

# The Springwatcher

Discover the wildlife beneath your feet on a walk with naturalist and TV presenter Chris Packham.

Words: Nicholas Milton Photos: Liam Grant

**J**ust 10 minutes after starting out on our walk together, Chris Packham is already on his hands and knees. “For me landscapes work not just on the macro scale but the micro scale as well. It’s a question of perspective, not size,” he says, lying down to survey the rolling lichen heath from ground level. “I like the idea of toying with scale. If you are a mouse or a vole scurrying through here you’ve probably never seen the horizon. The ground we walk on and take for granted is a jungle for lots of creatures.”

Chris is leading me on a wildlife walk across Wangford Warren, one of the last surviving areas of Breckland heath deep in the heart of Thetford Forest in Norfolk. This year the naturalist, former punk rocker and now presenter of the BBC television programme ‘Springwatch’ turns 50 and it is playing on his mind.

“Of course, when I was younger I could hear the high-frequency calls of the voles underneath the grass. But at my age the ability to hear them has now sadly been lost.”

We talk and walk for another five minutes before Chris again comes to an abrupt halt, this time bending down to examine a pigeon carcass. “You can tell it’s been eaten by a fox,” he says running his fingers through the feathers. Seeing the puzzled look on my face he quickly adds, “because the feathers have been chewed off in lumps. If it were a bird of prey they would have been plucked out individually.”

It is this attention to detail which makes a walk with Chris so fascinating and, it must be said, so slow. He has two modes of walking. The first is very fast when he needs to get somewhere quickly and I struggle to keep up. But most of the time he is your classic ambler. It can take him an hour to walk

along the edge of a spinney which would take you or I 20 minutes at a normal walking pace. This gives him the time to 'naturalise'.

Although he is an outstanding all-round naturalist, if he is out in the field in a new area for the first time Chris will thoroughly research his route, checking a 1:25,000 Explorer map. He will also set out with a species list firmly in his mind, checking any difficult species to identify beforehand in a field guide. Here in the Brecks that means he's scanning the horizon for a hobby, while stopping occasionally to identify the lichens at his feet and looking around for a basking adder. This technique of stopping every few minutes to scrutinise the sky and search the ground while listening intently allows him to identify the maximum number of species along his route.

These days most of Chris's walking is done near his home in the New Forest where he uses five different walking circuits depending on how much time he has got and the weather. He is nearly always accompanied on the walks by his dogs Itchy and Scratchy who are not only his constant companions but have become stars in their own right on 'Springwatch'.

Using a regular route allows Chris to monitor wildlife throughout the year and keeps him in touch with, in his words, the 'metronome of nature'. He

has memorised a mental map of the best places to see wildlife at different times of the year along each of the walks. For example, at one woodland glade he regularly stops in the summer to look for butterflies like the White Admiral, much to the annoyance of his dogs.

He also carefully checks over any oaks he comes across, explaining that they can support over 460 species of invertebrates and a larger number of bird species than any other tree. He does the same walks at night but doesn't take the dogs and never uses a torch because it would disturb the wildlife. Over the years he has developed an acute sense of sound and smell for detecting wildlife such as badgers and deer in the dark.

My walk with Chris is nearly up and I calculate we have walked at less than half-a-mile per hour. But despite the relatively short distance, his knowledge and sheer enthusiasm for wildlife has made our walk come alive. As I turn to go I ask Chris what walking means to him.

"It's total therapy and sets me up for the whole day," he says. "I go out first thing in the morning and when I get back I feel I've had a slice of the real world. Walking really is the only way to appreciate our wildlife."

**'Springwatch' starts on Monday, May 30th at 8pm on BBC2.**

**CHRIS PACKHAM BIOGRAPHY** Chris has made an impressive 550 wildlife programmes and counting in a career spanning over 30 years. His big break came 25 years ago when, at the tender age of 24, he began presenting the children's television programme the 'Really Wild Show', complete with a shock of blond spiky hair. It was, he says, "a dream come true. I played football with a cheetah, married a king penguin and got to handle a range of venomous snakes, always my favourite as a boy."

Since then Chris has started up his own television production company, been an award-winning photographer, produced a range of best-selling wildlife books and even designed his own T-shirts. He is also patron to a large number of conservation charities from his beloved home town in the form of the Southampton Natural History Society to the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, of which he is Vice President.

# Chris Packham's top 10 tips for wildlife-watching walks

- 1 Buy a good wildlife guide and begin by familiarising yourself with some common species you are likely to see on a walk.
- 2 Select clothes which are comfortable and help you to blend in with the countryside.
- 3 Invest in a good pair of binoculars.
- 4 When walking always be alert and keep your eyes and ears open. Stop occasionally and be patient.
- 5 Get to know the calls and tell-tale signs that wildlife leave behind from spraints (poo) to tracks.
- 6 Do your homework and find out what species you are likely to see in what habitats and at what time of year.
- 7 Explore your local wildlife area or 'patch' at different times of the day and night and during different seasons.
- 8 Bring a camera or notebook and pencil and record what you see.
- 9 Join a local wildlife group and get involved in conservation.
- 10 Go on a guided walk with an expert – many conservation groups organise a programme of walks and field trips.



"Heard the one about the ghostly Labrador that stalks this heath..?"