

# THE SERPENT TRAIL

## Explore the heathlands of the South Downs National Park by following the 65 mile/106 km long Serpent Trail.

Discover this beautiful and internationally rare lowland heath habitat, 80% of which has been lost since the early 1800s, often through neglect and tree planting on previously open areas. Designed to highlight the outstanding landscape of the greensand hills, their wildlife, history and conservation, the Serpent Trail passes through the purple heather, green woods and golden valleys of the Wealden Heaths.

The name of the Trail reflects the serpentine shape of the route. Starting with the serpent's head and tongue in Haslemere and Black Down, the 'body' turns west, east and west again along the greensand ridges. The Trail 'snakes' by Liphook, Milland, Fernhurst, Petworth, Fittleworth, Duncton, Heyshott, Midhurst, Stedham and Nyewood to finally reach the serpent's 'tail' at Petersfield in Hampshire. **See back cover for an overview map of the Serpent Trail.**

### GETTING THERE

**BY RAIL** The railway stations of Haslemere, Liss, Liphook and Petersfield are all close to the Trail. Visit [nationalrail.co.uk](http://nationalrail.co.uk) to plan your journey.

**BY BUS** Bus services run to Midhurst, Stedham, Trotton, Nyewood, Rogate, Petersfield, Fittleworth, Petworth and Haslemere allowing easy access to the Trail. Visit [traveline.info/se](http://traveline.info/se) to plan your journey.



### WAYMARKERS

**TAIL ROUTE** The purple waymarkers follow the Serpent Trail from Haslemere to the tail in Petersfield. **This is the route described in this booklet.**



**HEAD ROUTE** The green waymarkers follow the Serpent Trail from Petersfield to the head in Haslemere. This is the opposite of the route described in this booklet but the points of interest and public transport information for each stage will still be relevant.

## COUNTRYSIDE CODE

### Respect everyone

- Leave gates and property as you find them
- Do not block access to gateways or driveways and do not park on verges
- Keep to marked paths unless wider access is available

### Protect the environment

- Leave no trace – take your litter home
- Do not light fires or have BBQs outside of permitted sites
- Always keep dogs under control and in sight – we are a farmed landscape with livestock and rare ground nesting birds
- Dog poo – bag and bin it, any public waste bin will do

### Enjoy

- Plan ahead and be prepared

Heathlands are a haven for some of Britain's rarest wildlife. They are home to all 12 of our native reptiles and amphibians. Heathlands Reunited is a partnership project where 11 partners have joined forces to expand, reconnect and restore the existing 1% of rare lowland heath in the National Park. The

11 project partners are the South Downs National Park Authority, Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust, Forestry England, Hampshire County Council, Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust, Lynchmere Society, Ministry of Defence, National Trust, Natural England, RSPB and Sussex Wildlife Trust.

### THE HEATHLANDS REUNITED PARTNERS:



## WILDLIFE

Heaths are a habitat 'rarer than rainforest' and are home to some amazing species.

### HEATHLAND REPTILES



#### SAND LIZARD

- 1** During the breeding season, male lizards have bright green sides. They love the warm bare patches of ground on the heaths, and female lizards lay their eggs in the sandy soil. Sand lizards are much rarer than the viviparous (or common) lizard, which give birth to live young instead of laying eggs. On warm days you are quite likely to spot a common lizard basking on the heath.

**When: May to June**



#### SMOOTH SNAKE

- 2** Britain's rarest reptile, the elusive and harmless smooth snake has a small population in West Sussex. Dependent on well managed heathland the smooth snake is rarely seen as it doesn't tend to bask in the open. Generally grey or dull brown, smaller and more slender than other snakes (60-70cm), their scales are flat and smooth.

