



Thursley NNR

Welcome to the National Nature Reserve

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The extraordinary place that is Thursley National Nature Reserve (NNR) is the surviving part of a once much more extensive area of heathland in Surrey. With most of this heathland lost through urban expansion and agriculture areas that are left are even more precious. You can experience a sense of wilderness at Thursley NNR that makes it hard to believe you are only 1 hour from London.

The 325 hectares of Thursley NNR holds extensive areas of open dry heathland, peat bogs, ponds, pine and deciduous woodlands, home to a thriving and varied amount of wildlife, much of which is rare and confined to heathlands.

Wildlife

To the south of the reserve are the areas of open dry heath. Common heather, or “ling”, along with bell heather are the dominant species here. Mid to late summer brings the landscape a striking purple hue; from the soft mauves of the ling to the darker purples of the bell heather. These areas are home to many of the ground nesting birds, such as stonechats and woodlark. Many reptiles also favour this habitat, and at Thursley all six native species can be found. The silver studded blue butterfly, whose caterpillar feeds on bell heather, can be found here. What this jewel of a butterfly lacks in size, it can make up for in its sheer abundance.

Heading north we come to the wetter areas of the reserve. The valley mire or “bog” as it is colloquially known supports a very different variety of wildlife. The wildlife communities change to include plants and animals adapted to the wet and nutrient-poor acidic conditions.

Here we find the sphagnum mosses that form the peat bog. Carnivorous plants such as the sundew thrive alongside the dazzling displays of early marsh orchid in the early summer. A different heather takes over here: the cross-leaved heath. This grows on the wetter ground around the mire. Later in the summer the delicate sunshine yellow flowers of the bog asphodel come into bloom, forming stunning carpets of colour, which fade to a deep russet orange as they go to seed.

Amongst the areas of sphagnum and heather are open ponds and ditches. These are home to one of the highlights of the reserve: the dragonflies and damselflies. With over 20 different species living and breeding here, Thursley NNR is one of the best places in England to watch these aerial acrobats hunt and mate over the open water. These insects attract the attention of one of the most enigmatic birds on Thursley NNR: the hobby. This falcon, a summer visitor from Africa spends the summer feeding on dragonflies and smaller birds in order to raise its chicks.

Management

Much of the management on the reserve is about maintaining the open nature of the site. Areas of scrub are kept under control to stop the heathland being shaded out. The heather itself is managed to provide a wide range of ages and structure, a mosaic – from bare open ground with very short young heather seedlings to deep mature heather. This structure in turn provides a variety of homes for the many and varied species associated with this habitat. The areas of bare ground and young heather make perfect conditions for basking in the sun; reptiles and warmth loving insects are to be found here.

The more mature heathers provide a greater variety of structure and this is perfect for the many spiders to lay their webs across - best seen on a misty autumnal morning. The deeper heather also provides shade and cover. The reptiles which are unable to regulate their body temperature will seek out these areas to avoid the heat of the day, and also in which to hunt for their prey.

The wetter areas of the reserve are more problematic when it comes to management. Heavy machinery simply can't get on this habitat. Over recent years grazing has been introduced. Rare breed cattle such as belted Galloway are used to graze this wet ground. The cattle will help reduce encroaching scrub and overly dominating rough grasses such as purple moor grass. The selective nature of their grazing ensures a highly varied mosaic. Certain areas will be lightly grazed, whereas other areas will be much harder hit. The cattle will also naturally open up the ponds as they come to drink, through the poaching of the ground. Without this many of the open water habitats would be lost through a process known as succession, where the surrounding vegetation would gradually cover over the ponds.

Contact us

Thursley National Nature Reserve

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Find out more at www.naturalengland.org.uk



Volunteering

As part of the regular management of the reserve volunteer groups carry out important tasks such as scrub control, heather mowing and burning, as well as maintaining the access infrastructure. These groups meet on a regular basis, with tasks held most weeks and one Sunday a month.

If you are interested in helping look after this fabulous reserve please get in touch with the site manager – see details below.

How to find us

Thursley NNR is located between the villages of Elstead and Thursley, South of Guildford in Surrey. Both accessible from the A3.

By car: car parks available south of Elstead on the Thursley Road (The Moat), and on the recreation ground in Thursley village.

By public transport: the nearest train stations are Milford, Haslemere and Witley.

By bike: lock up facilities are available in the Moat car park

