

# West Wight Heathland Trails





The Forestry Commission is the government department responsible for the protection and expansion of Britain's forests and woodlands



**Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust is a partner of the International Year of Biodiversity**

## Introduction

This booklet is all about heaths, land characterized by its cover of dwarf shrubs (heathers) and a mix of particular plants and animals adapted to a hard life on the thin and acid soils where little else can grow. Heaths are really man-made landscapes and some date back over 14000 years.

Different heathland develops over different rocks and this guide features two kinds. At Cranmore and Bouldnor the heath grows on patches of stony clay and is interspersed with flower-rich meadows; at Brighstone the heath sits on a gravel bed that caps the downs and as you follow the trail you will see the flora change as you climb up and leave the chalk behind.

As land management and farming has changed the UK has gradually lost much of its lowland heath (so-called to differentiate from mountain and highland heather habitats) and the Island has fared just as badly: almost 80% has gone in the last century. The Island probably never had extensive heathland to start with and so the little fragments that remain have become a very high priority for conservation work and most are now formally recognized as Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs) or Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs).

As you follow the trail you'll see some of the wildlife that relies on these heaths but also the restoration work that Island landowners, the Wildlife Trust and its partners are now delivering to protect and restore these fascinating places.







Dormouse



Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary



Marbled White



Skipper

1. This guide will take you from the old coaching inn of the Horse and Groom through the settlement of Cranmore northwards to Bouldnor Forest on the north-west Heritage Coast of the Island. We hope you enjoy this lovely walk through one of the most tranquil of the Island's Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Follow the [S9 footpath out of the carpark](#).

2. The landscape of this part of the Island is an intimate mix of small fields (enclosed pasture), woodland and hedgerows filled with elm and oak, dogwood and spindle. Some of these fields have undergone agricultural improvement to increase the grass yield for dairy cows but you can still find wildflowers such as honeysuckle and red campion in the margins and verges as you walk by.

3. The woodland and marsh here fringe a tidal creek stretching from the Newtown estuary and creates a scene that has not changed for a thousand years. The estuary is an important site for roosting and nesting birds as well as for stunning wildlife-rich meadows and woodlands.

4. The flower-rich meadow here is one of the best in this part of the Island and is of national importance. 97% of this habitat has been lost from the British countryside since WWII as the land was ploughed to feed the population in the Dig for Victory campaign.

5. Away from the estuary the woodland around the settlement of Cranmore is relatively recent in origin. Trees were at one time scarce here as sheep were traditionally reared out on extensive grasslands and heath. 150 years ago this area would have looked much like the open parts of the New Forest. [Head right when you reach Hamstead Road then turn onto Solent Road, look out on the left for the entrance into Ningwood Common Reserve.](#)

6. A good example of this recent woodland colonisation is here at the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust's Ningwood Common Reserve. The woodland is small and is characterised by large oak trees with a thorn understorey. The site includes several ponds – pits left over from the work of brickmakers in the 19th century when the site would have been busy with industry. Now it is home to dormice, white admiral and





Heather



Alder Buckthorn



Dyers Greenweed



Compact Rush

silver-washed fritillary butterflies and the management work being done here aims to provide the right habitats by creating sunny rides and coppiced glades.

**7. Continue through the Common towards the restored heathland, through the gates.** The open habitats you can see around you on the reserve have been deliberately cleared to restore rare heathland. This would have once dominated the local landscape before development, forestry and a farming economy that first 'improved' the land and later lost its need for extensive grazing cleared away the heath and let trees and scrub gradually take its place. This special area still holds onto nationally important wildlife such as the reddish buff moth, the small pearl-bordered fritillary, pale violet, nightjar and nightingale. The grassland itself is unique with acid-loving plants such as heather and heath dog violet growing next to neutral grassland indicators such as dyers greenweed, saw-wort and devil's bit scabious. Our work aims to restore and extend for wildlife as much of this ancient heath as we can by mowing and grazing the vegetation and gradually extending the open areas. (Access is restricted in May due to ground-nesting birds and in

August and September due to grazing and you may see electric fencing on the site at these times – please check the notices).

**8. When you have finished exploring the heath head back to Solent Road,** from here you can retrace your steps back or continue on to Bouldnor. **Follow Solent Road to the end then join footpath S1 (the Coastal Path) along West Close.** The road takes you through the settlement of Cranmore, a community planned and developed especially for veterans of WWI. Returning soldiers were offered a plot of land to build a house and make a living. The site was only partially successful as many opted instead for Canada or Australia where the amounts of land on offer were far larger. Cranmore is laid out across a grid of unadopted roads and the architectural style can be described as 'quirky and unique'! In 1832 John Nash built the Island's first railway here at Hamstead, serving the farm, quay and brickworks.