**When: Emerge from hibernation in April/May. Give birth to live young in September.**



#### ADDER

- 3** The UK's only venomous snake. Its secretive nature and 'zigzag' markings along its back mean that despite being fairly widespread it often goes unnoticed. Adders will retreat from people and dogs but if they feel threatened, they may bite in self-defence. See [arctrust.org/facts-and-advice-on-adder-bites](http://arctrust.org/facts-and-advice-on-adder-bites)

**When: Spring/summer**

#### OTHER REPTILES YOU MAY ENCOUNTER ARE:

- Grass snake** – a large non-venomous snake found throughout England and Wales and favouring ponds and rotting vegetation where they may lay eggs. **When: eggs June to July, hatching late summer**
- Common (viviparous) lizard** – frequently seen on heathland, approx. 15 cm in length, usually brown with spots or stripes. **When: give birth to live young in August**
- Slow worm** – actually a legless lizard and not a worm or a snake. Shiny appearance, often hides under logs and feeds on slugs etc. **When: seen through spring/summer, 'give birth' in late summer**
- Natterjack toad** – not a reptile but an amphibian. Extremely rare and threatened by habitat loss. Not to be found on the Serpent Trail but there are small local populations on sandy heath pond systems.

## HEATHLAND INSECTS



#### SILVER-STUDED BLUE BUTTERFLY

- 1** As caterpillars they feed on the young shoots of bell heather and are protected from predators, such as sand wasps, by black ants. The ants even ferry the caterpillar into their nest to pupate, but why? The caterpillars secrete a sweet honeydew which the ants 'milk' as payment for their troubles. Adult butterflies can then emerge safe and ready to take flight.

**When: June to July**

#### SAND (DIGGER) WASP

- 2** This impressive looking solitary wasp can be found around patches of bare soil on heathland. Females hunt for caterpillars, which they paralyse with a sting before carrying them back to their burrow and burying them alive in the sandy soil. Sometimes the caterpillar can weigh up to ten times the weight of the wasp herself! The wasp lays eggs inside the caterpillar, which the larvae will feed on before later emerging from the burrow themselves as adult wasps.

**When: Spring/summer**



#### FIELD CRICKET

- 3** Rare black or brown cricket with striking yellow wing bases. They can't fly but can walk up to 100 metres a day. Two cm long, their wing markings resemble intricate wrought-iron work. The males make a loud chirruping call to attract a mate using 'harps', modified veins on their wings.

**When: Singing May to mid June**

#### OTHER INSECTS YOU MAY ENCOUNTER ARE:

- Green tiger beetle** – bright green with cream spots, these beetles can often be seen sunning themselves on the heathland. They move quickly and will run or fly if they are disturbed. They are an aggressive predator on the heath and have a fierce jaw. **When: April to September**
- Golden ringed dragonfly** – a large dragonfly and voracious predator of other insects. Agile and fast

flyers they are black with yellow bands along the body and bright green eyes. **When: on the wing from May to September on heathland**

- Black darter dragonfly** – a common, small narrow bodied dragonfly. Almost entirely black they frequent damp areas of heathland with a skittish flight to catch insect prey. **When: on the wing June to October**



## HEATHLAND BIRDS



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### 1 NIGHTJAR

A ground-nesting bird that migrates from Africa during the summer. They feed on nocturnal insects such as flies, moths and beetles, using the hairs around their mouths to detect their prey's wingbeats.

**When: Listen at dusk in the summer for the otherworldly "churr" of the breeding males. Territory is also marked by loudly clapping their wings together.**

### DARTFORD WARBLER

**2** A small brown, recently scarce bird. Now recovered in number and often found singing its scratchy song from the tops of gorse bushes. It has a distinctive red eye ring, red breast and long tail. It builds its nest on the ground amongst dense heather and gorse. Sticking to the paths helps to protect this species and its young.

**When: Year round**



© Bruce Middleton

### WOODLARK

**3** A rich mellow fluty whistle in early spring tells you a woodlark is flying across the heath. A small brown stripy bird similar to a skylark, this is a key heathland species whose numbers have declined and is therefore closely monitored.

**When: Year round**



© Derek Middleton

### STONECHAT

**4** Resident on heathland throughout the country, look and listen out for the stonechat. A small, dumpy and charismatic bird, usually seen at the top of bushes or posts making a distinctive call like two stones being tapped together. The male is highly territorial and has an orange-red breast with a white half collar.

