

Location & Access:

The Tarka Trail is a long distance footpath / cycleway in north Devon. The town of Barnstaple acts as a transport hub for the trail, and there is a working railway station here that links to Exeter Central and Exeter St Davids. Public buses run from Barnstaple to Braunton (Route 21 to Ilfracombe); Barnstaple to Bideford (Route 21); and Barnstaple to Torrington (Route 71). It is also possible to connect by bus from Barnstaple to Meeth (via Torrington), but the service is not regular, and some planning would be required.



Taw Estuary —Photo: Paul Berry

Key Geography: Stunning views of the rivers Taw and Torridge, and the Taw-Torridge Estuary. Salt marshes, mud flats, historic towns, industrial archaeology, abundant wildlife & birdlife, literary connections with Henry Williamson’s ‘Tarka the Otter’.

Description:

The Tarka Trail, named after Henry Williamson’s famous novel ‘Tarka the Otter’, is in its entirety a 180 mile figure of eight loop featuring roads, footpaths, bridleways and cycleways. The most popular part of the route is the 31 mile section along disused railway lines between Braunton and Meeth, converted to a cycleway and walkway (with access to horse-riders in the last section) in 1997.



Fremington Quay —Photo: Paul Berry

The 31 mile shared access section of the Tarka Trail breaks down conveniently into 4 separate sections: (1) From Braunton to Barnstaple along the banks of the River Taw (5 miles); (2) Barnstaple to Bideford along the banks of the Taw-Torridge Estuary (9 miles); (3) Bideford to Torrington along the banks of the River Torridge (6 miles); and (4) Torrington to Meeth through woodland and moor (11 miles).

Each section (or combination of sections) makes an interesting walk or cycle – all flat ground along the route of a disused railway line. Because of the easy terrain, it is possible to complete the whole journey in one go – but there is so much to see on the way, and so many diversions that could extend the trip, that it is best enjoyed in leisurely bite-sized chunks.

Henry Williamson published Tarka the Otter in 1927, and his famous novel describing the life and struggles of Tarka was set in this part of the north Devon, which he called ‘the country of the two rivers’. The trail runs close to the

(continued overleaf)

Curiosity Questions:

- # What is the name of the heron in Williamson’s ‘Tarka the Otter’?
- # What two national Parks can be seen from the Tarka Trail?
- # Devon County Council bought the old railway line from Bideford to Meeth in 1989. How much did they pay?

Further information:

www.tarkatrail.org.uk
www.tarkatrailguide.co.uk
www.northdevonbiosphere.org.uk/shared-use.html

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watercourses of the Taw and Torridge, and many of the landmarks mentioned in the book can be visited along the trail.

Together, the Taw and Torridge drain almost 800 square miles of north Devon countryside, and although there is only 26 miles between the sources of their sources, they travel very different paths on the way to their meeting at the sea. The Taw flows northwards from its source near Cranmere Pool on Dartmoor, while the Torridge has its origin near Hartland in north west Devon. From there, it sweeps around in a great arc to meet the estuary just 9 miles from its start point.

The shared use section of the Tarka Trail is part of a European Cycle West project that jointly promotes cycling routes in Britain and the South West. It is part of the ‘Velodyyssey’ route linking south-east Brittany, including the Iroise Biosphere Reserve and Devon. The trail is also part of the National Cycle Network (routes 27, Devon Coast to Coast and 3, West Country Way).



Tarka Trail near Braunton

—Photo: Paul Berry



Audio Post—Photo: Paul Berry

Cycle hire is available at numerous locations along the trail, including: Otter Cycle Hire (at Braunton) – 01271 813339; Tarka Trail Cycle Hire (aka ‘Tarka Bikes’ at Barnstaple Railway Station) – 01271 324202; Biketrail (at Fremington Quay) – 01271 372586; and Bideford Cycle Hire (at East-of-the-Water, Bideford) – 01237 424123.

A series of articles following this introduction will give details of the highlights of each of the four sections of the trail. There is also a series of 21 yellow-topped Audio Guide posts along the route, each with a QR code which can be scanned, to access further information and downloads.

Whether you decide to explore the whole trail in its entirety or just one of the sections, take time to enjoy the geography and natural history of north Devon.



Fremington Station —Photo: Paul Berry

Answers to Curiosity Questions:

- # What is the name of the heron in Williamson’s ‘Tarka the Otter’? (*‘Old Nog’*)
- # What two national Parks can be seen from the Tarka Trail? (*Exmoor and Dartmoor*)
- # Devon County Council bought the old railway line from Bideford to Meeth in 1989. How much did they pay? (*£1*)