#### **9. Follow the Coastal Path S1.**

Bouldnor Forest is owned by the Forestry Commission and is managed for timber, outdoor recreation and wildlife conservation. It was planted



Cranmore Cliffs (old postcard)



Cranmore Cliffs 1930 (old postcard)



Pillbox at Bouldnor Battery



Viewpoint across the Solent

into the open grassland and heathland of the early 1950s along a crumbling coastline after the abandonment of the area by the military.

**Just after entering the forest look out for the old stones with bearing directions.**

**10.** The vulnerability of the Island's coast to the elements is starkly illustrated here. Stunning views across the Solent to the Hampshire coast can be enjoyed from the edge of the eroding footpath, collapsing down into a landslip to the sea. Though woodland has re-established on the slopes below, the ground is predominantly very thick and unstable mud. The landslip is dangerous and should not be crossed. The viewpoints along this section look out to Hurst Spit, Fort Albert, Yarmouth, the New Forest, Lymington and Milford on Sea.

**11.** There is only 70ha of heathland left on the Isle of Wight; it is a rare resource that can really only be restored on land which has not been too much disrupted by agricultural improvements. Heathland can't survive under the trees so a partnership between the Forestry Commission, the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust and the West Wight

Landscape Partnership has created a project to restore the heaths to this part of the Bouldnor Forest. The trees have been cleared and the ground beneath is left to grow back with heather and the associated mix of plants and animals. In places ponds have been created to increase the habitat diversity for wildlife.

**12.** Bouldnor Battery, built in response to the growing threat from Germany shortly before World War II, includes the emplacements, shell stores and troop shelter of a twentieth century close defence coastal battery. It formed an integral part of a group of eleven fortifications that defended the Needles Passage at that time. Although a two gun battery existed above Bouldnor Cliff in the 1890s this battery was rebuilt in 1937-38 to cover a new examination anchorage in Yarmouth, remaining in service until 1956. This structure has been recognised as being of national importance and has been given Scheduled Ancient Monument status by English Heritage. **From here you can loop around the forest and return via part of the coastal path.** You can follow the coastal path down to Hamstead beach where there are the remains of an old tank landing-ramp from WWII which was used in the run-up to D-Day.

# Conservation Management

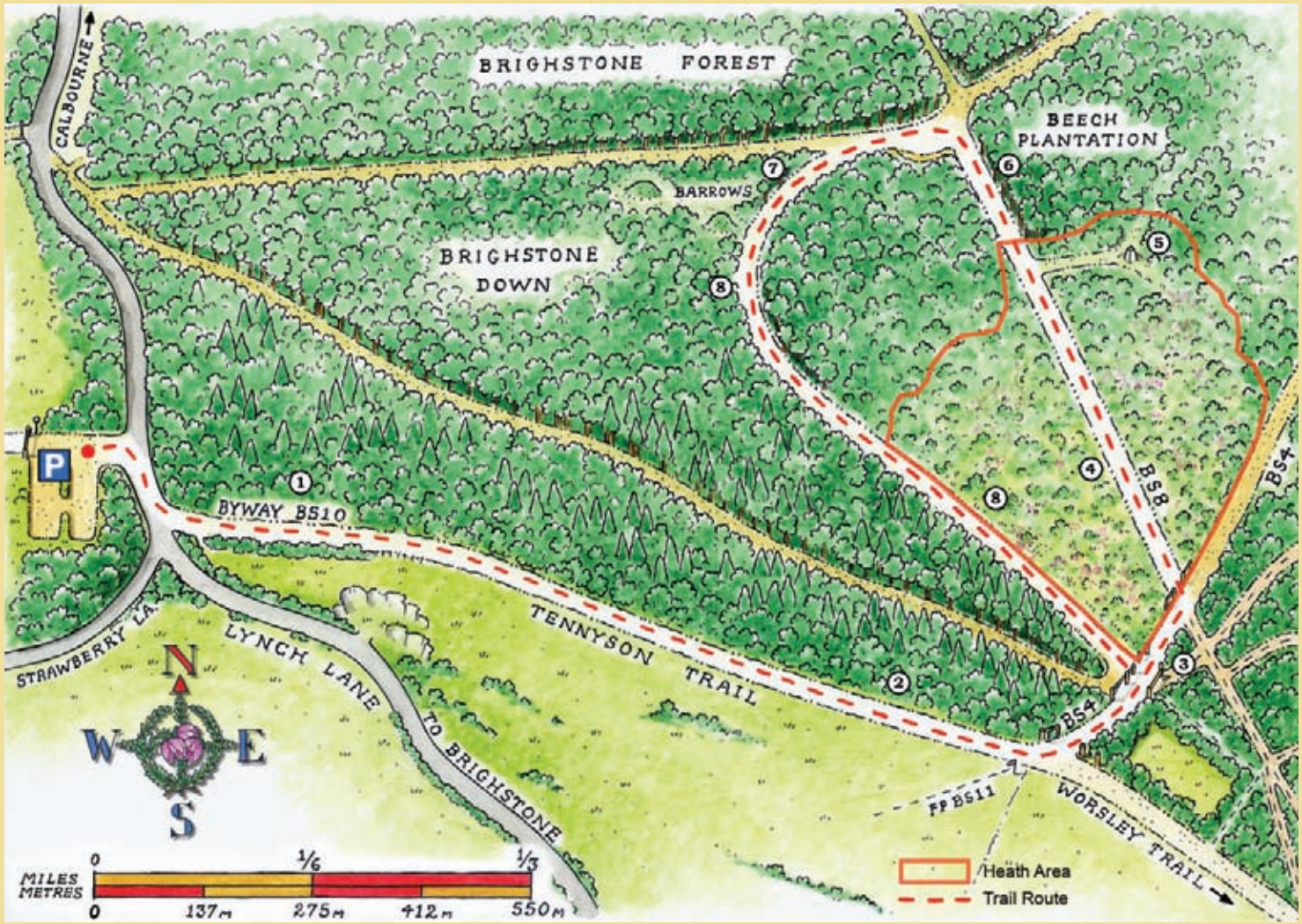
Ningwood Common will be managed by mowing and grazing (so you may see some electric fencing on the site) to keep the heathland open for the important species it supports. Some scrub will be kept for nesting nightingales and the woodland will continue to be managed for red squirrels and dormice. Seasonal restrictions to access may apply to some parts to protect ground-nesting birds such as nightjar. Bouldnor heath will also be managed by mowing and perhaps grazing too. The Bouldnor Battery will remain in its context and open views across the heathland will also be managed. Seasonal restrictions may be imposed to allow ground-nesting birds to thrive and electric fencing may be employed to enable grazing.

