

My pocket guide to heathland

How can I help?

Keep to main paths March to September to reduce the risk of disturbing rare birds that nest in vegetation on the ground.

Keep dogs out of vegetation to give chicks the best chance of survival.

Please, no fires or BBQs, ensure cigarettes are out and take all litter home.



Prevent fires



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tbhpartnership.org.uk/activities



Our Amazing Heathlands

FREE curriculum-linked education sessions for local schools. On the heath, in the classroom, in your school grounds, or remotely!

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THAMES BASIN HEATHS
PARTNERSHIP



Our Amazing Heathlands



Heathland habitat is rarer than rainforest!

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.



©Adrian Wallington



Many heathland birds nest on the ground.

Dartford Warbler

RARE!

This secretive little bird lives on heathland all year round and relies on gorse bushes for food, such as spiders and insects, and shelter from the elements in winter. To spot one, listen out for its scratchy song.



©Paul Roberts

Nightjar

RARE!

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

Woodlark

RARE!

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.



©BBOWT



Insects



©Debbie Lewis

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!



©Alex Cruickshank

Silver-studded Blue

RARE!

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.



©Steve Gerrish

Green 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!



Black Ants eat the sweet liquid secreted by the Silver-studded Blue caterpillars, and in return protect them from predators!

Plants



©Katie Breach

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 Heath prefers wetter conditions.



©Katie Breach

Gorse

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



©Kate Dent

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.



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

Reptiles



©Andy Fairbairn



©Friedrich Böhringer



©Andy Fairbairn

Adder

Adders can be recognised by a dark, zigzag stripe along their backs. They are the UK's only venomous snake, but are placid creatures unless directly threatened and slide into the undergrowth when they sense an approach.

Sand Lizard

RARE!

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.

Slow Worm

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

Unlike Grass Snakes, Adders don't lay eggs, they give birth to live young.



Heathland needs friends

Disappearing fast

Over the last 200 years we have lost 84% of our heathland to roads, homes, businesses and lack of management. 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.

