



# Protecting the rare wildlife of our heathland

HIKING ON THE HEATH – Dog owners enjoying a winter walk across Surrey heathland

**SWATHES of heathland such as Chobham, Horsell and Whitmoor commons have helped many survive a difficult year, providing open spaces for fresh air and exercise during the lockdowns.**

The numbers of people strolling and cycling across these ancient landscapes have increased significantly, as people escape from their homes for the time permitted under coronavirus rules.

Our heaths are treasured as countryside and wildlife havens. Threats to enclose or develop them prompt outrage, but many might not know that they have a huge amount of legal protection.

Many of the commons across Surrey, Hampshire and Berkshire have SSSI – Site of Special Scientific Interest – status which guards against damage by mankind, but the most important sites are also part of the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area (SPA).

Totalling 8,200 hectares, more than 20,000 acres, the SPA was designated by the European Union in 2005 and forms a network of sites across Europe which are internationally important for nature conservation.

The Thames Basin Heaths Partnership, a collaboration of local councils, land managers and nature conservation bodies, is responsible for spreading the word about how special the land is.

“The SPA helps protect the wildlife and guards against development of the heaths,” said Sarah Bunce, the partnership’s communications officer.

“You might not think of South East England as a hotspot for rare wildlife, but it really is! It may be criss-crossed by busy roads and have an ever-increasing population but, by a fluke of nature, it has the perfect geology and climate for a very special wildlife habitat, heathland.

“If you’ve taken your local heath for granted, think again. This heather-clad landscape is rarer than rainforest.”

Sarah, who co-ordinates the annual Heath Week activities across the SPA, said much of the heathland wildlife probably goes unnoticed.

“A closer look reveals a magical world inhabited by iridescent beetles, weird-looking wasps, beautiful butterflies, shy reptiles, carnivorous plants and some very special birds,” she said.

“Heathland birds aren’t part of the common-or-garden flock. And because a heath, by its very nature, is covered in low-growing shrubs rather than trees, that’s where special birds nest, on or near the ground, in among the heather and gorse.”

The SPA was designated particularly for three vulnerable species of bird – nightjar, woodlark and Dartford warbler.

“Much of the heathland magic happens at twilight,” said Sarah. “You could walk on the heaths every day

of your life and not see my favourite bird, the nightjar.

“But visit on a summer evening at dusk, and you’ll hear the strange, mechanical churring of the males, and maybe even catch a mesmerising glimpse of a bird in flight. Astoundingly, they come all the way from Africa to nest here on our heaths.

“You might think that nesting on the ground in a heavily populated area would lead to a rather precarious existence, but these birds have been living and breeding alongside us for centuries.

“Only in recent years, with development on the up and a growing population with more leisure time, has their vulnerability become an issue.”

She said that heathland covered vast areas of southern England thousands of years ago, but its size had shrunk dramatically over the last 100 years and pressure on it is still increasing.

“It’s now more important than ever for us to act together to protect this precious and fragile landscape for the future,” said Sarah. “The Thames Basin Heaths Partnership is here to help you connect with it, protect it and enjoy it for years to come.”



SONGSTERS – Woodlarks are heathland birds with a beautifully lyrical song  
Photo by Michael Jones



MUSIC OF THE NIGHT – Nightjars spend the winter in Africa and return to this country in May. Their unique churring “song” adds magic to the heathland dusk  
Photo by Rob Soloman



ELECTRIC BIRD – Dartford warblers are affectionately known by that name. If you hear a bird that sounds like it is being electrocuted, it’s probably a “Dartie”  
Photo by Michael Jones

THAMES BASIN HEATHS  
PARTNERSHIP

THE Special Protection Area was set up to conserve rare birds, but it does so much more than that, says Sarah Bunce.

“It protects the heathland for all sorts of wonderful wildlife and, of course, gives the landscape we love a huge amount of protection from inappropriate development.

“It’s a pleasing, virtuous circle – protecting birds protects heaths, protecting heaths protects birds.”

She said that everyone can help conserve and protect the rare heathlands.

“Simple things can make a huge difference. When you’re out on the heaths, please keep to main paths and keep your dog on the path and out of vegetation.

“Help prevent wildfires by following the code of not lighting fires or barbecues on heathland, not discarding lit cigarettes and taking all litter home.”

Sarah recommends that people who want to visit the heathland countryside visit the Greenspace on Your Doorstep directory of more than 70 walks of the Thames Basin Heaths Partnership website, [www.tbhpartnership.org.uk](http://www.tbhpartnership.org.uk).

The partnership also offers free virtual school visits – see the website for details.