



**User Guide to holding Recreational Events
on SSSI Designated
Lowland Heathland and Conifer Plantation
within the Army Training Estate (Home Counties)**

The primary use, for which the MOD holds or uses land, is for military requirements and in the interest of National Defence.

A large amount of the Army Training Estate (Home Counties) comprises lowland heathland, or rotationally managed conifer plantation of such high conservation importance that vast tracts have been designated as important sites for nature conservation, both nationally as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), but also recognised for their international wildlife importance under the EC Birds and Habitats Directives.



The Role of English Nature as nature conservation advisors to Defence Estates

Due to the national and international ecological importance of these habitats and species they are protected by law to prevent any damage or deterioration to them. Defence Estates undertake full consultation with English Nature to ensure that these wildlife and geographical conservation issues are given full consideration, when considering alternative uses, such as civilian events on the Army Training Estate.

English Nature advises Defence Estates on the compatibility of any events (or management) with the requirements of nature conservation law. Defence Estates then take a decision based on the information provided.

A minimum period of at least *four months* should be given to allow this process to be completed in advance of any event taking place.

Birds and Special Protection Areas (SPAs)

175 species have been recorded on the Army Training Estate (Home Counties). Annual bird counts are made by local bird watchers enabling populations to be monitored and appropriate conservation projects to be initiated.

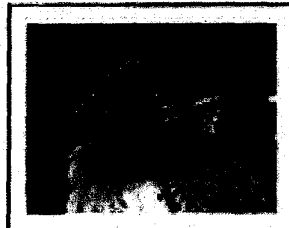
Such counts have revealed that important breeding populations of internationally threatened species including woodlark, nightjar and Dartford warbler (which are listed on Annex I of the Birds Directive) are found on Army Training Estate (Home Counties). These birds and their habitats are now protected as Special Protection Areas (SPA), and Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) under European law through the Habitats Regulations. This is supported at a national level by SSSI designations, legislation which prevents any damage, or deterioration or disturbance to the habitats and corresponding species it protects.

Woodlark and nightjar are traditional heathland species which breed in a woodland edge habitat on heathland, or in clear-felled and young forestry. Following research these special birds are known to be particularly sensitive to disturbance such as noise, dogs and large numbers of people. For these reasons events should be planned to avoid the Annex I bird breeding season.

Annex I birds



Woodlark
Breeding Season:
February - August



Dartford Warbler
Breeding Season:
February - September



Nightjar
Breeding Season:
May - September

Additionally, Dartford warblers feed on invertebrates found typically on gorse bushes adjoining the heathland and are particularly susceptible to cold weather, which has historically caused dramatic population crashes in this species. Hence, it may also be important to avoid any disturbance to them during cold weather spells when limited food resources may also increase stress levels. This issue is likely to be dealt with on a case by case basis.

Dry Lowland Heathland

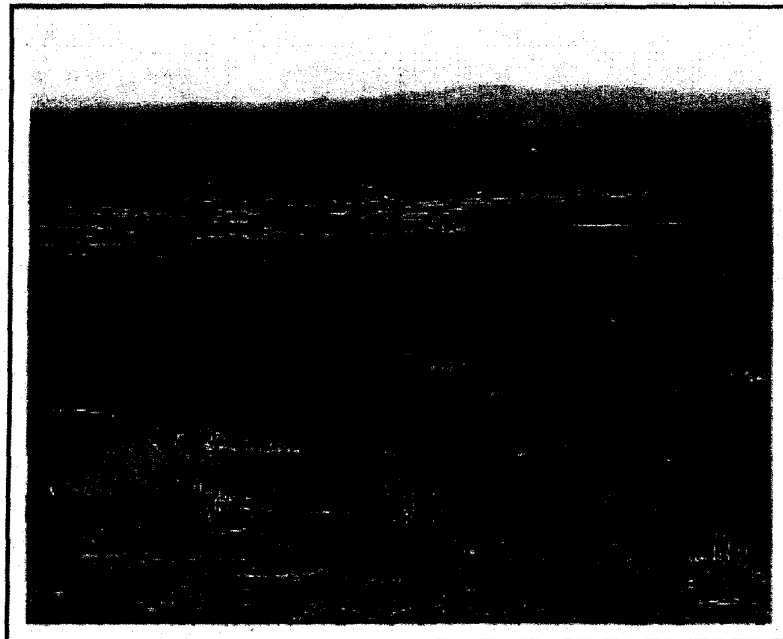
Lowland heathland is an ancient habitat existing on freely drained, sandy, nutrient poor soils. It supports a varied flora and fauna, but can be typically recognised by its extensive tracts of heather species such as ling, cross-leaved heath and bell heather, and gorse species. The UK holds 20% (58,000 hectares) of the world-wide resource of this habitat, which provides habitat for many flora and fauna which are exclusively related to it.

