

Explore... Dorsets heaths

Dorset's Lowland Heathland is a beautiful landscape, its wild open terrain is full of rare and intriguing wildlife. Its unusual mix of poor sandy soils, areas of dense scrub or bare ground, shallow pools, and peat bogs are the perfect home to many specialist species. These include birds such as the Dartford Warbler and Nightjar, all six of the UK's native reptiles, insect eating plants, and even a wasp found nowhere else in the world! The Purbeck Mason Wasp.

Now peaceful retreats, the Dorset heaths were once a hive of activity, full of vital resources exploited by the local communities. Used for grazing livestock, gorse was cut for firewood, heather for thatch, bracken for bedding, and sand and clay were extracted for trade. These activities created features such as trampled trackways, exposed sandy patches, and shallow pools; ideal homes for heathland wildlife that can live nowhere else.

Sadly our amazing heaths have suffered huge declines, 85% has disappeared since 1800. Lost to housing and road development, agriculture, and forestry; what remains is small fragments of its past extent, meaning many of its special plants and animals are struggling to survive.

Thankfully the remaining patches are now protected and despite the declines, these heaths are some of the most biodiverse areas in Britain, with the Dorset heaths being some of the best remaining areas in the UK. Thanks to conservation efforts this special habitat, home to a huge range of species, is a great place to explore and find wildlife.

Explore... Heathland

- Notice the distinctive features found on Dorset Heathland
- Investigate the differences between wet and dry heath
- Find and identify some of the key heathland species

Here are some of the highlights to look out for!



Insect-eating Sundew



Sand Lizard basking in the sun



Silver-studded Blue butterfly

Please take care on your visit.

Please keep to public rights of way and be careful when moving across rough terrain. Avoid walking into boggy areas. Note that livestock often graze heathland sites as an important part of their management.

1 Notice...

As you explore, take the time to notice the different landscape features and distinctive habitat types the heathland contains. Heaths usually have a combination of two dominant areas: one usually very dry and sandy, the second wet and boggy. Both support unique plants and wildlife only associated with heathland.



Dry sandy heath



Wet boggy heath

Which of the features can you identify around you?

- Areas of the heath with distinctively different colours
- Open landscape with patches of scrub and scattered trees
- Dry sandy heath dominated by heather
- Wet boggy heath dominated by tall grass tussocks and colourful moss
- Clay or sand banks or cliffs
- Wide sandy tracks or wet rutted tracks
- Pools of standing water
- Different heights of heather growth

2 Investigate...

Mosses and lichens; tiny but not insignificant

The mosses and lichens found on heaths are a distinctive and special plant community found in many forms and can be spotted all year round.

The dry heath is home to numerous *Cladonia* species found amongst the heather. In other parts of the world these are an important source of food for Reindeer. Easy to spot *Cladonia portentosa* (right top) forms pale green-grey loose clumps. Look more closely for those with a distinctive goblet or trumpet shape including *Cladonia fimbriata* (right middle). Or one with a bright red tip known as Devil's matchstick's *Cladonia floerikiana*.

The wettest parts of the heath are dominated by carpets of colourful *Sphagnum* mosses (right bottom). Also known as bog mosses these plants can hold a significant amount of water and play an important role in developing peat; great for storing carbon.



Marsh Clubmoss *Lycopodiella inundata*

Marsh Clubmoss belongs to a family of plants that developed around 380 million years ago and could be considered a living fossil! It's also pretty rare, so you are unlikely to find it on the heath. It is quite small, usually just a few centimetres tall, its 'leaves' are needle-like and densely cover the stem. It looks a bit like the tip nipped off the end of a conifer branch and poked upright in the ground. Each plant generally has two short creeping shoots arranged in a V, with an upright "club" arising from the join. Clubmosses are in fact neither moss nor conifer, but are closely allied to ferns.

3 Find three of a kind... Heather...

Heathlands are typically dominated by short, woody, shrub species known as heather. These plants are ideally adapted to their surroundings and the poor heathland soils. Their flowers, which bloom during July, August and September, attract all kinds of nectar-loving insects.

