



Recommended Leaf Peeping Walk for Autumn

No. 1 - Speculation and Mireystock Bridge

by Paul Rutter, Chief Leaf Peeper and Tree Specialist

Distance: Approx. 2 miles

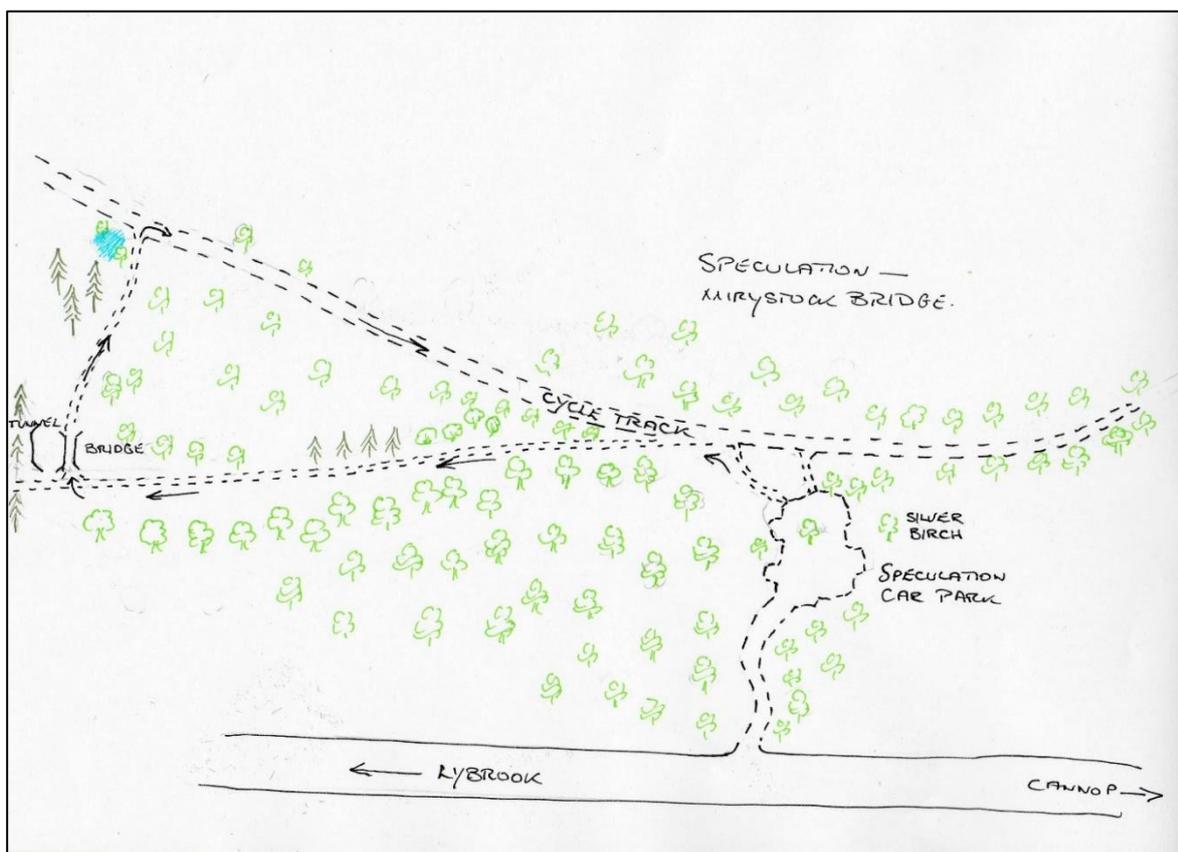
Parking: Speculation Car Park

Walk Summary:

This is a gentle walk through the heart of the Forest of Dean, beginning at the Speculation car park, surrounded by oak trees and silver birch. The route heads to Mireystock Bridge where leaf peepers should look out for oaks, sweet chestnut and beech trees along the way, before circling back to the car park through alders, spruce and hawthorn trees.

The walk features a variety of ancient trees and newer plantations, creating a compilation of sizes, shapes and species that radiate browns, coppers, yellows and bright oranges through the autumn months.

Route of Walk:





Starting from the Speculation car park, you will see sessile oak trees scattered around the perimeter alongside silver birch trees. Many of the oaks were planted around 130 years ago.

The silver birch, with its white bark, has leaves that turn a bright yellow in autumn. At this time, the deciduous trees begin to suck in the green chlorophyll chemical from the leaves (needed to convert sunlight to sugars for energy) and after the chlorophyll has been taken back into the tree, more leaf chemicals are revealed including carotene that is yellow. The birch trees here are about 70 years old and are quite short living.



The oaks are about 150 years old but can grow for 800 years or more and turn brown as they begin to expose the tannin in the leaves.

Walk Directions:

From the car park, follow the path uphill onto the old railway track and turn left following the path, with its wire fence on your left. Oak trees, sweet chestnut and beech are growing along this stretch.

Many of the oaks here were planted in the late 1800s while others are much older and have thicker stems. These older trees are described as ancient and have broader canopies with a thickly fissured bark. The beeches to your left are growing branches low to the ground as they would naturally do given enough space and light. The beech trees cast heavier shade than the oaks and little can grow beneath them. The leaves become a dark copper colour as they lose the green chlorophyll, and the leaves stay un-rotted on the ground for many months.

On your right you will see a much younger plantation of trees that are multi-stemmed and have been coppiced. These are sweet chestnut and their leaves become a golden brown while their spiny fruits are yellow/green, these are a favourite food for small mammals. These chestnuts are also eaten by us at Christmas but must ripen to a good size first.

Above the chestnut coppice you will see the finer leaves of the larch which turn from a rich green to a golden yellow before changing again to brown before eventually falling from the tree. Although larch is a conifer, it does lose its leaves each year.

Continuing along the path even older oaks can be seen on the bank above. When the trains used to travel this route the banks were more open, so the trees grew well. These are ancient veteran trees and are just a few of the remaining truly ancient trees in the forest today.



A younger oak



An ancient veteran oak

Upon reaching the bridge you will see a tunnel; this is a favourite bat roost. The surrounding trees above the tunnel are Scots pines, these remain the same colour throughout the year.

Cross over the bridge to your right and follow the path uphill. On your right you will see alder trees beginning to change colour. These trees like growing in wet ground and grow cones despite being deciduous. The sap is rich yellow when the tree is cut into.

Continue a little further where the ground rises steeply to your left and look back at the very tall conical evergreens downhill. These are Serbian spruce introduced to Britain in around 1880 and are dark green the whole year. Adapting to alpine conditions these trees lose little water through the fine needle shaped leaves that are kept on the tree for 10 years and have a type of anti-freeze to prevent the water inside the tree from freezing.

As you continue up the path you come to a forestry track. On your left, you'll spot a woodland pond surrounded by some old hawthorn trees that turn red and yellow in autumn.

Hawthorn trees when in flower are an important source of nectar for insects and will also nurse young trees protecting them from grazing animals with their thorny branches.

Turn right here onto a forest track to return to the car park.

