

The rolling hills of the Cheviot range are generally associated with a period of mountain building known as the Caledonian Orogeny, about 490 to 390 million years ago. The collision of several mini-continents, including Avalonia, with Laurentia and the subduction of the Iapetus Ocean, resulted in volcanic activity. This created a mass of granite surrounded by extrusive volcanic rocks, most notably andesite. The collision of the plates also resulted in faulting, evident in places such as the Harthope and Breamish valleys.

Although there are older rocks dating as far back as the Ordovician, about 450 million years ago, the rocks of the North Pennines are largely Carboniferous limestone, sandstones and shales laid down about 360–300 million years ago, when this area was covered by a tropical sea.

There are certain surface features that will stand out as walkers explore the county – the andesite outcrops that form small crags on the otherwise smooth slopes of the Cheviot Hills; the fell sandstones, most prominent on the Simonside Hills; and, probably



Hadrian's Wall was built on the Great Whin Sill

most famously, the dolerite of the Great Whin Sill, on which Hadrian's Wall and several castles were built. The latter was formed towards the end of the Carboniferous period, when movement of tectonic plates forced magma to be squeezed sideways between beds of existing rock. The magma, as it then slowly cooled, crystallised and shrank, forming hexagonal columns.

WILDLIFE AND HABITATS

With habitats covering anything from coastal dunes to 600m-plus hills, it's not surprising that the wildlife of Northumberland is extremely diverse. While walking the coast, keep your eyes peeled for seals and even the occasional dolphin out at sea. Seals often haul out on the sands of the

Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve (see Walk 4), while dolphins have frequently been spotted playing in the waters around Berwick. Seabirds such as puffins, guillemots, Arctic terns and shags nest on the rocky Farne Islands, while winter visitors to the coast include barnacle geese, brent geese, pink-footed geese, wigeon, grey plovers and bar-tailed godwits. The waders, in particular, enjoy feeding on the sand and mudflats, where they are joined by their British cousins, who abandon the hills for a winter holiday at the seaside.

At first sight, the delicate and ever-shifting dunes seem to be home to nothing more than marram grass; closer inspection reveals an array of wildflowers such as lady's bedstraw, bloody cranesbill, houndstongue, bird's foot trefoil and restharrow.

They're also home to common lizards and an assortment of moths and butterflies, including the dark green fritillary and grayling.

Moving inland, the uplands contain some very important ecosystems. Almost 30 per cent of England's blanket bog is found in the North Pennines, home to peat-building sphagnum moss as well as heather, bog asphodel, bilberry, crowberry and cotton grass. Rare Arctic/alpine plants, such as cloudberry, still thrive on the highest moors. The nutrient-poor, acidic soils also support native grasses such as purple moor grass, mat-grass and wavy-hair grass, which give the Cheviot Hills, beyond the heavily managed grouse moors, their distinctive look.

The North Pennines and Cheviot Hills are important for a variety of bird

species, including red grouse, some of England's last remaining populations of elusive black grouse, and the heavily persecuted and extremely rare hen harrier, as well as merlin, kestrel, short-eared owl, peregrine falcon, ring ouzel, skylark, lapwing, golden plover, whinchat and wheatear.

As far as mammals go, the most common species you're likely to see on the uplands is sheep, but there is wildlife too – foxes, brown hares, weasels and stoats can be seen, particularly around dusk and dawn. Small bands of feral goats also roam parts of the Cheviot Hills.

The valleys and low-lying woods are home to badgers, roe deer, voles, shrews, minks and otters. Northumberland is also one of England's last bastions of native red squirrels, driven to extinction in other



Curlew in flight

WALK 1

Craster and Howick Hall

Start/finish	Craster Quarry car park, Craster (NU 256 197)
Distance	9.2km (5¾ miles)
Total ascent	137m (450ft)
Grade	1
Walking time	2½hr
Terrain	Field paths, road, track, low cliffs
Maps	OS Explorer 332; OS Landranger 81
Transport	Buses 418 and X18
Facilities	Craster Seafood Restaurant, Jolly Fisherman and Shoreline Café, all in Craster; public toilets and seasonal catering van in car park

Starting from the attractive fishing village of Craster, this relaxing amble heads south to Howick Hall before taking to roads and rough tracks to reach the coast path and a gentle stroll back to the village. Even across the farmland at the start of the walk, the paths are generally easy to follow. Unwind and enjoy a few undemanding hours on this gorgeous section of the coast!

