



# My pocket guide to heathland



# It's MY heathland

Heathland is important for many rare animals and plants. Heathland habitat emerged after our native forests were cleared thousands of years ago. Without the shade of trees, heathland plants and other wildlife thrived in the open landscape. People harvested plants such as gorse and heather turfs for fuel and bracken for animal bedding, which prevented shrubs and trees from taking over the landscape. Today, cattle grazing has the same effect.

This creates the perfect habitat for many rare wildlife species. Bare patches of sandy soil make excellent homes for burrowing insects such as solitary wasps, and the caterpillars of the true lover's knot moth feed on heather and gorse tips. Sun-warmed sandy banks are great for basking snakes and the sand lizard.

Heaths are great places for people to explore too. This pocket guide tells you about a few of the amazing species that can be found on heathland.

Photo: Adrian Wallington



Did you know? Heathland habitat is rarer than rainforest!

RARE!



Paul Roberts

## Dartford warbler

This secretive little bird nests in gorse bushes, where it also likes to catch its prey, such as caterpillars and beetles. These birds are rare because damage to the heathland is causing a decline in their numbers.

## Nightjar

The nightjar flies all the way from Africa to breed on our heaths, where it makes its nest on the ground. The nightjar is nocturnal, and the male attracts a mate by calling with a strange 'churring' noise after dark.



Amy Denness

RARE!



BBOWT

## Woodlark

The woodlark has such a beautiful song that it has been written about by many famous poets. Woodlarks nest on the ground, digging a shallow scrape to build their nest in.

Did you know? Many heathland birds nest on the ground.





### Black darter dragonfly

This is the only black dragonfly in the UK and is the smallest of our dragonfly species. Dragonflies are some of the fastest flying insects in the world, reaching speeds of up to 30mph!

### Silver-studded blue

This butterfly gets its name from the light blue reflective spots on the underside of its wings. The larvae feed on heather and gorse which is why heathland is so important for their survival.



RARE!

### Tiger beetle

Tiger beetles have long legs making them agile when hunting for prey. The larvae make a funnel shaped burrow in the ground, and catch insects that fall in the trap!



### Heather

There are three different types of heather growing on heathland. Ling has very tiny pink flowers. Bell heather grows in dry conditions, whereas cross-leaved heather prefers wetter conditions.

### Gorse

Gorse has bright yellow flowers which smell like coconut. Its leaves form prickles which protect it from hungry animals. They are waxy to reduce water loss in dry conditions.



### Round-leaved sundew

This carnivorous plant gets extra nutrients by trapping and digesting insects that are attracted by a glistening sticky liquid on its hairy leaves. The insect is digested by enzymes in the sticky liquid.



Did you know? Common ants eat the sweet liquid secreted by the silver-studded blue caterpillars, and in return protect them from predators!

Did you know? Heathland soil has little nutrients, and is generally sandy and acidic. Heathland plants are specially adapted to grow in this environment.



## Adder

Adders are the only venomous snake in the UK. They track their prey using their keen sense of smell, and strike using their poisonous bite. Unlike grass snakes, adders do not lay eggs, instead giving birth to live young.

## Sand lizard

Sand lizards are very rare and only found in a few locations in the UK. They are dependent on well managed heathland or sand dune habitats. They bury their eggs in sand exposed to the sun which helps to keep the eggs warm.



RARE!

## Slowworm

Despite their appearance, slowworms are neither worms nor snakes! They are legless lizards. When they are attacked by predators, they can cleverly shed their tails to escape!



# Heathland needs friends

## Disappearing fast

Over the last 100 years we have lost 80% of our heathland in Britain to roads, homes and businesses. That doesn't leave many wild places left for all the special plants and animals that depend on heathland to survive.

## Managing and restoring heathland

Rangers look after the heaths by regularly cutting down trees and shrubs, and by using controlled grazing to mimic the ways that heathland was managed by our ancestors in the past. They also keep a close eye on heathland species, from rare ground-nesting birds to beetles and butterflies, to help stop their numbers declining.

Photos: Liz Child, Andy Fairbairn, Giles Strother



Did you know? Adders have a zig-zag pattern on their backs.

# Help YOUR heathland

THAMES BASIN HEATHS  
PARTNERSHIP



We can all do our bit to help to protect the animals and plants that depend on their special heathland home.

Always keep to marked footpaths, especially when birds may be nesting on the ground between March and September. Please also keep dogs on paths with you.



Never light fires on heathland. Uncontrolled fire can destroy much of the wildlife and put lives in danger.



Please don't leave litter on the heathland. Wildlife can become trapped and injured by litter. Always take it home, or put it in a bin. Dog mess kills heathland plants, and should always be bagged and binned.



We hope you enjoy exploring and learning about your heathland!



## Find out more

The Thames Basin Heaths Partnership works across several different heathland sites that make up the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area. To find out more, go to [www.tbhpartnership.org.uk](http://www.tbhpartnership.org.uk)