

March 2021 (370 words)

PROTECTION FOR LOCAL HEATHS

Sarah Bunce from the Thames Basin Heaths Partnership explains how a mysterious bird from Africa is protecting our local heaths.

You might not think of busy south-east England as a hotspot for rare wildlife, but it really is! By a fluke of nature we have the perfect geology and climate for a very special wildlife habitat: Heathland. Have you been taking local heaths for granted, places like Yateley Common and Wildmoor Heath, and forestry plantations at Bramshill and Heath Warren? If so, think again, this landscape is rarer than rainforest!

Much of the magic happens at twilight. You could walk on the heaths everyday 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. They nest right on the ground, amongst the heather and gorse.

You might think that nesting on the ground would lead to a 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, has their vulnerability become an issue.

In 2005 the heaths in this area of Surrey, Hampshire & Berkshire became the **Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area**. This does so much more than protect rare birds. It protects the heathland for all sorts of wonderful wildlife, and of course gives the landscape we love a huge amount of protection from development. It's a pleasing virtuous circle: Protecting birds protects heaths, protecting heaths protects birds!

Everyone can help

It's easy to help and 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 fires by following the code "No fires or BBQs, ensure cigarettes are out and take all litter home".

Have you discovered 'Greenspace on your doorstep'? It's a directory of over 70 local country walks. By using them, you're also helping the heaths.

More at www.tbhpartnership.org.uk.