

Stanmore Common Nature Trail

Text version

Welcome to Stanmore Common, a council owned nature reserve of around 122 acres of mixed woodland, wetland and grassland. The reserve is bisected by Warren Lane, the last unlit road in the borough. The majority of the reserve lies north of the road and this is the direction you are facing at the start of the trail.

Topographically the reserve is a shallow valley with the highest point at the corner of Warren Lane and The Common and the lowest point at Pynding Mersc 500 metres to the north. The soil structure of the reserve is impermeable London clay topped by more permeable Claygate Beds and Stanmore Gravels, creating springs and boggy areas where percolating water meets the impermeable clay. This means that the reserve is always damp underfoot and can be very muddy: stout shoes or boots are essential.

The reserve is very important because of its rare habitats and wildlife. It is rated a Site of Metropolitan Importance to Wildlife and is protected by law as a Local Nature Reserve. Historically the site was part of a open common owned by the people and used for grazing, shooting, gravel extraction and rabbit breeding. As you go around the trails you will see evidence of some of this human activity.

From the car park you can follow the long trail (red arrows) or the short trail (blue arrows). These meet in Bluebell Heath at the north of the Common from where a single return trail (orange arrows) brings you back here. Including the return leg, the long trail is 1.2 miles and the short trail is just under one mile long.

How to find the reserve

The number 142 bus runs along the A4140 "The Common" while the junction of the A4140 "The Common" and the A409 Common Road is served by the 258 bus. There is a car park off Warren Lane. For the walker the well-waymarked London Loop Link offers a pleasant and largely road-free route from Stanmore Jubilee Line station through Stanmore Country Park.

Birds: 59 bird species have been recorded on Stanmore Common. Some to listen out for:

Chiff-chaff sing their name over and over again then and sign off with a little "cough" before beginning again. This is a more wheezy sound than the "tee-cher" of the great tit.

Great spotted woodpecker can be difficult to see but their sharp "pik" calls are heard all year around.

Great tits have a number of calls and songs but their commonest, and most recognizable, is an endlessly repeated two-note "tee-cher".

Ring-necked parakeets screech and squawk loudly. They have spread across the whole of London in the last 20 years.

Mammals: Stanmore Common has 3 species of wild deer. They are wary and not often seen, but look out for their cloven hoof prints. Measure the length of the print to identify the species: muntjac 25mm; roe 45mm; fallow 60mm.

Contacts:

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Stanmore Common needs volunteers. If you would like to help, whether at one of our working parties or as part of the warden team, contact the wardens or Harrow Nature Conservation Forum.

This nature trail was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund as part of a project to restore Bluebell Heath in the north of the Common.

Long trail

Long trail 1 Follow the red arrow into Jake's Path to the left.

Long trail 2 This is Holly Brook. In summer look for water crickets upstream of the bridge. These are not true crickets but are members of the Hemiptera, the bugs. They skate on the water surface like pond skaters but unlike the latter have bent front legs. Both pond skaters and water crickets are predators on drowning insects, detecting them by sensory hairs on their legs.

Long trail 3 At the base of the post is a pile of Stanmore Gravels dug to create the post hole. The stones are rounded, indicating that they were tumbled in a river or beach. The Stanmore Gravel is recent; it was deposited only 2 million years ago - in contrast, the dinosaurs died out 65 million years ago. Fork left here and follow Jake's Path over a number of streams to point 4.

Long trail 4 This magnificent beech tree is certainly over 150 years old, possibly a lot older. At least 50 years ago it was pollarded, that is, the stem was cut and new sprouts allowed to grow that have now become four massive boughs. Look on the ground for the fruit of the beech tree called mast. Like its relative the oak, beech holds its nut in a cup but the beech cup is spiny and has four lobes. Almost all the cups on the ground will be empty, the nut inside eaten by birds or mammals. Sixteen metres along the path on the left is a much smaller Y shaped beech tree. Deer have ripped off the bark at the base, either to eat when food is scarce in winter or while rubbing the velvet off their new antlers.

