

LONDON'S WILD PLACE

Discover Hampstead Heath's changing habitats and wildlife

The Heath, managed by the City of London and English Heritage, comprises 800 acres of historic countryside. Season by season, we introduce you to the Heath's special habitats and species, and explain how you can help keep the Heath a valued refuge for nature and people.

A changing landscape

A hundred years ago, the Heath was largely open, grazed meadow, with little woodland. The Heath's sandy soils supported gorse, heather and acid grassland, which can still be found in places. Rain falling through Heath sands emerged onto hillsides as springs, which fed chains of ponds, forming the headwaters of the lost rivers Fleet and Westbourne. As grazing declined on the Heath, woodlands spread.



FIELD NOTES:

Spring songsters

Spring is a time to enjoy dawn and evening choruses. Wrens, robins and warblers dominate the singing, but the loudest song is that of the Song Thrush, a species in national decline with the Heath an important London refuge.

Rare trees in ancient woods

The rare Wild Service Tree can be identified by its irregularly pointed leaves and distinctive May flowers. It is characteristic of ancient woodlands, such as Ken Wood, and can be found in the ancient hedgerows across the Heath.

Nesting birds on Heath ponds

In Spring, coots, moorhen, ducks, geese and swans make nests around the Heath's ponds. Watch also for nesting Great Crested Grebe, with their spectacular courtship display and their striking zebra-striped chicks riding on their parent's back.

Mining bees on sandy paths

Heath soils are used by over seven species of solitary mining bees (*Andrena* spp), which make their nests underground. Look for them provisioning their burrows on sandy sections of footpaths across the Heath.

MAKE ROOM FOR NATURE!

In Spring, the Heath has over 30 species of birds nesting in its woodlands and meadow edges. Help to protect them by staying to main paths. Don't let dogs run free in dense undergrowth where they may disturb nests and nestlings.



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*The Heath &
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Managing natural habitats

While the Heath looks wild, it is in fact extensively managed for nature and people. Reedbeds are being extended on the edges of ponds to improve water quality and biodiversity. Mowing of meadows is timed to maintain species diversity and new wildflower meadows are seeded. Veteran trees are managed and native saplings planted to replace them. Invasive plants are removed before they overgrow our native flora.

Reedbed with Reed Warbler

Speckled Wood

Peacock

Photo by Adrian Brooker

Photo by Adrian Brooker

Whitethroat on bramble

Noctule bat

Common Spotted Orchid

Photo by Adrian Brooker

FIELD NOTES:

Rise of the Reed Warblers

As reedbeds have been extended, the shy Reed Warbler has colonized more Heath ponds. Listen for its chattering song from deep inside the reedbed.

A reserve for Whitethroats

Whitethroats nest in only a few scrubby habitats on the East Heath. A reserve has been created for them by roping off an area of bramble and wild rose to reduce disturbance by walkers and dogs.

Butterflies in different habitats

Most of the Heath's butterflies, like the Peacock, can be seen on wildflowers in meadows during Summer, but the Speckled Wood prefers the dappled shade of woodland paths.

Bats on summer nights

Just after sunset, watch for bats foraging for flying insects along woodland edges or over ponds. The Noctule is the largest of the nine species found on the Heath.

The Heath's changing flora

A millennial survey of plants on the Heath recorded over 650 species. You can even find orchids on the Heath! This year a new survey will assess changes to this flora twenty years on.

DID YOU KNOW?

Grazing livestock, once common on the Heath, is being trialled again to improve biodiversity. These Longhorn Cattle, part of the Kenwood dairy herd, were painted by Julius Caesar Ibbettson in 1797. The painting is on display at Kenwood

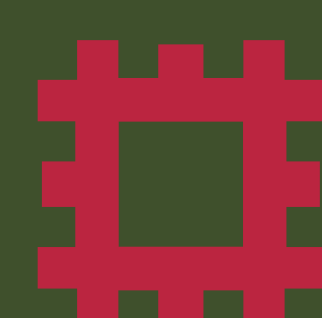


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Protecting biodiversity

There is an urgent need to reverse the decline of biodiversity nationwide. The Heath is no exception. It has lost about 30 % of its breeding bird species in the last 70 years. Today it is a refuge for threatened London species like the Hedgehog. Protecting uncommon habitats like sphagnum bogs and acid grasslands will save many Heath species from local extinction.



FIELD NOTES:

A diversity of spiders

Autumn mornings reveal vegetation covered with glistening spider webs. Over one third of the British spider fauna has been recorded on the Heath, including the striking Wasp Spider and the rare Purse Web Spider, a tiny relative of the tarantula.

A London refuge for Hedgehogs

Recent surveys suggest that the Heath may support over a hundred Hedgehogs. A nocturnal species, they rest in dense undergrowth by day where they can be disturbed and injured by poorly controlled dogs. They hibernate over winter months between November and March.

