

SGEG - Shamley Green's Special Places

3. Blackheath

Right on our doorstep is the amazing expanse of Blackheath, immensely popular for weekend walks and a great place for walking the dog. But did you realise that it's also a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI for short) with many rare plants and animals which rely on the unique qualities of a lowland heath for their survival.

Even in the middle of winter you will find flowers there: the coconut-scented blooms of European gorse can be found throughout the winter, even on Christmas Day. And on Blackheath there is also a much rarer and much smaller type of gorse, Dwarf gorse, found only in a few small areas of Southern England. You will find this in flower during the summer, when the big European gorse's flowers have all turned to brittle pea pods which you can hear exploding on a hot day.

Flitting about the gorse bushes you might be lucky enough to see a Dartford warbler, an attractive little bird with a rusty coloured breast and grey upper parts, a red eye and a tail cocked a bit like a wren. Listen for its rather harsh squawk as it warns of your approach. We have seen several on the heath this year, which is great news because this species almost became extinct in the 1960s, largely due to loss of habitat.

The glory of Blackheath is of course the lovely purple swathes of heather in midsummer: magenta bell heather starts in June, then is joined by the mauve hues of true heather or 'ling', and it all make a stunning picture alongside bright splashes of yellow from the dwarf gorse.

But very worryingly, there are now very few bees there. Not many years ago, the midsummer air was loud with the buzzing of bees working the heather, but that is no longer so and we just have to hope that the rewilding schemes in the wider environment will help to rectify things. Having said that, there is lots of fascinating wildlife to see on Blackheath, like massive hills made from thousands of pine needles covered in very purposeful-looking ants going about their business, or intriguing holes in the sand from which little bumble bees emerge (sometimes you see them busily excavating the holes a bit more with their back legs), or gorgeous dew-covered spider's webs draped between the heather plants on autumn mornings.

Just occasionally you might come across a grass snake or even an adder, basking in the sun by the side of the path. As soon as they spot you, snakes will usually try to get away, they really don't want a fight! Blackheath is also home to rare sand lizards - you may spot a male in his bright green breeding colours in the spring - reintroduced to the heath by ARC (Amphibian and Reptile Conservation), a wonderful organisation who also help us in Shamley Green with our annual toad migration.



Blackheath in winter

So do go and have a wander on Blackheath when you get the chance. The woods surrounding the heath are wonderful in the spring for bluebells, you can hear nightjars calling at dusk in the summer, there are wild strawberries along the path edges, there's a lovely stream that runs below the northern edge of the heath where your dog can splash about on a hot day, and even on the scruffy bits of the heath where logs have been stacked you can spot little gems like tiny forget-me-nots and speedwells. It's really worth a visit.

For lots more information about the environment in Shamley Green see our website www.shamleygreenenvironment.co.uk, and to find out about opportunities for volunteering with conservation work on Blackheath see the Waverley Borough Council website

Next month: The Wey and Arun Canal

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