Heathers are native plants which belong to the *Ericaceae* family. Historically, heather was utilised and harvested for a range of domestic purposes including fuel, thatching rooves, bedding, making dyes, tanning and making brooms. It was considered an excellent antiseptic and was used externally on the face and eyes and taken internally for the kidney and urinary systems.

You are likely to find three different types of heathers on Dorset's heathlands. This guide will help you tell them apart.

Heather *Calluna vulgaris* ▶

Also known as 'ling' this is the classic heathland plant. If you see an area flushed with purple, the chances are it is heather in flower.

Heather is a bushy evergreen shrub that has very small scale-like leaves (1-2 mm) along the stems.

The pale lilac/purple flowers are in dense spikes.

This species tends to grow on dry heaths but will also tolerate the transition into wet heath.



◀ Cross-leaved Heath *Erica tetralix*

The leaves of Cross-leaved Heath are longer than those of Heather and are arranged around the stem in groups of four, making a cross shape.

The flowers are in distinct drooping flowerheads of rose-pink flowers at the end of the stems.

The leaves are narrow and are a green/grey colour being slightly 'hairy'.

This species grows on wet acidic soils rather than dry heaths.



Bell Heather *Erica cinerea* ▶

Bell Heather is similar to Cross-Leaved Heath but the leaves are in whorls of three in clusters along the branches. It has a different flower shape than Heather, with flowers arranged in groups at the end of the stem. The leaves are dark green in colour and quite small and narrow. The colour is magenta pink.

This species tends to grow on dry heaths but will also tolerate the transition into wet heath.



4 Identify...

Once you are more familiar with the heathland landscape have a go at identifying a greater diversity of its plant species, here are a few below to help. Depending on the soil type and wetness of the heathland you will find different plants.

Look for these plants on the drier areas of heath:



© A. Skimmer

Tormentil
Potentilla erecta

This creeping plant has bright yellow four-petaled flowers on long stalks. Leaves are deeply cut, shiny green, mostly made of three narrow leaflets and are unstalked.

May to October



© C. Kelly

Heath Milkwort
Polygala serpyllifolia

A plant of many colours, usually dark-blue but also purple, pink or white. Tell it apart from its close relative Common Milkwort by the leaves - common milkwort leaves alternate up the stem, heath milkwort's are opposite each other.

May to September



© T. Bagley

Gorse
Ulex species.

A spiny evergreen shrub with pleasant scented yellow flowers. 3 species of gorse frequent the Dorset heaths including Common Gorse *Ulex europaeus*, Western Gorse *Ulex gallii*, and the much smaller Dwarf Gorse *Ulex minor*.

All year round



© D. Liley & S. Lake

Bell Heather
Erica cinerea.

A small, woody, evergreen shrub with narrow, dark-green leaves which are arranged in whorls of three. Named after the pink bell-shaped flowers that grow in groups along the stems. Indicative of dry heathland along with common heather/ling.

July to September

Look for these plants on the wetter bogs and mires within the heath:



© T. Bagley

Bog Asphodel
Narthecium ossifragum

The yellow, star-like flowers of this plant light up our wet heathlands. Its colour persists long after flowering and stalks can be seen throughout winter.

July to August



© R. Krack

Round-leaved Sundew
Drosera rotundifolia

Also known as common sundew, this carnivore uses glues and acids to trap and devour carelessly insects who are attracted by its crimson tentacles and sticky, sugary secretions.

May to September



© B. Newman

Cotton-grass (Common)
Eriophorum angustifolium

Fluffy, cotton-like flower and seed heads give this distinctive plant its name. As a member of the sedge family, it's technically not a grass at all.

May to June



© T. Bagley

Marsh Gentian
Gentiana pneumonanthe

A rare plant of acidic bogs and wet heathlands. Its upright stem holds large bright blue trumpet-shaped flowers, delicately striped with green, which contrast with its surroundings.

July to October