Moths on the Heath

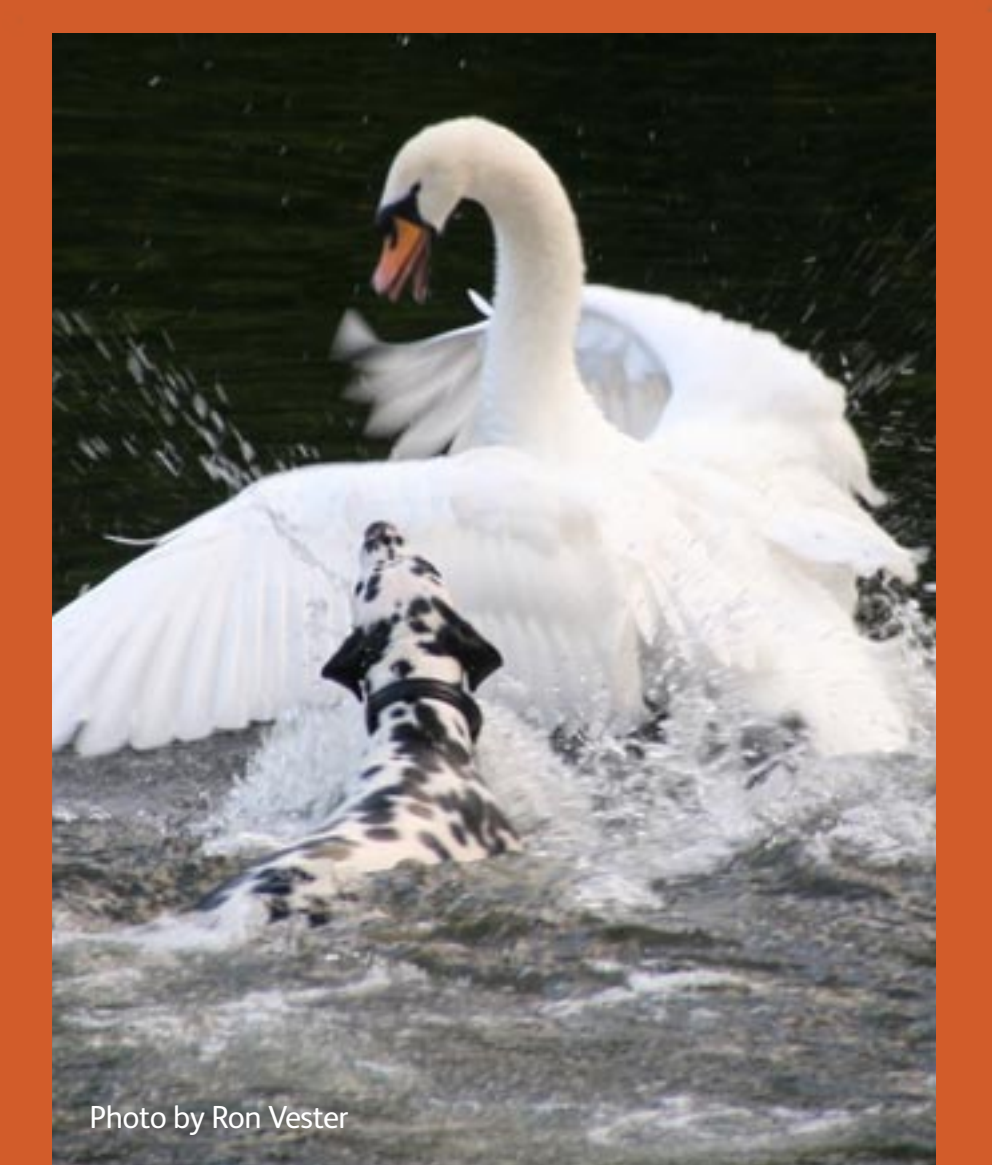
The Heath supports over 300 species of moths. With moth numbers declining nationally, a large and diverse moth population is essential to maintaining the Heath's bat and bird populations. The Red Lined Quaker moth is active in Autumn, laying eggs on willow.

New species for the Heath

After centuries of nature study, new species are still being found. Last year, LNHS found five new mosses, including the Compact Bog Moss, which grows in the Kenwood sphagnum bog with other uncommon mosses, horsetails and ferns.

MAKE ROOM FOR NATURE!

Dog swimming areas are provided to prevent dog attacks on waterfowl and limit poisoning of pondlife from dog flea powders. Please use only these areas.



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Adapting to change

The increase in extreme weather events is adding to pressure on the Heath's biodiversity, for instance by increasing treefalls and flooding. Heath habitats play an important role in addressing our climate emergency. Woodlands and rough meadows store carbon well. Ancient woodlands are particularly good at this. Protective fencing around veteran trees reduces root compaction and helps these woodlands to survive.