Long trail 5 To the left is a stump covered with a carpet of dark green moss. There are at least four species here. The soft green mat is common feather-moss *Kindbergia praelonga* while the dark green tall spikes are bank haircap *Polytrichastrum formosum*. Swan's-neck thyme-moss *Mnium hornum* is also dark green, while the lighter green moss is common smooth cap moss *Atrichum undulatum*. The species name undulatum refers to tiny wrinkles in the leaves, which are just visible with the naked eye or obvious with a hand lens. Between April and July you may see moss spore capsules which emerge from the shoot tips looking like pepper pots on stalks. In dry weather the capsule teeth open releasing millions of minute spores to form the next generation of moss. Turn left and follow the path uphill which soon bends to the right and left.

Long trail 6 In this area the space between the mature trees is thick with holly *Ilex aquifolium*. The holly both shades the ground and keeps it dry, preventing the growth of woodland flowers. You may see piles of cut holly on your route around the reserve, this is the result of volunteers cutting back the holly in some areas to maintain a mix of woodland types.

Long trail 7 Here we turn left by another fine mature beech, though not as old as the one we saw at post 4. From here to post 10 the path winds between shallow pits where gravel was dug for roads before the days of tarmac.

Long trail 8 Eight paces beyond the path junction the path crosses a low bank. On the left notice the straight stems of wild raspberry *Rubus idaeus*; the shoots have thorns but these are thinner and softer than those on bramble. Among the raspberry grows tufts of pendulous sedge *Carex pendula*; in summer look for the drooping flower spikes. Look also for bluebells *Hyacinthoides non-scripta* as well as enchanter's nightshade *Circaea lutetiana* with its spike of tiny delicate flowers. Bluebell and pendulous sedge are two of sixteen ancient woodland indicator plants found in this area of the Common. This is a puzzle, since the trees are certainly not ancient - most are less than 100 years old. It is likely that an area of ancient woodland was felled, perhaps on the orders of the 1st Duke of Chandos (1674-1744) who is thought to have sold timber from here to the navy. Young trees grew back, allowing the plants of the woodland floor to survive.

Long trail 9 A line of yew trees gives a dark, sombre appearance to the wood on the left. The area ahead is more open and there are patches of bluebells. To the right of the path is an old tractor tyre - it has been here as long as any of the volunteers who maintain the site can remember!

Twenty paces ahead notice a dead tree that has fallen away from the path, with its base close to the path on the right. We know what killed this tree: look carefully and you can see a network of what look like black bootlaces. These are the mycelium of honey fungus *Armillaria*, one of the few fungi that attacks and kills living trees.

Long trail 10 Ahead is the open space of New Heath. While you are still hidden, check the tops of the pine trees on the other side of the Heath: both buzzard *Buteo buteo* and red kite *Milvus milvus* like to perch here and watch for mice and voles in the open ground.

Like much of Stanmore Common, 150 years ago New Heath was open acid grassland and heathland maintained by grazing, but when grazing stopped birch trees invaded. However around the year 2000 a fire killed many of the birch trees. This was recognised as an opportunity to restore the lowland acid heathland, which is a rare and declining habitat; Hounslow Heath, 20 km to the southwest, is the best example north of the Thames. In the winter of 2007/8, supported by a National Lottery grant, the leaf litter and topsoil was scraped off by bulldozer to reveal the gravel and rounded pebbles of the Stanmore Beds. The next spring we sowed heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) seed from Hounslow Heath. Among the heather are plants that germinated naturally from the bank of seeds that had lain dormant for over 100 years. The heather is still young but already gives a lovely display of purple flowers in late summer.

Walk ahead to return trail post 1.

Short trail

Short trail 1 Walk down Witling Ride past the picnic tables. Woodland rides introduce important diversity to the woodland habitat, letting light into the adjacent woodland and supporting some very different plants and invertebrates. In 2012 volunteers from The Conservation Volunteers felled young trees to preserve this open ride. Look out for post 2 directing you to the left.

Short trail 2 From here you can see two mature oaks. You passed one a few yards back up the ride, and there is one a few yards further down the ride to your right. These two oaks grew while the land was open meadow and contrast with all the surrounding trees, which are much younger. Framing the path ahead are three silver birches, about 50 years old, but all the younger trees about are oak and beech. As you follow the path into the woodland notice that almost all the fallen trees are birch. Birch is one of the first trees to colonize open ground, since it has tiny, fine seeds with twin outgrowths that act as sails that are blown far on the wind. However birch is short lived and cannot compete with the slower growing but sturdier oak and beech. Descend to the bridge over Holly Brook and then continue to post 3.

