

## Iping and Stedham Commons

Outstanding example of lowland heath with a wealth of fauna and flora

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.

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 and 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

### Highlights

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



dartford warbler

Hugh Clark

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 may return here too, thanks to a reintroduction programme on the Commons. 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 June and July 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 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 lining 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



common lizard



Clockwise gorse, silver-studded blue, bog bush cricket

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 aerobatic 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.

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 maintained open heathland in the first place. Grazing has now been restored to Stedham Common using cattle which are ideally suited to the rough pasture of heathlands. 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 South Downs Joint Committee.

Iping and Stedham Commons represent some of the best that this scarce heathland habitat can offer. As rich in atmosphere as it is in wildlife.



fly agaric

Mark Monk-Terry