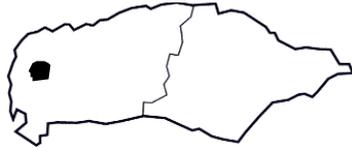


Iping and Stedham Commons



Superb example of lowland heath with all the fauna and flora one would expect

There is something about an expanse of open heathland in the heat of a summer's morning that is quintessentially English. Haze shimmers in the distance to create little mirages of refracted sky at the horizon of purple heather. The brown pods of the gorse pop open in the heat shedding a shower of seeds into the dry sand below.

Highlights

Digger wasps, field crickets, tiger beetles, woodlark, Dartford warbler, nightjar, stonechat and sundew.

At first this seems like a barren, unforgiving landscape, but close examination reveals a wealth of life specially adapted to the harsh conditions.

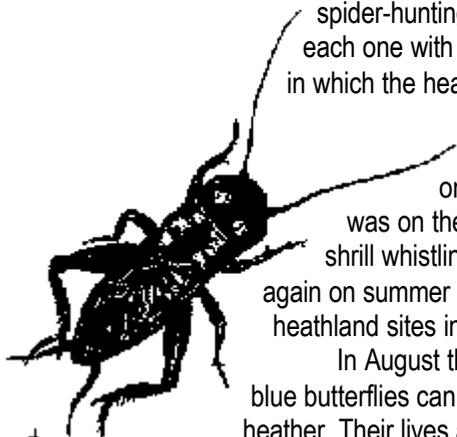
The dry acidic soils encourage the growth of what seems like mono-cultures of plants – heather, gorse, birch, Scots pine, purple moor grass, but within these blocks of vegetation there is a host of animal life that can only exist within this habitat. The key is the dry sandy soil itself – wherever it is exposed at the surface numerous insects tunnel their way through the soft material to create thousands of tiny burrows. Digger wasps may be seen dragging their caterpillar victims down to an underground prison where in a paralysed state they will be devoured by their grubs. There are

spider-hunting wasps and many mining bees, each one with a complex and particular life-history

in which the heathland plays a crucial part. Field crickets are returning here too, thanks to a recovery programme on Stedham Common. The species

was on the verge of extinction, but now the shrill whistling of crickets can be heard once again on summer mornings on this and other heathland sites in Sussex.

In August the blue confetti of tiny silver-studded blue butterflies can be seen fluttering over the bell heather. Their lives are inextricably linked to some of the



Field cricket



Bell heather

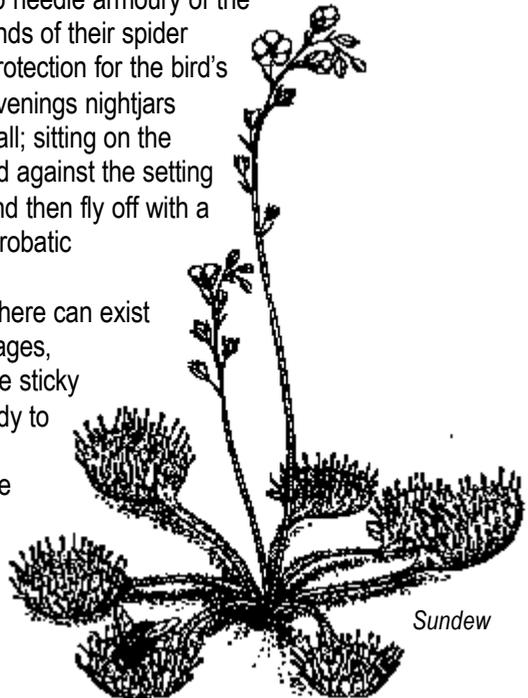
ant species found here. The ants are duped into taking the caterpillars down into their subterranean nests and tending them, until they emerge the following year as an adult butterfly.

There are also birds associated with this landscape. Woodlarks rely on the bare sandy patches among the vegetation for nesting, and their haunting melodies can be heard filling the air in a descending lament at the passing of spring.

From the ribbons of gorse that line the paths can be heard the scratchy song of the Dartford warbler, another bird almost lost in Britain as heathland

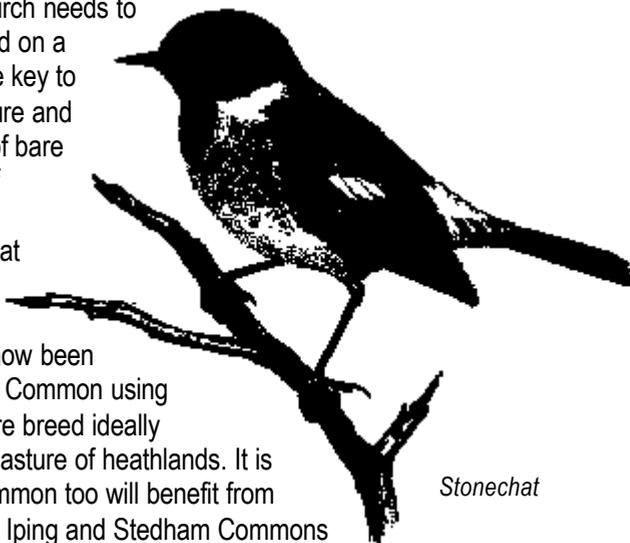
has decreased. The razor-sharp needle armoury of the gorse provides home to thousands of their spider prey, as well as impenetrable protection for the bird's nests. On warm, still summer evenings nightjars ring out their curious churring call; sitting on the dead bough of a tree silhouetted against the setting sun, they purr like giant cats, and then fly off with a display of wing clapping and aerobic manoeuvres.

Many of the plants growing here can exist in no other habitat. In wet seepages, insectivorous sundews unfurl the sticky red droplets on their leaves ready to entrap any insect lured by the promise of some free sugar. The very rare marsh clubmoss occurs here, as well as soft cushions of sphagnum moss over which bog bush crickets crawl.



Sundew

When the Trust took over the management of Stedham Common there were large blocks of pine trees planted for timber, much of which has now been cleared and heathland restored in its place. Those that remain provide a rich hunting ground for fungi in the autumn. A less welcome plant is the birch tree, rapidly threatening to take over the open landscape and shade out this fragile habitat. The birch needs to be controlled by hand on a regular basis, but the key to the patchy open nature and regular occurrence of bare soil lies in the use of grazing animals, the very management that created open heathland in the first place. Grazing has now been restored to Stedham Common using Shetland cattle, a rare breed ideally suited to the rough pasture of heathlands. It is hoped that Iping Common too will benefit from grazing in the future. Iping and Stedham Commons is a Local Nature Reserve and a Site of Special Scientific Interest, and is jointly managed by the Trust and the Sussex Downs Conservation Board.



Stonechat

Iping and Stedham Commons represents some of the best that the lowland heathland landscape can offer of this scarce habitat which is diminishing throughout Europe, as rich in atmosphere as it is in wildlife.

Access

The reserve is flat and there are no stiles, but there are many gates to allow entry into the grazing area of Stedham Common. There is a large car park on the Elsted road just off the A272.