

# Stanmore Common: a local nature reserve

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The speaker is volunteer Head Warden at Stanmore Common Local Nature Reserve where he has been a warden since 1996. The reserve is owned by Harrow Borough Council, and comprises 120 acres of woodland, grassland and common. It is a Local Nature Reserve, a binding designation under Section 21 of the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act. There are 1,500 Local Nature Reserves in the UK.

There are several streams fed by run-off and springs from small aquifers in the Stanmore Gravel, where it rests on the London Clay underlying most of the reserve. Only one stream, the Holly Brook, flows all year round.

## Habitats

Habitats include the very well drained Stanmore Gravel, which is colonised by common heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), as well as rare types of grassland on soil which is poor in nutrients and acidic. We have ancient trees, one in a clearing called Oakmead, possibly 400 years old. One of the most important habitats is dead wood since 10% of all invertebrates spend all or part of their life cycle in dead wood. Heathland is a very rare habitat in London and consists of open areas characterised by heather, gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) and grasses of acidic nutrient-poor soils. The heathland is man-made as a result of tree-felling, turf stripping and grazing. Non-flowing waters include Great Beavers Pond, where water lilies have been reintroduced, and shady woodland puddles in holes left by gravel extraction during the 19th century. There are also flowing fresh waters which are very clean as they support stone fly larvae (*Perlodes microcephalus*), carnivorous larvae which can only tolerate cold well oxygenated water. The presence of 3 species of stonefly on the reserve illustrates the effective clean-up of polluted water running off from roads by passing through the Stanmore Gravel. A successful restoration project has been carried out at Bluebell Heath by removing some of the trees to allow reversion to a grassland habitat.

## Fauna and flora

Mammals in the reserve include muntjac (*Muntiacus reevesi*), roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*), though they are rarely seen, badger (*Meles meles*), fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), moles (*Talpa europaea*) and up to 7 species of bats including noctule (*Nyctalus noctula*) bats. A variety of birds occur including bullfinch (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*), green woodpecker (*Picus viridis*), nuthatch (*Sitta europaea*), coal tit (*Periparus ater*), goldcrest (*Regulus regulus*) and hobby (*Falco Subbuteo*), the latter have bred in the field to the north of the reserve for the last 12 years. Amphibians include the common toad (*Bufo bufo*), common frog (*Rana temporaria*) and grass snakes (*Natrix natrix*), and there are rumours of adders (*Vipera berus*), but the speaker has never seen one in the reserve. Fish in the ponds include pike (*Esox Lucius*), roach (*Rutilus rutilus*) and minnows (*Phoxinus phoxinus*).

There are a variety of insects including rare chrysomelids (leaf beetles), ladybird look-alikes of the Genus *Gonioctena* which feed on poplars and aspens, longhorn beetles such as *Rutipela maculata*, wasp beetles (*Clytus arieta*) and jewel beetles (*Agrilus biguttatus*), all of whose larvae feed on dead wood. Butterflies include the comma (*Polygonia c-album*), marbled white (*Melanagia galathea*) and large skipper (*Ochlodes sylvanus*), whilst among the moths are the angle shades moth (*Phlogophora meticulosa*), knot grass moth (*Acronita numisis*), black arches moth (*Lymantria monacha*) and maiden's bush moth (*Cyclophora punctaria*). Bugs have tubular piercing mouth

parts and include the red-legged shield bug (*Pentatoma rufipes*) and the water cricket (*Velia caprai*). The solitary bee *Andrena* is present and the cuckoo bee (*Genus Nomada*) which lays its eggs in the nests of solitary bees. A gall wasp 2mm long (*Andricus kollari*) forms oak tree leaf bud galls, but may be replaced by the chalcid wasp *Torymus sinensis* which injects its eggs into galls for the larvae to eat the gall wasp larvae. The native tawny cockroach (*Ectobius lapponicus*) is a woodland dweller, and there are lots of woodlice species.

Plants include foxgloves (*Digitalis purpurea*), the relatively rare hard fern (*Blechnum spicens*), germander speedwell (*Veronica chamaedris*) and true heath spotted orchid (*Dactylorhiza maculata*) which is a specialist of damp acidic soils, which are poor in nutrients.

## **Looking after Stanmore Common**

The key features are: the low nutrient acidic soils; grassland, which is an unstable habitat and easily overtaken by scrub and woodland; the important wetlands; the large level of dead wood; the fact that some of the woodland is ancient woodland; the need to control invasive species which can include native species such as holly (*Ilex aquifolium*). The geology of the Stanmore Gravel supports the nutrient-poor soils on which sheep's fescue (*Festuca ovina*), common heather, tormentil (*Potentilla erecta*) and wavy hair grass (*Deschampsia flexuosa*) grow. The grassland is protected by clearing bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*) and young trees, and keeping the wet bits wet, thus supporting the Bog Hoverfly (*Sericomyia silentis*), a characteristic species of grassland with wet areas. At the exit of water from the reserve a dam has been built at Pyding Mersc to maintain water levels. An ancient common hawthorn tree (*Crataegus monogyna*) was smothered in invasive holly which had to be cleared to preserve the tree. Opening up the woodland to let light in and generating dead wood are both achieved by cutting down healthy young trees and retaining the older ones. Bracken is an invasive native species that needs to be controlled.

Work is also carried out for habitat creation/restoration, particularly that of bare soil, which is an important habitat for invertebrates and plants. In the Bluebell Heath Restoration Project, (2012-15), trees were felled and vegetation and topsoil scraped off by bulldozer to create bare earth in an area now called New Scrape. 2 years later there was sheep's fescue but also young trees and bracken which had to be controlled. Other new plants included heath rush (*Juncus squarrosus*), green-ribbed sedge (*Carex binervis*) and brown bent grass (*Agrostis vinealis*), all relatively rare plants.

## **Who looks after Stanmore Common and other nature reserves?**

Nature reserves in Harrow fall under the aegis of the Harrow Nature Conservation Forum, chaired by Steve Bolsover, which is part of the Harrow Heritage Trust. The HNCF supports and represents the wardens. Assistant wardens at Stanmore Common are Neville Day, John Winter and Josh Kalms, and there is still considerable activity by the ex-warden John Dobson. Clare Abbott is warden at Pear Wood, which has the very rare yellow-necked mouse (*Apodemus flavicollis*) and pygmy shrew (*Sorex minutus*), and David Winton is warden at Wood Farm.

Volunteer assistance is provided by the 23rd Wembley Scouts 2-3 times per year and by teenagers from The Challenge, a national teenage involvement organisation.

The Wardens and others run guided walks all year round on various subjects such as mosses, fungi, birds, butterflies and bats. They also provide training tools and refreshment for volunteers on regular conservation work parties.