

Sandy Badlands.

Andy Harris, the Trust's Northern Reserves Officer, gave a talk at our February 2023 meeting about the Trust's heathland reserves.

For centuries, our sandy heathlands have been dismissed as wasteland, their poor soils were of little agricultural value, and they were feared as the haunt of highwaymen and bands of robbers. Today, their value in the environment and their unique wildlife is seen as something to be treasured. Andy Harris, the Trust's Northern Reserves Officer explained how the Trust was helping to reverse the decline in the county's heathland. In Worcestershire, 90% of our heathland has been lost to development, or simply left to revert to woodland. Andy described a 10-year management and restitution project that is being carried out on the Devil's Spittleful and Rifle Range reserves, where scrubby woodland is being cleared, the heath is being grazed by cattle and sheep to prevent unwanted new growth, and traditional heathland plants: bell heather, broom and silver birch, are being replanted providing a mosaic of habitats that thrive on acid soil. Recently, the experimental movement of soil from other heathland areas to the reserve has seen the rapid new growth of heathland species. Recently extended by the purchase of Dropping Well Farm, the reserve accounts for the largest area of heathland in the County. Once common birds such as skylarks, yellowhammers, woodlarks, tree pipits, cuckoos and the increasingly rare nightjar have been seen, together with common lizards and great crested newts, and more than 20 species of butterflies. The reserve is great for bees, wasps and ants that burrow in the sandy soil. Particularly notable species are: the black mining bee *Andrena nigrospina*, a colony of *Lasius fuliginosus* ants and the hornet robber fly *Asilus crabroniformis*. The reserve is also a paradise for fungi enthusiasts, with over 140 species including pine wood mushroom, oyster mushroom and liberty cap.

Spittleful About the reserve

This impressive heathland is one of the largest areas of the habitat left in Worcestershire; it's estimated that we've lost approximately 90% of heathland in the county over the last 200 years.

Visitors walk through a mosaic of habitats that thrive on acid soil; open areas are dominated by bell heather and acid grassland is dominated by wavy hair grass.

Heaths were traditionally managed to provide grazing for livestock and many useful materials such as bracken for bedding, birch for brooms, kindling and firewood. When farming practices changed, heathlands were generally abandoned as they are not productive by modern farming standards. Since the 1950s this site gradually became dominated by scrub and young trees. We are reversing this and now graze the site and manage the scrub and tree cover. Grazing helps the regular management of gorse, broom and silver birch. This provides different ages of plant, which is great for supporting a diverse group of wildlife whilst allowing the heathland to improve and expand.

The heather is at its best in late July and August but there are many other plants to discover - heath dog violet, early forget-me-not and small cudweed are in flower from June to September. Grey hair grass and buck's-horn plantain are also found on the reserve; they're normally associated with coastal regions.

The combination of heathland, grassland, scrub and trees is perfect for invertebrates. 20 species of butterflies can be spotted – from pearl-bordered and silver-washed fritillaries to purple hairstreaks. More than 160 species of moth have also been recorded here included barred tooth striped, grass wave, orange underwing and fox moth. The reserve is great for bees and wasps and is known for three important species: the black mining bee *Andrena nigrospina*, a colony of *Lasius fuliginosus* ants and the hornet robber fly *Asilus crabroniformis*. The reserve is also great for fungi, with over 140 species including pine wood mushroom, oyster mushroom and liberty cap. Visitors should keep a look out for redstart, tree pipit, cuckoo, wood warbler, lesser whitethroat, green woodpecker and sparrowhawk.

The reserve gets its name from the rocky sandstone knoll crowned with Scots pine. It is known as The Devil's Spittleful or Spadefull; a 'spit' was a spade's depth and the area is thought to have got its name from a digging Diablo. The cave beneath the rock has become unstable and is now no longer safe to view.

We bought the neighbouring Blackstone Farm Fields in 2007 and are gradually returning them to heathland. It's a long process but as heathland-loving plants thrive in poor quality soil, we've begun by reducing nutrient levels. The adjacent Rifle Range and Burlish Top nature reserves are owned and managed by Wyre Forest District Council.

Bigger, better and more joined up

We believe that a landscape-scale approach to wildlife conservation is essential. Wildlife needs space to adapt and move to cope with the consequences of climate change. Practically, this means that we need our countryside to be bigger, better and

more joined up to provide a coherent network of large areas linked by corridors that can provide benefits for people as well as for biodiversity.

This is an important heathland site with extensive restoration and creation taking place and is an ideal place where we can share our experiences of the long-term management of heathland and its creation and management of associated nationally important flora and invertebrates. The reserves fall within the Wyre Forest Heathlands identified as one seven priorities in Worcestershire for its Living Landscapes approach.

Why is it like this?

Lowland heathland is defined by the poor fertility of its soils, which discourages other plants, and a long history of human management. Nutrients gradually accumulate allowing larger, more vigorous plants to become established at the expense of smaller, less competitive species. This results in heathland eventually developing into birch or pine woodland if left to its own devices. Traditional heathland activities such as livestock grazing and burning have played a vital role in allowing heathland to persist over the centuries.

Dropping Well Farm sits in the middle of our own The Devil's Spittleful and Blackstone Farm Fields nature reserves and Wyre Forest District Council's Rifle Range and Burlish Top nature reserves. Saving this block of land would enable us to connect over 300 acres of wonderful heathland habitat (600 acres of mixed habitat altogether).

Our long-term vision is to restore what is currently farmland at Dropping Well and give wildlife a tremendous boost. From pantaloon bees and hornet robberflies to common lizards and yellowhammers, this is a once in a generation opportunity to make a huge difference for our wildlife.

The purchase of Dropping Well Farm will help to achieve #30by30 - 30% of the UK's land and seas managed for wildlife by 2030.

The nature reserves that surround Dropping Well Farm have been studied for many years and are renowned for their biological interest and importance for rare wildlife species. The purchase and restoration of the site will significantly extend and strengthen this habitat, thus allowing species to move around the landscape and increase in numbers.