Brighstone heath will be managed by mowing or grazing to maintain the mosaic of scrub and heathland habitats. Again seasonal restrictions may be in place to allow ground-nesting birds to thrive but in the main access will be encouraged on footpaths and bridleways through the site, including the popular Tennyson Trail. Scrub will be actively managed to help nesting birds such as the rare Dartford warbler. Both Bouldnor and Brighstone habitats will connect with the wider landscape beyond via a network of forest roads and rides. The ongoing sustainable forest management on Forestry Commission managed land will ensure that these corridors provide stepping-stones across the forest for the wildlife of both the heath and woodland.





Route two - Brighstone Heath Trail







Brighstone view southwest



Brighstone Heather on clay-gravel



Sycamore Plantation



New Heather on part of cleared heath

### 1. From the carpark carefully cross the road and follow the BS10 Byway up the chalky track.

When looking out over the Channel and the Island's Heritage Coast you are also viewing the main breeding grounds for the rare glanville fritillary butterfly, which in good years may spread even as far as Brighstone Down. This coast is a fossil-hunter's dream, where it is possible to discover everything from dinosaur footprints to complete skeletons. Brighstone heathland is a clay and gravel cap upon the chalk downland. There are a number of interesting chalk species such as marjoram along the verges of this first part of the walk.

2. As you ascend the Tennyson Trail the flora changes from the chalk species to clay cap plants; glimpses of the plantation woodland can be seen in the form of sycamore and sweet chestnut. **Look down to the right over Brighstone Village (named Weristestone in the Domesday Book).** This stretch of coast has a colourful history of smuggling and Grange Chine was home to Brighstone Lifeboat Station where local volunteers saved 433 lives until it was disbanded in 1915.

### 3. Take a left onto the BS4, heading into Brighstone Forest.

The forest lies within the Isle of Wight Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and is an ancient site rich in wildlife and in buried archaeology. The earthworks in Brighstone Forest are considered to be the best preserved remains of a prehistoric field system on the Island. At this junction in the path there is a large reservoir dug into the ground beneath you; this is one of many set into the downland spine of the island designed to capture and store water for public supply from the chalk aquifer but no longer in active use.

### 4. Head left onto the BS8, you are now entering the heathland.

The forest here was levelled by fire in 1997 and it was decided to leave the land to restore to open heath and to extend this gradually by selective thinning of the surrounding woodland. The Forestry Commission's vision is to gradually increase the restoration project and bring back populations of the key species that would once have been found on Brighstone's heathland. As you walk this path you'll see the dark purples of bell heather and the paler pinks of ling growing together amongst the gorse.



