



Heathlands in the Weald

of Kent, Sussex
and Surrey



A guide to a
globally endangered
cultural landscape and
its precious wildlife.

Visit a heathland and see
what makes them so special.

Why are heaths special?



The well camouflaged **nightjar** nests on the ground

What is heathland?

- A 'mosaic' of habitats; open heath, scrub, wet heath, bog and bare sand.
- A place dominated by plants such as gorse, heathland grasses and heathers: common heather (or ling), cross-leaved heath and bell heather.
- An area with sandy, free-draining and nutrient-poor acidic soils. In the Weald, heaths are found above the Ashdown and Tunbridge Wells Sands.



Sundew and **sphagnum** are found in wet heathland areas

Lowland heath is:

- an ancient habitat
- only found globally in Northern and Western Europe
- now rare and threatened and a priority for nature conservation
- not just heather but a mosaic of different habitats that are home to some very special wildlife.

On heathlands you can find wildlife such as:

- Thousands of different types of insect such as bees, spiders and butterflies, including the rare silver-studded blue butterfly.
- Over two-thirds of our 39 native dragonflies, 8 of which only live on heaths.
- All our native reptiles and amphibians.
- Endangered birds such as breeding nightjar, woodlark, Dartford warbler, overwintering hen harrier and the great grey shrike.
- Uncommon plants such as sundew, marsh gentian and bog asphodel.



Wealden heaths are an important cultural landscape. They are:

- Some of the few places in the busy South East with an open landscape and a unique 'wilderness' feel.
- Wonderful places to relax and enjoy healthy activities, particularly walking.
- Rich in cultural heritage such as: Roman roads; barrows and hillforts; man-made rabbit burrows (pillow mounds); iron bloomeries; military firing ranges and trenches. Ashdown Forest is well known as A.A. Milne's inspiration for the home of 'Winnie the Pooh'.

Heathland history



Claire Jenkins, Angel Design

Wild animals grazing natural glades in woodlands.



Valerie Alford, ESCC Landscape Group

A patchwork landscape of woods, fields and heaths.



The importance of the area's heaths or 'forests' was recognised in the 'Poly-Olbion' – an epic poem praising the landscape of the English counties published in 1612. The poem's author, Michael Drayton, likens the area's medieval forests to wood nymphs, or maidens.

Heaths are an ancient habitat that have existed in the Weald since the last ice age, over 10,000 years ago. Naturally-occurring glades were found with woodland, particularly on the sandy, drier and acidic soils where trees grow less well. Grassland and heathland plants thrived in these more open areas, grazed by herds of wild herbivores – auroch (wild cattle), bison, deer, wild horses and boar.

From the Late Stone Age onwards, humans began to settle, clearing woodland to create open areas for farming. Light-loving grassland and heathland plants and animals from the glades soon spread into the cleared areas. On the less fertile soils heathland plants dominated.

Grazing by domestic animals and use of the heath's resources kept the areas free from trees. Many of the heaths were used for hunting deer. Boundary banks were built around the heaths to create deer 'parks' or 'forests'. The banks were topped with a wooden fence or 'pale' to keep the deer from escaping.

By the end of the medieval period extensive areas of woodland had been cleared to produce timber to fuel the Wealden iron industry, creating a patchwork landscape of woods, small fields and open heath.

Nature readily adapted to the gradual creation of more open areas by humans. A distinctive, wildlife-rich, heathland habitat evolved on the area's poorest soils.

Disappearing heaths



Bracken collection on Ashdown Forest
Courtesy of Peter Kirby

Heathlands were once valuable to local communities in the Weald. Commoners (people with a right to use heaths) grazed animals for food and collected timber and gorse for fuel, birch for broom making, and bracken for bedding.

However by the end of the late 20th century, perceptions were changing. In James Edward's 'Companion from London to Brighthelmstone (Brighton)' he describes the area of St. Leonards and beyond as '*an immense tract of gravelly barren land (heathland) extending eastwards from Horsham through this and several other forests, almost to Tunbridge Wells*'.

The 21st century saw the economic value of heaths begin to fall. As a result, many were lost to forestry plantations, intensive agriculture and road and housing developments.