FIELD NOTES:

Woodpeckers drum for mates

The Heath's woods in winter are quiet, but still full of birdlife. Great Spotted Woodpeckers will start drumming on hollow branches to attract mates for the Spring.

Rare fungi on veteran trees

More than 480 veteran trees, some over 300 years old, can be found in Ken Wood, North Wood, and along ancient field margins on the Heath. They support a fauna and flora of uncommon species, including the Bearded Tooth Fungus.

Catkins on winter trees

Alder trees growing by ponds will be putting out their cones and catkins as Spring approaches.

Ducks on ponds

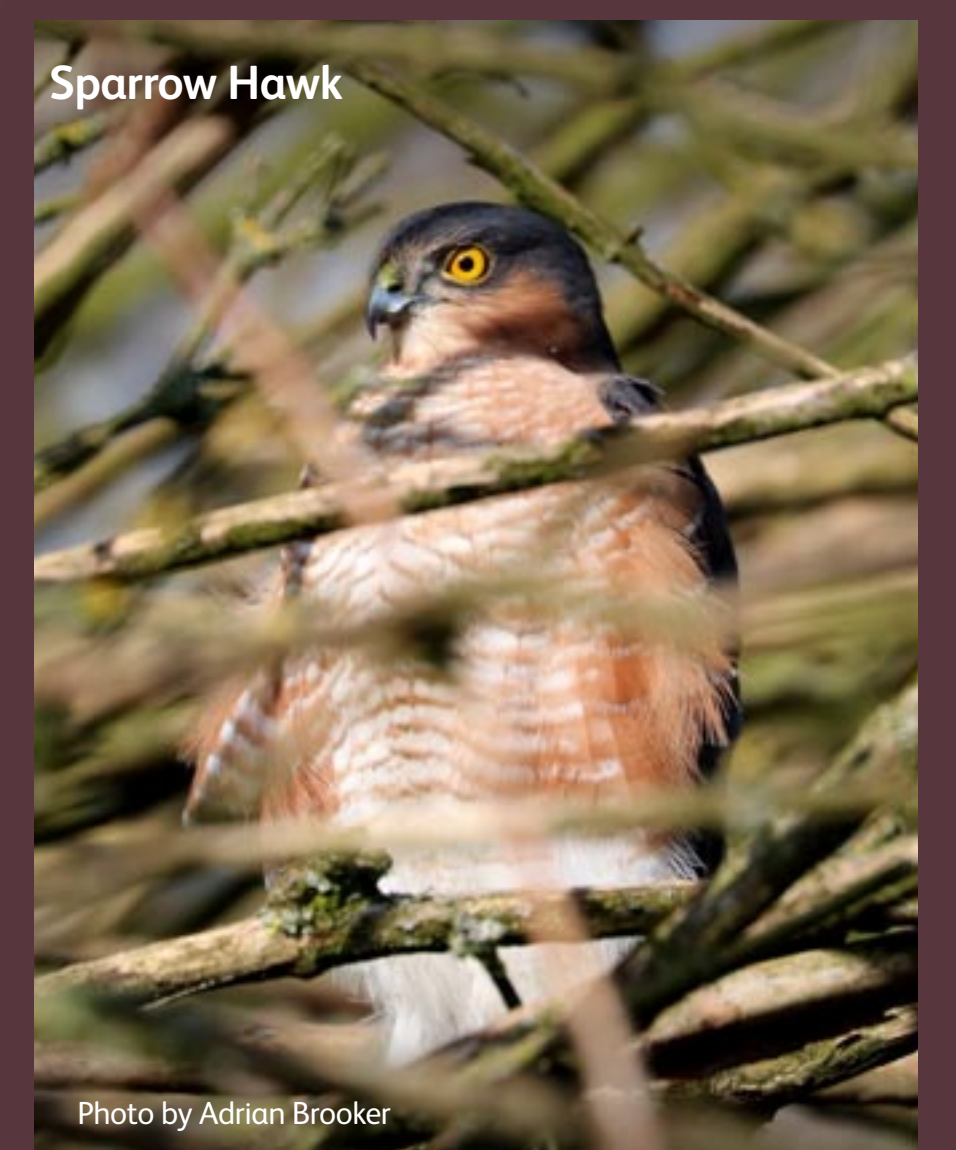
Colourful ducks gather on Heath ponds in winter, including Mandarin, Shoveller, Pochard and Teal.

Harbingers of Spring

As the winter ends, early spring wildflowers appear in Heath woodlands and wetlands, including Wood Anemone and Lesser Celandine.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Heath supports a number of birds of prey. Tawny owls can be heard on winter evenings. Kestrels hunt voles in meadows, while Sparrow Hawks mount surprise attacks on small birds, like siskins feeding in alders. Buzzards can be seen and heard overhead.



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