From the car park, take the footpath heading southwest towards Craster South Farm – along the edge of the Northumberland Wildlife Trust's Arnold Memorial Nature Reserve. Having ignored one path to the right, you'll quickly reach a kissing-gate providing access to more open ground. Follow the faint trail away from the woods (southwest). After a slight rise, stay parallel with a fence over to the left.

Reaching a road, cross diagonally right to head up a lane – signposted Howick Hall Gates. The lane ends in a turning circle at **Craster South Farm**. Just before this, bear left around the side of a farm gate. The muddy path soon joins a more solid track from the left. Continue with the field boundary on your left for almost 500m. Having crossed another rough track, go through a kissing-gate.

Still following signs for Howick Hall, bear half-right, aiming for a farm gate at the base of the low crags of **Hips Heugh**. Once through the gate, skirt the base of the rocks for another 100m or so and then swing right across damp ground to go through a kissing-gate next to a ladder stile. A fingerpost shows the way through the crops ahead (south-southwest).

In the field corner, a pair of gates with a bridge between them provides access to the next field. Keep close to the trees on the right until you encounter a clear track rising through the woods. Follow this up to a broad, stony track near the walls of **Howick Hall**. This leads to a road, along which you turn left.

Howick Hall has been owned by the Grey family since 1319, although the house was rebuilt in 1928 after a massive fire. Among the many Greys who have lived there, the most distinguished is probably Charles, the second Earl Grey, after whom the bergamot-flavoured tea is named. As leader of the Whigs, he was Prime Minister from 1830 to 1834, during the time of the Great Reform Act 1832. The grounds – but not the house – are open to the public. They are particularly famed for their dense banks of snowdrops in late winter and





*The coast south
of Craster*

For the first time on this walk you're able to look south along the coast, towards a series of small, golden beaches cradled by long fingers of rock.

their unusual range of trees, gathered from some of the farthest-flung corners of the world. Visit www.howickhallgardens.org for more information.

After 850m the road bends sharp left. Take the track on the right here – signposted Alnmouth via coast path. At the entrance to **Sea Houses** Farm, keep straight on – along what is now a public byway. ◀

A small, fenced **enclosure** to the left of the track was the site of an archaeological dig from 2000 to 2002, when a rare example of a Mesolithic hut was unearthed. Radiocarbon dating from hearths inside the home show it was built in about 7800BC, making it Northumberland's oldest occupied site and among the oldest in the UK. Five Bronze Age burial cists were also found.

Just before the track drops to Howick Burn, a small gate on the right allows a 250m detour to the earthwork remains of an Iron Age settlement. After a metal gate, the mouth of Howick Burn is reached – a chance, finally, to

enjoy a paddle in the chilly North Sea, or to search for fossils. Turn sharp left immediately after the gate – almost back on yourself – along the coast path as it hugs the top of low cliffs.

The lump of metal on the rocks below in a short while is part of the boiler of the French steam trawler **Tadorne**, which ran aground here in 1913. Five of the crew were killed in the accident, but another 25 were rescued by the Boulmer lifeboat.

The path goes through a couple of gates, passes to the seaward side of Sea Houses Farm and reaches a junction with a more solid path. Turn right along this. Views of Dunstanburgh Castle, further up the coast, come and go until you round **Cullernose Point**; now, the ruins take on a more surreal appearance, looming mirage-like above Craster.

Passing through a kissing-gate, keep to the seaward side of the first buildings on the southern edge of the village. The path passes to the right of a play area. After a set of steps, the coast path enters the beer garden behind the Jolly Fisherman pub. After a gate on the other side, turn left along a track between the buildings. Go left at the road and then take the lane rising on the right – Whin Hill. Swing right at the top and then follow the narrower path to the left. This leads back to the car park.



*The fishing village
of Craster*