Since 1800 we've lost 84% of our heathland nationally. In the Weald we have lost most of the four medieval heathlands or 'forests' that once extended from Horsham in the west to Tunbridge Wells in the east:

- 50% of the medieval forest of Ashdown (Ash-downe);
- 95% of the medieval forests of St Leonard's (Saint Leonards) and Worth, near Horsham and Crawley in West Sussex; and
- 90% of the medieval forest of Broadwater (Water-downe) and Frith in the Tunbridge Wells area of Kent.

The UK now holds about a fifth of the world's remaining lowland heath and the Weald is home to 7% of this rare habitat, some 4,000 hectares.

Threats to heathlands

The importance of heathland to wildlife is now recognised, but it is still under threat from:

- A decline in traditional management techniques, such as grazing and bracken cutting – meaning scrub and bracken quickly overwhelm open heathland.
- Forestry plantations with dense, even-aged trees, narrow rides and no permanent open areas – so heathland species can't get enough light and fail to thrive.
- Fragmentation – isolated heathland patches are difficult to manage and may be too small to support healthy populations of heathland wildlife species.
- Air and water pollution which can change the acidity and nutrient levels of the soil and encourage the spread of non-heathland plants.

Only a fraction of the heathland which once existed in the UK and the Weald remains.

Open heathland is rarer than rain forest. Ongoing action is needed to conserve and enhance our heaths.

How is heathland being helped in the Weald?



Scrub being cleared to rejuvenate heathland habitat

What is scrub?

Scrub is vegetation dominated by small bushes such as gorse and young trees, like birch and willow. It is a valuable home for wildlife and an important part of the heathland habitat mosaic. Scrub needs to be managed so that 'open' heath, which is home to rare plants and animals, also thrives.

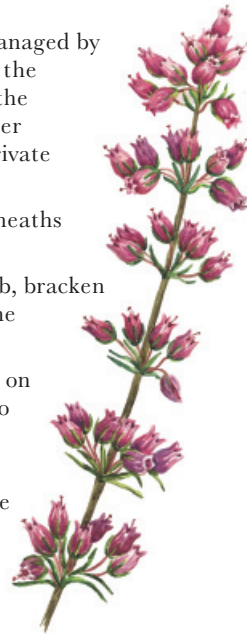


Grazing is helping heathland plants thrive

Many of the area's largest heaths are now managed by local authorities or charitable bodies such as the Conservators of Ashdown Forest, the RSPB, the Woodland Trust and the Wildlife Trusts. Other smaller heaths and 'wooded heaths' are in private ownership.

Supported by grant schemes and donations, heaths are being managed and restored by:

- Removing large areas of encroaching scrub, bracken and rhododendron, which compete with the heathland plants.
- Felling and thinning conifer trees planted on former heaths to allow heathland plants to return.
- Creating sunny glades and rides in woodlands and conifer plantations to make more open space for heathland wildlife.
- Re-introducing grazing, a traditional use of heathlands.