Short trail 3 In front of you is Fox Earth mound, built as an artificial rabbit warren. Rabbits were brought to England by the Normans as a food source and kept in artificial hillocks surrounded by a fence. Rabbits are a Mediterranean species and had difficulty adapting to the harsh British winters. The rabbits were looked after by warreners. This is not the only man-made warren on the Common, but this is the best defined and the most accessible. Most warrens were long structures so this round form is unusual.

Short trail 4 This open meadow is Cerrislande. The vegetation is a rich mix of grasses, bracken, scrub and wild flowers including the yellow creeping buttercup. The tall woody stems are willows. Identifying willow to species is difficult especially since the various species hybridise freely. The plants here have oval leaves with paler green below and an intricate vein network, suggesting goat willow *Salix caprea*, however grey willow *Salix cinerea* can look almost identical. Whatever they are, they need to be controlled: if volunteers did not cut the willow and other woody plants on rotation this area would rapidly revert to willow scrub then woodland.

Short trail 5 This large tree is a Turkey oak, *Quercus cerris*. It is native to Turkey, Greece, and the Balkans and was introduced into the UK in the 1700's. One can identify it by the deeply indented leaves and the hairs that surround its buds and acorn cups. It does not have as great a range of invertebrates as our two native oaks; pedunculate oak *Quercus robur*, the commonest native oak on the reserve, and sessile oak *Quercus petraea* which is only found in the far north west edge of Stanmore Common. We do weed out turkey oak saplings but we keep the magnificent large trees.

Turn right and follow the path downhill. In summer notice the green bottlebrushes of great horsetail *Equisetum telmateia*. Horsetails contain a lot of silica in their cell walls and this makes the stems very hard and tough. Horsetails used to be used as pot scourers and in burnishing silver.

Short trail 6 The young oak tree ahead and to the left has masses of small twigs growing out of the trunk and side branches producing shaggy clusters known as witches' brooms. Witches' brooms are formed by many species of trees in response to a wide variety of stress events; it might be a gall-forming insect or mite, aphids or bacterial/fungal colonisation or even mistletoe which sets it off.

Tykes Water lies a few steps ahead. This is the major stream of the reserve and in early spring is full of young stonefly larvae, an indicator of good water quality. The larvae are nevertheless hard to see because they hide under stones and amongst debris. The adults are poor fliers and stay close to the water.

Short trail 7 This open area is Oakmead, named after the huge multistemmed pedunculate oak which dominates the open area. The question can be posed; is this one tree that was coppiced at a much earlier date and then each shoot left to grow? If so it is old indeed, at least 200-300 hundred years. However it may be a group of trees, perhaps from a cache of nuts left by a squirrel or jay. In late summer look for the blue pom-pom flowers of devils-bit scabious *Succisa pratensis*.

Scattered among the grass are clumps of heather (ling) *Calluna vulgaris*. Heather is native to Stanmore Common and is precious. It is a characteristic component of lowland acid grassland and heathland, a habitat that is increasingly rare due to loss to farming and building.

The woodland ahead is open and light and supports a good ground flora. In late summer look for the green flower spikes of wood sage *Teucrium scorodonia*, a relative of dead-nettle that is characteristic of acidic soils.

Short trail 8 Behind you on the left is a magnificent pedunculate oak that lost a major limb during a storm. Trees are tough and can survive damage like this as long as the roots are intact.

Looking on the opposite side of the trail from the oak you see an old tree with a stem that divides into multiple branches about 2 metres from the ground. This is an ancient hawthorn, probably over 200 years old and likely to be one of the oldest in southeast England.

Short trail 9 On the left is a line of old oaks, much older than the young trees all around. These may once have marked the edge of a track used by commoners to remove gravel, timber or other materials.

Short trail 10 The open area ahead and to the right is Bluebell Heath. Although one of the largest open areas on the Common, it had by 2010 been almost completely overgrown by scrub and young woodland, and we were in danger of losing all the plants of open grassland and heath together with the butterflies and other invertebrates that depend on them. In the winter of 2012-2013 much of the young trees and scrub were removed in a project supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund. The ground cover was allowed to regenerate naturally. Now the clearing is far more open yet still full of life.

Walk up the hill to post 1 of the return trail.

Return trail

Return trail 1 The area to the left of the path you will follow is New Scrape. Here in the winter of 2012-2013 the secondary woodland was not only cleared of trees but the leaf litter and forest soil was scraped away to leave the bare Stanmore Gravel. By doing this we allow the growth of acid grassland and heathland plants that thrive in nutrient poor quick draining soil.

