

Chalk Stream Challenge



Challenge Route: The River Mimram at Panshanger Park

You should be able to complete these parts of the challenge on this walk:

Section 1

Section 2.1, 2.2, 2.5

Section 3.1, 3.2, 3.3 (3.3 – after Dog Dip is renovated)



Route Guide

This route can be completed as a circular walk; however, you will only be walking along the river for half of it. At **Stop 8**, you can choose to either retrace your steps and walk back downstream or continue the loop past Riverside Cottage, along the north side of Osprey Lake. The total walk is approximately 3.5 km.

Begin the route at Thieves Lane Car Park (nearest postcode: SG14 2WN). If traveling by car, parking charges apply daily from 8 am to 6 pm, payable upon arrival. You can pay via the RingGo app (location code '39759') or by calling 020 3046 0060. There is a 2-meter height barrier at the entrance. If traveling by train, the nearest station is Hertford North, approximately a 1 km walk from the car park. By bus: routes 324, 341, 378, 396, 641, and 724 all stop on Welwyn Road, just northeast of the park.

Please note that there are no public facilities along the route.

Start by going through the gate in the southwest corner of the car park and follow the path along the stock proof fencing (to your right). This will lead you to the start of the Dragonfly Trail (**Stop 1**). Take a moment to observe the reed and sedge beds here. These habitats are vital in a floodplain, forming in areas where drainage leads to waterlogged soils or standing water. Sedgebeds thrive in waterlogged soils with high organic content, while reedbeds, dominated by common reed, form in areas with lower organic content or where standing water is present. These habitats support fewer plant species but host distinctive animal communities such as dragonflies, damselflies, water voles, warblers, and wading birds. Water rails live in these sedgebeds, so listen for their call – some say it sounds like a piglet squealing!

Continue along the Dragonfly Trail until you reach a dragonfly viewing point and interpretation board (**Stop 2**). In spring and summer, this is an excellent spot for observing wetland wildlife, including 19 different species of damselflies and dragonflies. In 2023, Panshanger Park was designated a national Dragonfly Hotspot.

Return to the path and continue walking until you reach a hide (**Stop 3**). Take a moment to look out over Osprey Lake. What birds can you spot? Can you find the Osprey nest platform? This platform is designed to encourage ospreys to stop and potentially breed here. The lake was created through the extraction of sand and gravel, following careful restoration the area has naturally reverted to wildlife-friendly habitats.

Continue along the path, and soon you'll catch your first glimpse of the River Mimram. Stop at the bridge **(Stop 4)** and take a moment to observe your surroundings and consider the features of the river. Why are chalk streams special habitats? What makes a chalk stream a chalk stream? What features can you see? In which direction is the water flowing? Do you know the name for where a river starts (its source)? Which direction is that? What about where a river meets the sea – what is that called, and which direction is it in? **Here is a good spot to complete challenges 2.1, 2.2 and 2.5.** Observe the flow – how fast is the water? Play a game of poo sticks and see what you can learn about the river's speed. You can't escape the noise of the road here. What issues do you think the road might cause for the river and its wildlife?

Follow the path around a wooden gate and continue heading west. You'll soon come to a viewing platform **(Stop 5)**. From here, reflect on the variety of life that the River Mimram supports and **is a good spot to complete challenges 3.1 and 3.2.** What plants and animals can you spot or learn about? Binoculars could also be used at this point, if you have them. Kingfishers are often seen flying along this section, their high-pitched piping calls usually giving them away before a flash of blue streaks past. Can you spot any fish in the water? Think about some of the features you have seen already and what life these might support. Be on the lookout for non-native species like Himalayan Balsam, which can block sunlight and harm native plants along riverbanks. Volunteers have worked hard to remove this invasive plant from Panshanger Park.

Continue along the path with Rifle Butts Meadow on the left. This meadow was once agriculturally improved grassland but was reseeded with a wildflower mix in 2014. Panshanger Park Volunteers further seeded it in 2016 with yellow rattle, a hemi-parasitic plant that reduces the vigour of grasses, allowing finer grasses and wildflowers to thrive. As a result, the meadow is now home to a wide variety of native wildflowers such as bird's-foot trefoil, greater knapweed, and oxeye daisies, which can be seen in full bloom during July.

After walking another 250 meters, you'll reach the 'Dog Dip' **(Stop 6)**. Here is a good place to think about some of the challenges chalk rivers face. This area was created to allow dogs to safely enter the river. What issues might arise from dogs entering the river? Why do you think that it is important for there just to be one place where dogs are entering? When sediment enters the stream, it can cause problems for the animals and plants living there. Imagine you are trying to see underwater and someone pours a load of dirt into the water. Now you can't see anything clearly, and it's harder for fish and invertebrates to move around, find their food and avoid being eaten. The sediment also covers the gravels on the river bed that fish and invertebrates need in order to complete their life cycles and find shelter. Sediment is a really big issue for this river in particular. Another challenge is when people use too much water from the river or the ground where the river gets its water, so the river doesn't have enough water to flow properly. The water that we use in our homes is taken directly from rivers like these, so it is important that we try and use as little as we need, to reduce the amount that is taken from the river. Another problem is pollution. When rubbish, chemicals, or dirty water get into the river, it makes the water unhealthy for the animals and plants living there. **(The Dog Dip is currently closed for refurbishment, but when it reopens, this is best spot for safe river dipping and completing challenge 3.3).**

Continue walking past the 'Dog Dip,' and you'll soon notice the wet woodland habitat on your right. Wet woodlands are characterized by trees such as willows, alders, and birches, which thrive in poorly drained or seasonally flooded soils. This rare habitat, known as Carr, is preserved with minimal intervention, allowing trees like alder to mature and eventually become standing deadwood – prime habitat for invertebrates and birds. The Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, a rare species in Hertfordshire, has occasionally been recorded here. Continue

walking until you're surrounded by woodland on both sides (**Stop 7**). Take a moment to listen for birds and observe your surroundings. Binoculars could be used if you have them.

Continue until you pass Kings Lake on your right. This lake is another restored sand and gravel pit used by the Panshanger Anglers for fishing, and the lake edges provide excellent nesting habitats for wildfowl such as great crested grebes, little grebes, coots, and tufted ducks. During the summer, migratory birds from Africa, such as reed and sedge warblers, house martins, common terns, swallows, and hobbies, can be spotted around the lake. At the junction, turn right onto the track and continue around the lake until you reach a bridge, where you'll once again see the River Mimram flowing underneath (**Stop 8**).

This is a great place to compare the upstream and downstream sections of the river, **revisit challenges 2.1, 2.2 and 2.5**. Which direction is the river flowing? How fast is the water? Throw some poo sticks into the water and observe! Can you spot any fish?

You've now reached the end of the route. At this point, you can either double back on yourself, retracing your steps to view the river from a different perspective, or continue on the circular route by walking around Riverside Cottage. Turn right immediately after the cattle grid and walk along the north side of Osprey Lake. Be cautious, as livestock may be grazing in the area.

Useful websites

[Panshanger Park Home Page](#) (Tarmac, landowners)

For information relating to volunteering, events and park management, contact: panshangerpark@maydencroft.co.uk

[Panshanger Park](#) Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust

[British Dragonfly Society](#) Information on the Dragonfly Trail

[River Lea Catchment Partnership](#) for information on the River Mimram