**When: Year round**



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#### OTHER BIRDS YOU MAY ENCOUNTER ARE:

- **Common redstart** – a summer visitor to the UK. Similar in size to a robin with a longer tail that constantly quivers up and down. The males develop a bright orange breast and flanks. Feeds on insects and larvae. **When: April to September**
- **Hobby** – another summer visitor, this bird of prey can often be seen on heathland chasing dragonflies and small birds. Similar in size to a kestrel and in shape to a swift, it is also fast and agile in flight. **When: April to October**

## HEATHLAND PLANTS



© Beth Nicholls

### HEATHER – bell, cross-leaved and ling (left to right in photo)

**1** Can you tell the difference between these three heather species?

Cross-leaved heather prefers wetter ground and gets its name from the way that the pale green leaves are arranged around the stem. Ling and bell heather are more commonly found and you can tell them apart by the position and colour of the flowers. Bell heather has dark purple flowers that cluster in groups along the stem, whereas ling has lots of very little flowers all the way up the longer stems. The Latin name for ling, *Calluna*, comes from a Greek work meaning 'to brush' which relates to the fact that heather was once used to make sweeping brooms or 'besoms'.

**When: In flower, late summer to autumn**

### GORSE

**2** A common thorny heathland plant with its distinctive yellow coconut scented flowers thriving on the nutrient poor land. It is an important dense refuge for birds and invertebrates but does have to be managed carefully so that it doesn't encroach everywhere. It was once harvested year round for fuelling bakers' ovens.

**When: In flower year round**

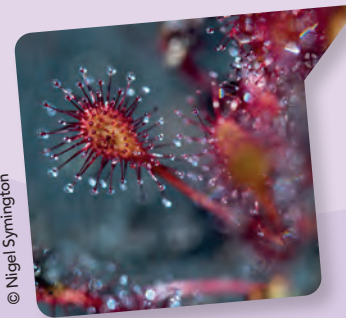


© Jonathan Mycock

### SUNDEW

**3** Tiny insectivorous plants that use sticky dew drops secreted from their hairy leaves to trap insects that land on them. The round leaves slowly curl around the insect, digesting the prey. Absorbing these nutrients helps sundews to survive on the nutrient-poor heathland soil. Typically found on wetter areas of the heath, the dew was once collected by people for use as an anti-aging cream!

**When: June to August**



© Nigel Symington

#### OTHER PLANTS YOU MAY ENCOUNTER ARE:

- **Bilberry** – our native version of the blueberry. Look out for the berries along sunny woodland edges around the heaths. A delicious summer addition to the diet of our forbears and were often shipped to London to the markets. **When: Late summer to autumn**

# HEATHLAND TIMELINE

Along the Serpent Trail you will encounter many small areas of heathland that were once a much larger expanse. This extremely rare habitat is the result of human activity dating as far back as 8,000 years ago.

© SDNPA



## BRONZE AGE

Heathland took on ritualistic importance. People created burial mounds known as barrows. Many can still be seen today, e.g. Petersfield Heath is home to one of the largest Bronze age burial grounds in the south of England.

© SDNPA



## THE ROMANS

Continued to use heathland for grazing and saw the clear open spaces as ideal locations to build roads. The Roman road from Chichester to Silchester runs through Fitzhall Heath, Iping Common.



## SAXONS

The word 'heath' is Anglo-saxon. Grazing was still the main use as well as collecting resources such as gorse. Land ownership and classification became more common.



## MODERN

The 1805 Enclosure Act saw much heathland converted into privately owned land. Pine plantations became dominant on the sandy soils and were used for timber and resin. Commoners grazing rights were stopped which left much heathland habitat unmanaged.



## TURN OF THE 20th CENTURY

Much heathland was lost as traditional grazing declined and the land was left unmanaged. Some sections started to be used for military training exercise, e.g. Parham and Graffham.

Left © Rob Groves/National Trust  
Middle © Jane Chandler/SDNPA  
Right © SDNPA

## NEOLITHIC (LATE STONE AGE)

Humans began to settle in one place, clearing woodland to raise crops. Farming caused soil acidity to rise. The nutrient drop was ideal for heathland plants such as heather and gorse but not so good for crops.