Grazing animals save heathlands

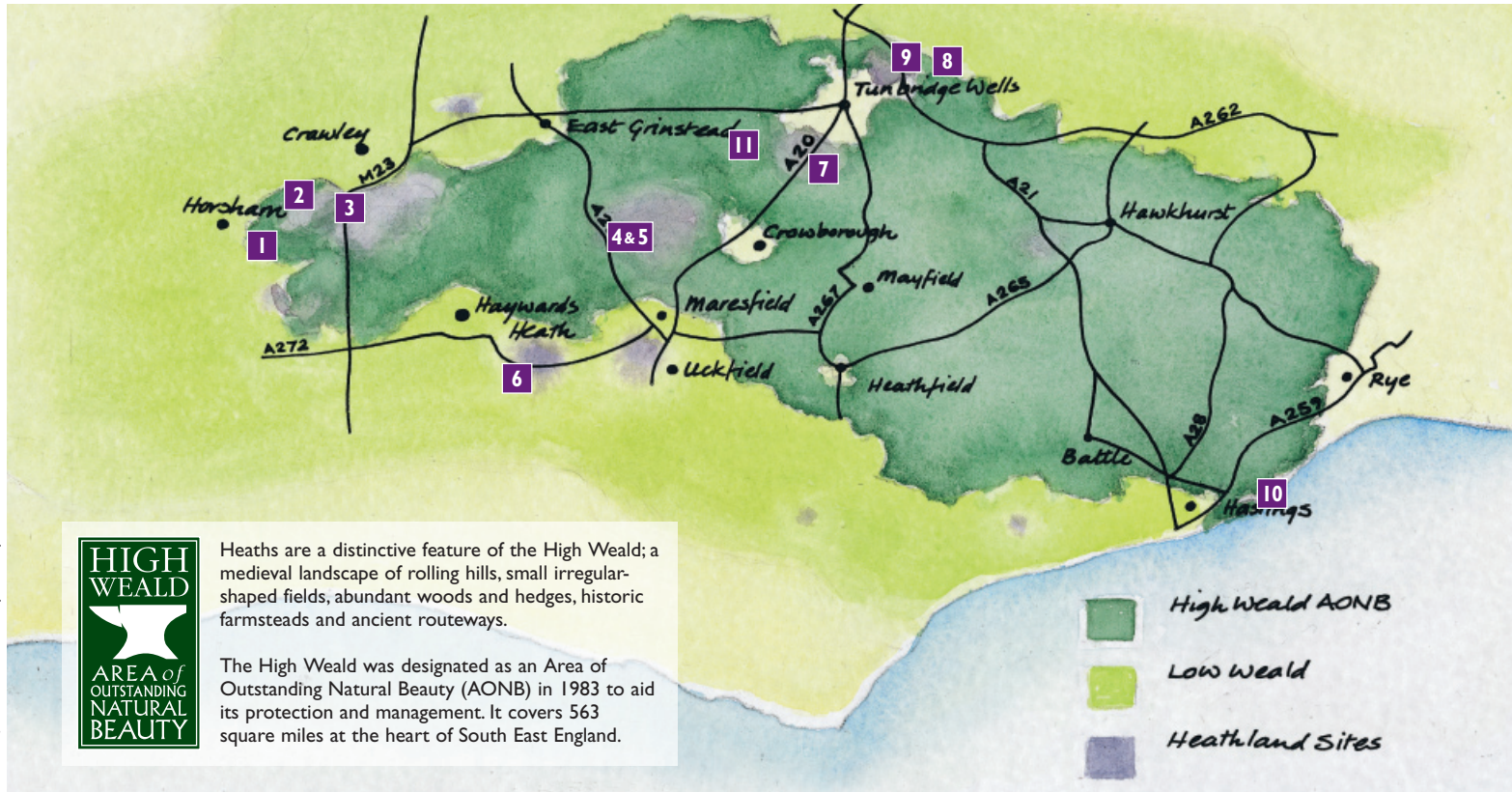
Grazing is helping to restore Wealden heaths by keeping scrub under control so heathland plants can thrive. Grazing also creates areas of bare ground and vegetation of different heights which encourages rare plants and animals. Cutting or mowing, although valuable, does not produce such a varied vegetation structure.

Further reading

Weald-specific heathland management guidance: www.highweald.org/land-managers-pack

Natural England and Buglife – search for 'lowland heath' publications.naturalengland.org.uk
www.buglife.org.uk

Precious heaths on your doorstep



Heaths are a distinctive feature of the High Weald; a medieval landscape of rolling hills, small irregular-shaped fields, abundant woods and hedges, historic farmsteads and ancient routeways.

The High Weald was designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in 1983 to aid its protection and management. It covers 563 square miles at the heart of South East England.

Valerie Alford, ESCC Landscape Group

Most, but not all, heathland sites have open access. The following heathland sites welcome visitors.

Key to symbols:
 ▶ Location
 i More information



1. St Leonards Forest

A mixture of broadleaf woodland, coniferous plantations and heathland.
 ▶ Car park near Roosthole pond, Hammerpond Road, 1km north of Mannings Heath.
 i forestryengland.uk

2. Buchan Country Park

A woodland and heathland centred around two large ponds. It has a small countryside centre which is open as staffing allows, as well as toilets and parking.

▶ 3km south west of Crawley, signposted from the Crawley Road (A264).
 i westsussex.gov.uk

3. Tilgate Forest and Park

A woodland intersected with heathy rides.
 ▶ 2½ km south of Crawley town centre with adjoining car parks.
 i crawley.gov.uk

4. Ashdown Forest

This former Royal Hunting Forest is the largest and most important open area of heathland in South East England. It accounts for up to 5% of remaining lowland heath in England. The Forest is the fictional home of 'Winnie the Pooh'.
 ▶ Visitor centre 1km east of Wych Cross.
 i ashdownforest.org

