

5 TOP FIVE TO SEE

AMAZING HEATHLAND

THAMES BASIN HEATHS
PARTNERSHIP



Dartford warbler



sand lizard



silver-studded blue



round-leaved sundew



green tiger beetle



Did you know that heathland is rarer than rainforest? It is home to some of our rarest and most exciting wildlife, from sand lizards and smooth snakes to birds such as Dartford warblers.

Historic Heathland

Although heathland may look wild and natural, it is an ancient landscape that has been shaped by the actions of people over thousands of years.

It's believed that large areas of heathland were created around 6,000 years ago, in the late Stone Age and Bronze Age. Our ancestors cut down the forest to make space for growing crops. Overtime, the rain washed the minerals from the soil, leaving it nutrient-poor and acidic, and unsuitable for growing crops.

Heathland plants such as heather and gorse are well suited to this type of soil, and began to spread across much of the exhausted farmland.

Over the following centuries, people used the heathland to cut firewood and

collect gorse for fuel, bracken for animal bedding, heather for thatching and birch twigs to make brooms. They kept animals for meat, wool, milk and hides, and grazed them on the heaths. The harvesting of plants in this way prevented trees and shrubs from growing, allowing heathland plants and wildlife to thrive in the open habitat, away from the shade of trees.

In modern times, to keep this rare heathland healthy, we must copy some of these old practices. You may spot Rangers on the heaths working hard to remove trees and shrubs. If this is not done, eventually the area will turn back to forest, and the rare heathland and its wildlife will be lost.

Not all birds nest in trees!

Some of Britain's rarest birds nest on the ground on our local heaths. One type of bird, the Nightjar, flies all the way from Africa just to breed here! They nest on the ground amongst the heather, and males will perch in a tall tree to sing their churring song. Other birds include

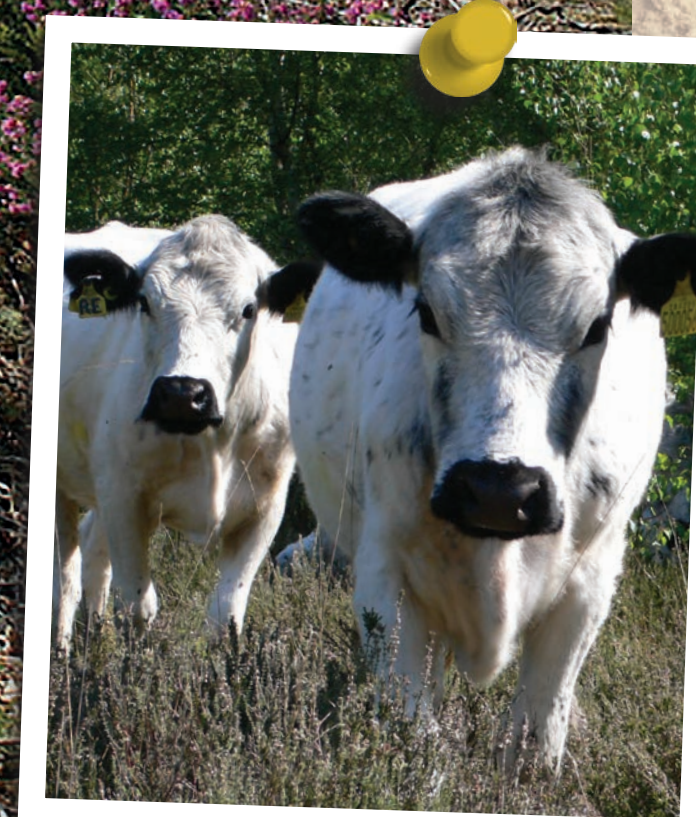
the Dartford warbler that nests in gorse bushes, and the Woodlark that makes its nest on areas of bare ground between clumps of grass.

To help these birds find ideal nesting places, the rangers may remove some of the old over-grown heather to allow new heather to grow, and create bare patches of ground by removing plants and soil. Bare sandy soil is also great for insects such as ants, bees, wasps and the green tiger beetle. Sunny spots are ideal for basking reptiles such as the sand lizard.

The dangers of fire

Heathland can become very dry during the warmer months of the year, and prone to uncontrolled fires. Fire can travel across heathland faster than an Olympic sprinter. It can kill wildlife, damage the habitat, and put people's lives and homes in danger.

To help prevent fires spreading, large belts of sand and bare ground (called firebreaks) are created to deprive the fire of fuel and to allow fire engines to access the heathland.



Living lawnmowers

Live-stock munch on scrub and grasses that would otherwise out-compete the heathland plants. Cattle use their tongues to pull vegetation into their mouths. This leaves tussocks of grass for birds such as woodlark to nest in.