Brighstone Triangulation Point



Brighstone earth-bank - great for bees!



Red Squirrel



Rosebay Willowherb

**5. There is a short diversion through the heather here to the triangulation point — perhaps a good spot for a picnic!**

The white pillar is one of a national network of such points which were used by the Ordnance Survey in order to determine the exact shape of the country. They are generally located on the highest ground in an area so that there is a direct line of sight from one to the next. By siting a theodolite (an accurate compass built into a telescope) on the top of the pillar, accurate bearings to other nearby trigpoints could be taken, a process called "triangulation".

**6. Back to the main path now and down into the beech plantation.**

The trees have been thinned to allow light into the forest floor but beech still casts a dense shade — especially good for fungi in the autumn! Look out here for woodpeckers and warblers. In the autumn and winter the beech mast is important for red squirrels and also for seed-eating birds such as bramblings.

**7. Keep left and follow the wide forestry track.**

This will take you through the Brighstone woodland and back to the heath and the junction with BS4. There is a clay bank near the start which is often colonized by mining bees which will be feeding on the rich flora along the path verges here and on the heather up on the heath. There is a spectacular display of the tall pink rosebay willowherb in the summer.

**8.** Over 4000 years ago, this part of the Island was downland and was used by our Bronze Age ancestors as a ceremonial landscape which included burial mounds. Many of these mounds (called barrows) survive today and can be seen along the route of the walk, including this particular spot where there is a group of six which form part of an ancient cemetery to the east of Calbourne Bottom.



# Key Species

## Nightjar

These extraordinary birds arrive on the Island from Africa in May and set up territories in clearings on the heath. If you are lucky enough to see one its long wings and tail might remind you of a kestrel or perhaps a cuckoo, but more likely it will be the sound of their remarkable song as night falls that will tell you that they are about.

The sound is a rapid and continuous churring that rises and falls in pitch and volume as the singing males turn their heads. Perhaps because of their strangeness nightjars have always had a rather sinister reputation in country folklore (in German their name means 'death bird') from evil omens to stealing goats' milk in the night!

Nightjars are largely nocturnal, becoming active at dusk and searching out large moths and beetles on the wing and they time their migration and nesting to coincide with the summer peak of these insects. By September most will have left on their long journey south again.





### Dartford Warbler

Named after the town where it was first found in Britain (in 1787) this rare little bird can sometimes be seen sitting on top of the gorse and heather or flitting between bushes on the heath. Unlike many warblers it is resident in the UK year round (oddly it is more common in southern Europe and the Mediterranean). This makes it vulnerable to hard winters when cold and the lack of insect food can prove devastating. The exceptional snow here on the Island over the winter of 2009/2010 may have reduced numbers but with careful management of the heathland habitat we can do our best to create the right conditions for the species' rapid recovery.

### Reddish Buff Moth

This very rare and specially protected moth is probably now found nowhere else in the UK but on the Isle of Wight and even here it is restricted to just the heathland at Cranmore. The nocturnal adult moths will fly looking for nectar from any night-flowering plant but the caterpillars are much more choosy and feed only on saw-wort, a prickly-less thistle that grows in the cleared parts of the heath. The work that the Wildlife Trust is doing to extend open areas for the foodplant is already showing good results in increasing the numbers of moths and of course in providing new habitats for many other heathland insect species at the same time.



## Dodder

Dodder is an extraordinary heathland parasite. It has no leaves and no chlorophyll (and so no green colour) and cannot make its own food. Instead it attaches itself to a host plant, often heather or gorse, by suckers called haustoria which invade the host tissues and absorb enough food and water to sustain it. Interestingly although dodder grows at first from seed once it has attached itself to its host the basal part shrivels and breaks leaving the whole tangle of red strands completely unconnected to the ground.

As dodder grows larger it will spread from the original host plant and reach out to cover others nearby so that a single dodder plant might end up parasitizing several hosts all at the same time.

The tiny flowers sprout from the stems in clusters and produce seeds that fall to ground nearby where they may lie dormant for years before germinating. Other names for dodder include the very descriptive strangeweed and hellbine.



# Partnership Working

The West Wight Heathland Restoration project has been a partnership between the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust, the Forestry Commission, the West Wight Landscape Partnership and the National Trust with help and support from the Heritage Lottery Fund. This partnership has overseen the restoration of 30 ha of heathland in the West Wight, a fifty percent increase on this rare biodiversity habitat on the Isle of Wight. The sites will continue to be monitored and managed for the species and habitats that have been restored for future generations to enjoy and be inspired by.

image: restoration at Ningwood Common



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