The path beside New Scrape is edged with lovely grasses. Yorkshire fog *Holcus lanatus* you can identify by the soft white downy hairs all down the stem, creeping soft grass *Holcus mollis* by the hairy "knees" or swellings at the nodes (the places on the stem where leaves emerge) and wavy hair grass *Deschampsia flexuosa* by its very tall tussocks bearing blazing red flower spikes or panicles. From late spring to late summer look for the yellow flowers of hawkweeds *Crepis* spp., relatives of dandelions. Hawkweeds are very important nectar sources since each flower head bears up to 50 individual florets and each has a nectar gland.

To your right are tall conifers. The one with fine reddish scaled bark is Scots pine *Pinus sylvestris* and the dark green thin needle leaved tree with thick vertical bark cracks is larch *Larix decidua*.

Return trail 2 In June through September this is a good place to look for the pretty yellow flowers of tormentil *Potentilla erecta* growing at the base of the bracken and other plants. Tormentil is a characteristic plant of acid grassland. Like cinquefoil and strawberry it is a member of the rose family, but unlike its relatives its flowers have four, not five, petals.

The trail descends though Bluebell Heath, passing to the left of a bench - but this is a good spot to rest for a while. Butterflies abound here: red admiral, small tortoiseshell, comma, peacock, meadow brown, speckled wood and ringlet can all be seen along with the small, Essex and large skippers.

Look up from the bench to the left of the path you came on for an ancient wild apple tree that is covered in blossom in April and May. We are working to propagate it from seed and to clone the existing tree by layering.

Return trail 3 The small tree beside the post, and several nearby, is aspen, a damp loving tree. The latin name *Populus tremula* refers to the trembling of the circular leaves in the slightest of breezes. This is because the leaf stalk or petiole is a flat strip that easily twists; this habit has produced the saying "To shake like an aspen". Aspen is home to some of the reserve's rarest insects. Because of this aspen is very rarely felled on the Common.

13 paces ahead on the left look in summer for the small buttercup flowers of lesser spearwort *Ranunculus flammula*.

Return trail 4 This is Pynding Mersc. A dam that carries the horse ride has created a wetland delta used by many animals including dragonflies, damselflies, frogs, toads, newts, water beetles, herons, mandarin and mallard ducks as well as Daubenton's and soprano pipistrelle bats. Plants in the water include float grass, water and wood forget-me-not and gypsywort. Immediately in front of the number roundel look for narrow leaved water plantain *Alisma lanceolatum* with its large spear shaped leaves, bearing pretty white flowers in June through August.

As you leave the boardwalk and begin climbing the slope look on the right in spring for wood-sorrel *Oxalis acetosella*. The leaves have three independent leaves, like clover, and the very pretty white flowers appear in April and May.

Return trail 5 This clearing is called Hollybrook Rise after the stream that flows to its west. Like the other open areas on the reserve it is cut by hand to create a complex mix of low and high vegetation including small miniclearings which will catch the sun but are shielded from the wind by a sparse covering of bracken and taller uncut vegetation. Look in particular for the acid grassland specialist heath bedstraw *Galium saxatile* with its sprays of tiny white flowers, and heath wood-rush *Luzula multiflora* with flowering heads like bulbous brown balls.

Return trail 6 This open space is Witing Glade. A great oak tree has fallen close to the trail bollard. Compare the bark on this oak tree to the living beech to the right. Oaks have rough bark, resembling poorly laid cobblestones, while beeches, even mature ones like this, are smooth.

Return trail 7 Turn left uphill for the final stretch back to the car park. Many of the plants found on this stretch are indicators of high nutrient levels such as greater plantain *Plantago major*, creeping buttercup *Ranunculus repens*, stinging nettle *Urtica dioica* and the tough wiry perennial rye grass *Lolium perenne* with its double row of oval florets going up the stem. The high nutrients come primarily from dog waste. The delicate wild flowers seen elsewhere on the Common would be crowded out by these ranker plants if nutrient levels rose; this is another reason, in addition to considerations of public health and unsightliness, why dog waste must be bagged and placed in waste bins or removed from the site.

You have come to the end of the nature trail - we hope you enjoyed it. Please send any comments, photographs, and notes about interesting species seen to admin@harrowncf.org.