This habitat is successional and can become invaded by birch, pine and bracken creating a woodland edge habitat, which must be managed to retain the correct balance of characteristics. Ancient traditional practices such as grazing, cutting and controlled burning have now largely ceased in this country.

As previously mentioned birds which may be seen on heathlands include woodlark, nightjar, Dartford warbler, stonechat and hobby. Many butterflies and moths may also be found, the green hairstreak, silver studded-blue, grayling and emperor moth being typical. Additionally rare reptiles such as the smooth snake and sand lizard enjoy basking on south facing sandy banks of heathlands.

Whilst some of the species thrive with a degree of disturbance to the sandy soils of heathland, there is a sensitive balance between this and any use which may cause erosion, or damage. Eroded depressions in paths caused by vehicles (four wheel drives, motorbikes, mountain bikes etc.) become even deeper during rainfall runoff on slopes. Additionally, heather may deteriorate in condition if intensively trampled. Furthermore there is a risk of trampling ground nesting birds' eggs and young.

Therefore, any event will be considered more favourably if it uses existing pathways and consideration is given to decreasing the likelihood of damage to sensitive habitats. For example, by reducing pedestrian numbers on any focal areas i.e. around car parks, gates etc., or perhaps considering several routes to an event rather than just one.

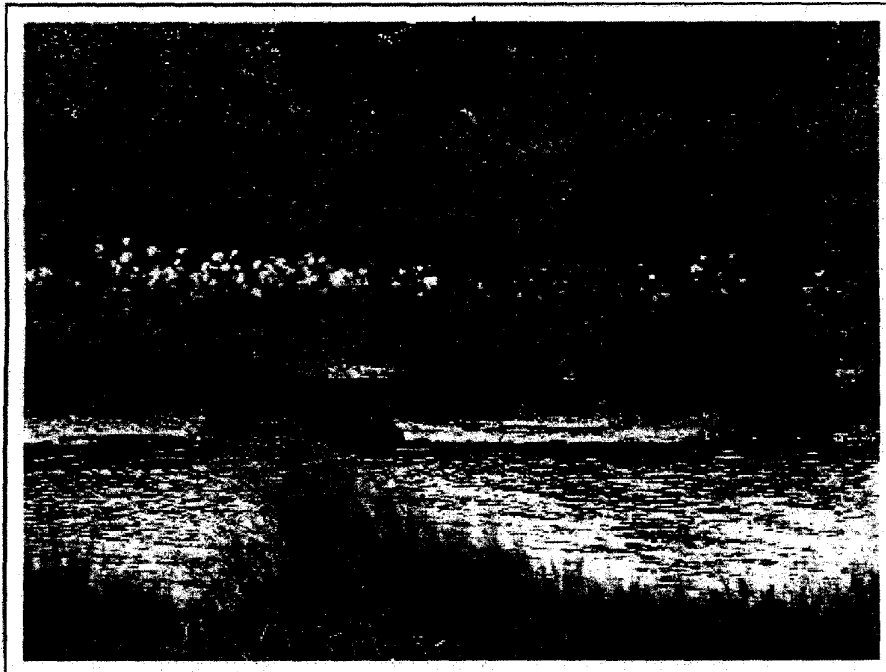


Wet heathland

Wet heathland may occur in hollows and depressions of dry heath where drainage is impeded. It is characterised by the presence of mosses and purple moor grass, the latter may become dominant if drying out occurs. A more species rich flora, including bog asphodel, devil's bit scabious, meadow thistle, the sundews, sedges and two orchids is encouraged through maintaining an open habitat and controlling the water conditions. Additionally this habitat is important for outstanding dragonfly and damselfly assemblages and the rare bog bush cricket.

Some of the wet heathland flora is rare and highly sensitive to trampling damage, which may alter the water conditions and damage sensitive species. Additionally the emergent vegetation is used by dragonflies and damselflies for egg laying purposes and also during larval developmental stages in the life cycle.

For these reasons any event or recreational use must be planned to avoid these areas.



As the vast majority of the Army Training Estate (Home Counties) is designated SSSI and subject to the above, English Nature and Defence Estates has provided this text as a broad guidance for user groups to plan appropriate events. However, the detail of all events will need to be given full consideration by Defence Estates and Landmarc Support Services with respect to nature conservation law. Please contact Defence Estates at the following address:

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