



## North Dartmoor

### Steeperton Tor and Beyond

This is a long and exhilarating trudge up into the high country. In a way it's a bit like attempting to find the source of the Nile - only the mission here is to find the source of the River Taw.

Taw Head is in the middle of nowhere - in other words, it's plonk in the centre of Dartmoor's northern vastness - which is as middle-of-nowhere-ish as you get in the Westcountry peninsula.

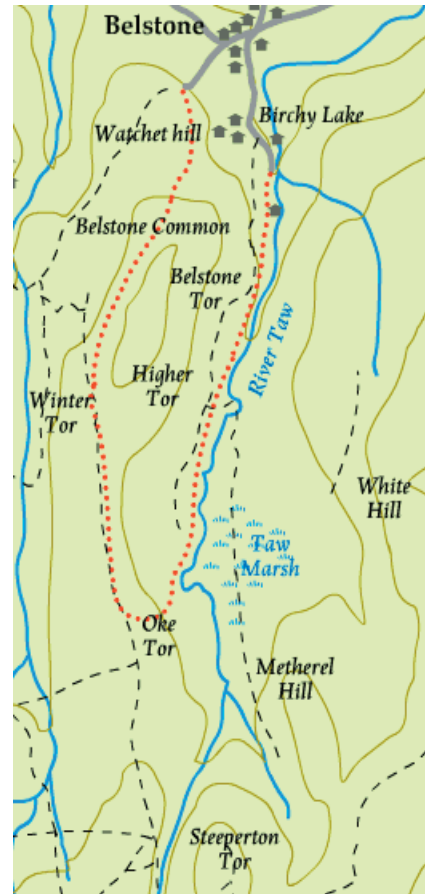
I'll admit before we begin that I never actually reached the teeny-weeny source, which spews from a bog under Hangingstone Hill, but I did get to a point where I could view the spring in all its wild and remote beauty. And that'll do nicely, as the route made a bracing and wonderful figure-of-8 walk.

We begin at the picturesque village of Belstone perched high above the A30 a few miles south-east of Okehampton. I parked by the side of a common just down the lane from the curious looking pub, and admired the view of spectacular Belstone Cleave before setting off in a southerly direction into the moors.

A track introduced me to the tumbling River Taw after I'd walked around the back of a Christian residential centre and found myself passing through what I presume is a series of sheep dipping pens. Once past this last bow to agriculture, I was able to gain the rough path that climbs alongside the waterfalls and rapids of the Taw.

And this is the theme of the first half-mile into the wilderness - the river seems in a great rush to leave the moor. Then, as if by some geographical magic, things change. The river ceases to rumble and roar and we enter a quiet stretch where the water moves sleek and silent down a narrow channel. And suddenly, looking up, the walker realises that he has entered an entirely new demesne - a secret world tucked away and shielded by great hills all around.

It's called Taw Marsh, and it looks a bit like something out of Africa's Serengeti. I have never seen anything like this place anywhere else in the region - an enclosed plain where the river forgets its moorland rush to meander quietly this way and that in a series of wide, beach-lined pools. It comes as a complete surprise and for a moment you are forced to stop and stare. The place is dominated by the tall triangular peak of Steeperton Tor and somehow you can imagine H Rider Haggard writing a novel about some long lost tribe hiding out up there.



*Basic hike: from Belstone (near Okehampton) south into the moors following the Taw. At Taw Marsh our route climbs Oke Tor and continues south up Okement Hill, before returning alongside Oke Tor to gain the ridge leading to Belstone Tor. Then it's simply a case of descending over Belstone Common back to the village.*

*Recommended map: Ordnance Survey Outdoor Leisure Map 28 - Dartmoor. Distance and going: seven miles, fairly easygoing except for boulder «clitter» in places.*

The two dippers, which had escorted me up the rushing part of the stream, departed and were replaced by a pair of ravens. These seemed most indignant at my arrival in their secret world, and I soon found out why. They had been about the gory business of pecking out the insides of a drowned sheep. She was caught up on a branch in one of the bends in the river, and I was horrified to see that her unborn lamb had survived its mother's death and attempted to climb out of the hole made by the birds. Nature's own terrible Caesarean had failed - the unborn lamb only made it halfway into this cruel world.

I walked quickly away and climbed the almost imperceptible path that took me on a diagonal route to the top of Oke Tor. The rocks up here look like so many pancakes piled one upon another - the fossilised silt, I suppose, of some ancient primeval sea.

After a sheltered breather from the gale I moved on, south to the lip of Steeperton Gorge. This is one of two defiles that isolate splendid Steeperton Tor and make it the distinct mountain it is. A bit confusing really because the easterly one is called Steeperton Brook so you'd think it would have the gorge named after it. But it's the western defile, the Taw, which gets the appellation, as it cleaves its way down from the southerly heights.

From Oke Tor to this point I'd followed a recognisable track and, as this now veered away from the gorge to climb the flanks of Okement Hill, I followed in the belief it would sooner or later reveal the birthplace of the Taw. It did. After I'd crossed a level plain that formed the watershed between the Taw and Okement Rivers, I was able to branch south again up Okement Hill, and long before I reached the top I could see Taw Head. Unremarkable bog it might be, but the landscape has a wild, untamed beauty of its own and I look forward to returning when I explore the Okement Rivers.

But now I retraced my tracks and returned to the watershed where I followed the left-hand track down the hill. Just past what's known on Dartmoor as a «clitter» of rocks, I left the track to follow the 420 metre contour back along the western flank of Oke Tor, and this took me north to the ridge that stretches between Oke and Belstone Tors.

The latter eminence affords some of the finest views in the Westcountry. From its rocky peak you can see all of central and North Devon as well as much of northern Cornwall. It is one of the most boulder-strewn hills on Dartmoor, and you must take great care not to turn an ankle when making your way north again, down across its flanks to Belstone. And take care too, not to annoy the Nine Maidens of Belstone Common who either dance here every noon - or every Hunter's Moon - depending on which myth you believe. Anyway, they're moody phantoms who were turned to stone for dancing on the Sabbath - just like the Merry Maidens across the Tamar vale at lofty Minnions on Bodmin Moor.

So watch your step and you'll re-enter the world of man at Belstone unscathed but weary after a long and spectacular Dartmoor dawdle.