

Spring awakens at Wealden Heaths National Nature Reserve

20.3.2026 - | Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs

Part of the King's Series, establishing 25 new National Nature Reserves by 2028. Surrey's National Nature Reserve home to rare ground-nesting birds this spring

Visitors to the Wealden Heaths National Nature Reserve (NNR) can enjoy a spectacular spring this year, but are being asked to take simple steps to protect rare ground-nesting birds and other sensitive heathland wildlife.

Species including nightjars, woodlarks, and Dartford warblers nest directly on the ground, often within a few steps of well-used paths. Walkers are asked to stay on marked paths and keep dogs on leads throughout the nesting season from March to September to avoid disturbing hidden nests.

Disturbance doesn't just affect birds, other rare heathland species such as natterjack toads, adders and sand lizards can also be harmed when people or dogs stray off the paths.

The Wealden Heaths NNR covers 2,760 hectares across the Surrey and Hampshire border. This is around 3 times the size of Richmond Park. The reserve supports some of England's scarcest wildlife, including silver-studded blue butterflies.

Spring brings vivid yellow gorse across the heathland. Visitors are encouraged to soak up the sunshine, listen to birdsong, and observe the landscape's slow, natural changes.

Stephen Rudd, principal manager for Natural England, said:

The King's Series National Nature Reserves are about celebrating the very best of England's nature, and the Wealden Heaths is a shining example of that.

As we enter ground nesting bird season, this milestone is a timely reminder of how special and how fragile this landscape is. Small actions from all of us can make a huge difference.

England's lowland heathland has declined by around 80 per cent over the last two centuries. Protecting what remains is a deliberate policy choice, and Wealden Heaths NNR represents one of the most significant commitments to that goal.

James Herd, director of reserves management at Surrey Wildlife Trust, said:

Given the increasing pressures faced by the natural world, the creation of Wealden Heaths National Nature Reserve is a much-needed piece of good news for wildlife, as well as providing a vital place of recreation and pride for local people.

As springtime brings more people out to enjoy nature, we all have a part to play in keeping heathland sites in good condition for nature and for other people. Ground-nesting birds like nightjars and woodlark are sensitive to disturbance, so please keep dogs on a lead.

Rob Fairbanks, director of Surrey Hills National Landscape, said:

We need nature to recover. The King's Series of National Nature Reserves like the Wealden Heaths in the Surrey Hills and Seven Sisters on the South Downs is the place where we put nature first.

As we look ahead to summer, it's important that we minimise fire-risks on the heathland. The public are advised to leave their barbeque at home, pick up any litter, and dispose of smoking equipment responsibly.

The reserve is cared for by a partnership of nine organisations: Natural England, RSPB, National Trust, Surrey Wildlife Trust, Hampton Estate, Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust, Waverley Borough Council, Surrey County Council and Forestry England, with support from Surrey Hills National Landscape.

Wealden Heaths was designated a National Nature Reserve in 2024, as part of the King's Series created to mark the Coronation of His Majesty King Charles III. The programme is establishing 25 new or expanded NNRs across England by 2028, with more than half now declared.

The King's Series of National Nature Reserves reached a significant halfway milestone yesterday (Thursday 19 March), with His Majesty King Charles III himself launching the new Seven Sisters NNR, which covers the chalk cliffs of Sussex and the unique downland habitat behind them, becoming the 13th of the 25 sites to receive the King's endorsement.

The King's Series now cover an area of 17,000 hectares or 65 square miles, equivalent to twice the size of the city of Brighton and Hove. Around 1.4 million people live within 5km of a King's Series NNR, and can experience the benefits they bring for health, wellbeing, education, and the local economy to communities around the country.

Background:

- Wealden Heaths was the ninth Natural Nature Reserve to be declared on 27 June 2025 - Home of 'Devil's Punch Bowl' to become new National Nature Reserve - GOV.UK
- Spokespeople from Natural England, Surrey Wildlife Trust, Surrey Hills Natural Landscape and Amphibian and Reptile Conservation are available for interview.
- More photos available on request.

Contact us:

Journalists only: Environment Agency and Natural England press office: 0800 141 2743 and communications_se@environment-agency.gov.uk.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/spring-awakens-at-wealden-heaths-national-nature-reserve>