5. Old Lodge Local Nature Reserve.

A heathland nature reserve on Ashdown Forest managed by Sussex Wildlife Trust. Dogs must be kept on leads at certain times of the year.
 ▶ Car park on the B2026 about 5km south of Hartfield.
 i sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk

6. Chailey Common Local Nature Reserve

Mainly heathland with open access. Can be explored using the Link Walk, a waymarked route of about 13km, linking the villages of Scaynes Hill and North Chailey via the Common.
 ▶ 10km from Haywards Heath. Main car park on the south side A272 beside St Mary's Church, North Chailey.
 i eastsussex.gov.uk

7. Hargate Forest

Mixed conifer and broadleaf woodland crisscrossed by a network of paths which lead to remnant heathland areas.
 ▶ Situated to the south of Broadwater Down which runs between the A267 and the A26.
 i woodlandtrust.org.uk



8. Cinderhill Wood

Mainly woodland with a circular walk route and small areas of restored heath grazed by sheep.
 ▶ From Matfield, turn off the B2160 Maidstone Road at Chestnut Lane. Around 100 metres past the 30 sign on Chestnut Road, turn down a track marked 'Nature Conservation Area' to the small car park.
 i khwp.org.uk

9. Pembury Heath

An area of heathland restored from conifer plantation and farmland.
 ▶ Can be explored with adjoining heathland areas via the footpaths ½ km to the north-west of Pembury, around the lane called 'Pembury Walks'.
 i Search 'Pembury Heathland Walk' on www.highweald.org

10. Hastings Country Park (Firehills and Warren Glen)

Heathland within the coastal country park.
 ▶ 4km north east of Hastings town centre.
 Visitor centre located on the Fairlight Road.
 i hastings.gov.uk

11. Broadwater Warren

RSPB nature reserve with a large, varied woodland being restored to a mix of heathland and ancient woodland. Way-marked trails and a surfaced all-ability route. Dogs must be kept on a lead.
 ▶ Car park about 5kms south west of Tunbridge Wells, accessed from Broadwater Forest Lane off the A26.
 i rspb.org.uk



What you can do to help heathland



Celebration of the area's medieval heaths



Inspired by the Poly-Olbion poem – The Ashdown Forest 'maiden'



Heathland products – firewood, charcoal, bracken compost and besom brooms

- **Support environmental organisations** which campaign for the protection of heathlands and manage heathland nature reserves, such as the Ashdown Forest Conservators, the RSPB and the Wildlife Trusts:

www.ashdownforest.org

www.rspb.org.uk/volunteer

www.kentwildlifetrust.org.uk

www.sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk

www.surreywildlifetrust.org

- **Volunteer with a local conservation group** that undertakes practical tasks on heaths like scrub clearance and heather cutting. The charities above run such groups or see:

www.highweald.org/volunteering

- **Report heathland wildlife sightings** via: i-record (www.brc.ac.uk/i-record) or your local Biodiversity Record Centre:

Sussex Biodiversity Record Centre

www.sxbrc.org.uk

Kent & Medway Biological Records Centre

www.kmbrc.org.uk

Surrey Biodiversity Information Centre

www.surreywildlifetrust.org/sbic

- **Buy heathland products** such as locally-produced heather honey, bracken compost, charcoal, and besom (witches') brooms.

- **Seek advice on heathland management and restoration**

If you own or manage a heath, or a woodland with a heathy understorey, the High Weald AONB team can provide information on useful contacts and grant sources.

Further information

High Weald AONB Partnership

T: 01424 723011

E: info@highweald.org

W: www.highweald.org

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Heathlands in the Weald

Plants, reptiles, birds and insects of Weald heathland. Many of these are only found on heaths and are internationally rare species.

Clumps of pine trees are a distinctive feature of High Weald heathlands. Some are self-sown, while others were planted as landscape features in the 19th century.

Heaths are found on the sandy ridges which criss-cross the High Weald. There are often excellent views of the surrounding landscape from these ridges.

The heathlands of the Weald are valuable open spaces within the wooded South East.

Many conifer plantations in the Weald were once heaths. Some of these woodlands are now being managed to bring back heathland plants and animal species.

Dartford warblers, with their distinctive red eyes, are a rare species occasionally seen flitting amongst dense heather and gorse.

Birch, pine, gorse and bracken, if allowed to takeover, will replace rarer heathland plants and threaten the wildlife which rely on them for food and shelter.

Heathland rides act as fire breaks and also provide an open, sandy habitat which is important for insects such as sand wasps.