© Rebecca Saunders/SDNPA



© Butser Ancient Farm



## IRON AGE

Heather was collected for fuel and building materials and land used for grazing animals. Archaeologists have found evidence of an Iron Age hill fort at Black Down.

## MEDIEVAL

Heathland was often classified as common land. Local families would be granted grazing rights. 'Turbary' allowed them to gather peat and turf for fuel, and heather for ale, dye, roofing, animal bedding or brooms (besoms).

© Rebecca Saunders



© Joanna Glyde/ SDNPA



## INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

The Weald was once a thriving centre of iron and glassmaking industry. Iron smelting used coppiced woodland charcoal. Glass making used potash derived from dried and burnt bracken and sand from the hills around Bexley.





# Heathland Today

If heathland habitat is unmanaged, the rich biodiversity is gradually lost as a small number of invasive species spread rapidly and become dominant.

Since 1800, heathland cover in the UK has declined by 80%. Recent efforts to restore and preserve areas of natural heathland through landscape scale partnerships such as the Heathlands Reunited Project, have used a variety of conservation methods.

## SITE MANAGEMENT

Over time, the once large bodies of heathland have separated into smaller 'islands', making the isolated plants and animals more vulnerable to localised extinction. Careful management of heathland sites ensures that the habitat can thrive. Selectively removing Scots pine, birch and bracken allows other heathland plant species to thrive in the acidic, arid conditions. Clearing scrub also exposes the sandy soil creating basking areas for rare reptile species as well as creating good habitat for invertebrates.

## CONSERVATION GRAZING

Some areas, such as Lynchmere Common, were left unmanaged and became covered in trees and scrub. As a result, the heathland wildlife that once thrived there was lost. In 1998, The Lynchmere Society bought the Common with funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, and began to restore the heath by using cattle to clear the scrub and keep the vegetation in check.



# Heathland Stories Through Sculpture

In recent years, significant effort has gone into creating bigger, better, joined-up heathland to support and improve the isolated pockets of lowland heath that remain. By re-engaging and inspiring communities to visit and learn more about their local heathland and the rare plant and animal species that live there, it is hoped that they can be cared for and enjoyed by future generations.

In 2020, as part of the Heathlands Reunited Project, funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, the South Downs National Park Authority launched its first Sculpture Trail to tell the stories behind some of the heathland sites. Five of the seven sculptures can be found on the Serpent Trail.



© SDNPA/Sam Moore

## TENNYSON QUOTE: BLACK DOWN (SERPENT TRAIL STAGE 1)

Famous poet Alfred Lord Tennyson was a keen admirer of Black Down. The sculpture quotes his words from his handwritten documents, using the same script style, and makes reference to the beautiful landscape and view from the site but also nods to its industrious past.



© SDNPA

## RESTING REPTILES: WOOLBEDING COMMON (SERPENT TRAIL STAGE 5)

The heathland sites within the South Downs are home to all 12 of Britain's native amphibian and reptile species. The smooth snake is Britain's rarest and most secretive snake. The sculpture here shows the snakes curled up on a bed of birch and oak leaves which are both associated with wooded heath.



© SDNPA/Sam Moore

## LAVINGTON LIZARD: LAVINGTON COMMON (SERPENT TRAIL STAGE 9)

Lavington Common provides a home for all three types of lizard that rely on the heaths; the slow worm, common and sand lizard. Sand lizards, which were once nearly extinct in Britain, are now protected by law and still classed as an endangered species.



© SDNPA/Sam Moore

## SHEEP PIG: GRAFFHAM COMMON (SERPENT TRAIL STAGE 9)

The sheep pig sculpture is inspired by a map drawn in 1629 showing the heath as a common which was then used for grazing. On the original map there are small drawings of animals which look to be standing on top of one another. This inspired the sculptor to create the sheep pig.



© SDNPA

## DRAGONFLIES REST: STEDHAM COMMON (SERPENT TRAIL STAGE 10)

Stedham and Iping Common are home to all five of the heathland dragonfly species found in the south of the UK. The sculpture, designed to look like the wings of a dragonfly, serves as the perfect resting spot for these species.