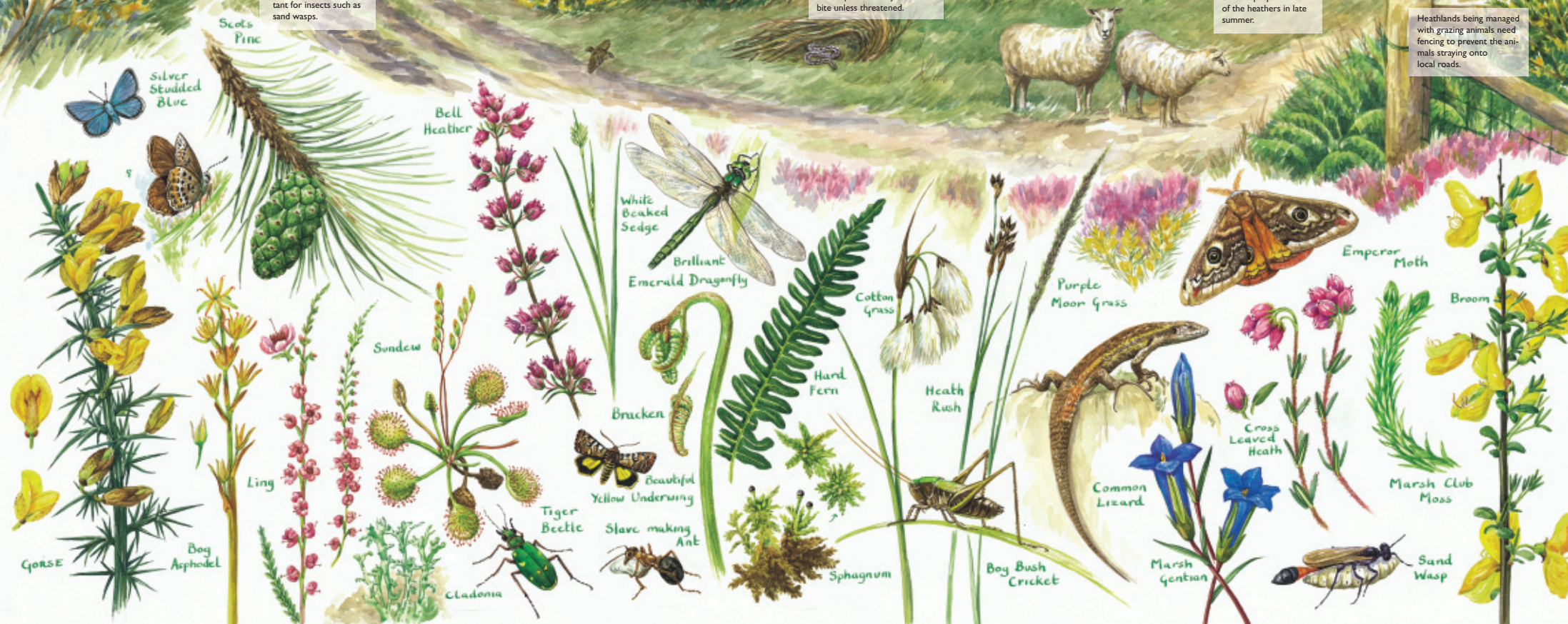
Look out for adders, and slow worms which are legless lizards, basking in the sun. Adders, with their zig-zag markings, are a protected snake species – they will not bite unless threatened.

Grazing sheep, cattle or horses are essential for heathland wildlife. They prevent scrub and trees taking over so the delicate heathland plants can thrive.

Stonechats often perch on the top of low scrub. Their call sounds like two stones being knocked together.

You can see the yellow, coconut-scented flowers of gorse all year, and the purple flowers of the heathers in late summer.

Heathlands being managed with grazing animals need fencing to prevent the animals straying onto local roads.



Scots Pine

Silver Studded Blue

Bell Heather

White Beaked Sedge

Brilliant Emerald Dragonfly

Cotton Grass

Purple Moor Grass

Emperor Moth

Broom

Sundew

Bracken

Hard Fern

Heath Rush

Common Lizard

Cross Leaved Heath

Marsh Club Moss

Ling

Tiger Beetle

Slave making Ant

Sphagnum

Boy Bush Cricket

Marsh Gentian

Sand Wasp

GORSE

Bog Asphodel

Cladonia