



Thanks to Mark Leitch and Jon Mullins for these photos

The miracle of Spring is upon us, with new life, light, colour and Ground Nesting Birds, or GNB for short. Not to be confused with LBJs, all those Little Brown Jobs that we can't identify! The perky Dartford warblers favour heather covered areas where you can also see Stonechats. They will have passed the winter here amongst the heather and gorse, where they can find food and shelter. Listen carefully for their scratchy song. The woodlark is a quiet, secretive bird with a trilling song and can be heard on Grasslands, where the short heather creates the ideal habitat. The Nightjar will travel around 3,000 miles from West Africa to spend the summer months from May to early September on the heathlands, camouflaged during the day as their plumage blends into the background of lichen-covered branches, but easily heard at dusk when they start their churring call. All of these rare birds are ground nesting and vulnerable to curious dogs.

**Help us to protect these rare birds by staying on the paths
and keeping your dog under control on the paths.**

Caroline Hughes (Editor)

Rae's Field

Rae's Field Community Green Hub

Rae's Field Community Green Hub is a newly created community space within the Horsell Common estate. Set within a previously disused field owned by HCPS, the site now features a renovated barn and surrounding green space designed to support the wellbeing of the local community.

Rae's Field

Surrey, June 2025

What began as a **disused barn and green space** within the Horsell Common estate, is now a **welcoming community hub that supports wellbeing, learning and connection.**

Thanks to a **collaborative effort** between local partners, funders, young people and team VIY, the area has undergone a **complete transformation.**



What We Did

- Fully insulated & boarded barn
- New windows & insulated doors
- Interior & exterior painting
- Guttering & drainage installed
- Outdoor firepit & seating with reclaimed wood



Impact

- The project has created a space where **local people can meet, learn, and support each other.**



Young People

- 18 young learners** from Surrey Alternative Provisions, PRUs and local referrals gained hands-on work experience and qualifications through this project.
- 15 City & Guilds** accreditations achieved

Community Effort

- 13 adult volunteers** supported the build, including Dulux employees and local community members



We help young people learn trade skills whilst renovating community spaces.



See how we do #SomethingConstructive for **Youth | Community | Volunteering** and how you could get involved via the QR code

The project reflects HCPS's charitable commitment to promoting health, wellbeing, and connection with nature. Alongside providing a welcoming outdoor environment, there are ongoing opportunities to enhance biodiversity across the site through the planting of native trees and hedgerows, as well as the installation of bird and bat boxes and other wildlife habitats.

The development of Rae's Field has been a collaborative effort between HCPS and Surrey County Council's Green Health & Wellbeing programme. Working with programme manager Jack Smith, the aim has been to create a space that local charities and community groups can use for activities that benefit from the positive impact of time spent in nature.

A key milestone came in summer 2025, when the barn was renovated in partnership with Volunteer It Yourself (VIY), an organisation that supports young people not currently in employment, education, or training. Through this partnership, 13 young adults gained at least one City & Guilds vocational qualification while working alongside professional tradespeople, providing valuable skills and experience.

In March, the Surrey Choices Growth team planted crab apple and rowan trees, with Jeremy to help. These trees are particularly good for wild life, with their blossom in spring and fruit or berries in autumn.

The long-term success of Rae's Field will depend on continued involvement from local charities and community groups.



Encouragingly, the project has already generated strong interest, and we look forward to working with a wide range of organisations in the years ahead to ensure the hub becomes a vibrant and valuable resource for the local community.

Jeremy Dalton

Volunteers are helping with Rae's field

Now that the ground nesting bird season is upon us, our Tuesday volunteers have switched from Winter clearance work on the heaths to other tasks including removal of invasive species from our woodlands, ponds and waterways.

To mark this switch, they recently planted over 1500 native tree saplings alongside a track leading to the hut in Rae's Field. The saplings will grow to form a wildlife-supporting hedge separating the track from the rest of the field. We plan to plant more saplings in random clumps around the edge of the field, creating greater variation in the woodland edge to

provide more cover and habitat for wildlife.

As the estate manager mentions in greater detail in his report, the hut will be used to host wellbeing workshops for local charities. The Volunteers did an amazing job in March, taking out barbed wire and rotting wooden fencing around the perimeter of Rae's field. This will be followed by further hedge planting.



Twenty Volunteers do a huge amount of work every week



Planting whips in Rae's field ,..

Above: Regular Volunteers

Right: John Morley and Melisa Kuipers



Common Volunteers

There's nothing common about Common volunteers. After 10 years of Tuesday morning working parties, some of the faces are still the same. Maybe a few streaks of silver around the temples or extra wrinkles, but still cheerful and hardworking.

Jim Thelton is a regular Tuesday volunteer:



"I started volunteering on Horsell Common after groups were allowed to meet at the end of Covid. Prior to that, I volunteered on the Basingstoke Canal. The weekly booking in system is efficient and easy to access.

I use the Common daily for dog walking and occasional litter picking as I walk around. I enjoy volunteering because you get to discover different areas which are managed and maintained by HCPS. Removing silver birch and Scots pine gives the heather a chance to survive and flourish. We plant young hedging plants (whips) to replace bushes for birds to roost and nest. The team has sourced and installed bird and bat nesting boxes to encourage different species.

The work is varied and interesting, and I enjoy the company of other volunteers. The group makes sure no one is ignored especially when there is cake on offer, made by Jan."



Every Tuesday morning, there is a fantastic atmosphere of camaraderie, easy chat and laughter! The atmosphere becomes exceptionally jovial when Jan's cakes are shared round at coffee time. Thank you, Jan, for fuelling the hungry volunteers. Would they come if there was no cake?



As well as thanking Jim and all the other volunteers, we must also thank Rupert, the Senior Ranger, who organises the volunteer sessions. Rupert plans meticulously, making sure that he loads the right tools, gloves and biscuits.

After a cheerful welcome, he gives clear instructions about the work, with interesting facts about the Common and its wildlife, and why any particular job is important. At the end of every session, there is a great sense of satisfaction, not least because Rupert sends "before and after" photos of what has been achieved during the morning.



None of this would be possible without the "Common Team", Jeremy, Estate Manager, Rupert, Senior Ranger and George, a long serving part time assistant. Thank you to them for "managing and enhancing our heathland and woodlands for now and the future".

Restoring Lowland Heath

The Benefits of Gorse Management

In early 2026, work was done on Horsell Birch and Warren Pond to remove overgrown gorse and willow. This has helped restore the character and ecological health of this section of common. While gorse is a natural and valuable component of heathland habitats, it can become overly dense if left unmanaged for long periods. This can overshadow other heathland plants and limit the diversity of wildlife that the habitat can support.

Carefully reducing the extent of dense gorse has opened up pathways across the Common, making the area easier to access and enjoy. Visitors can now move more freely through the landscape and benefit from views revealed across the heath.



The work also plays an important role in improving fire resilience. Large, dense stands of gorse can create a significant build-up of combustible material, increasing what is known as “fuel loading.” Tall, woody gorse can also act as a ladder fuel, allowing fire to spread rapidly

from ground vegetation into taller scrub. By reducing these dense areas, the risk and potential intensity of wildfires can be lowered.

Contractors also removed gorse from Grasslands, creating the ideal habitat for the woodlark and the Silver-Studded Blue butterfly. Both these species thrive in areas of short heather. Without intervention, fast growing gorse would soon outcompete the heather.



Gorse is also reestablishing on the Wheatsheaf Common, following the work to create the Wheatsheaf lakes. Volunteers have been uprooting the bushes which are still quite small, so that the hundreds of whips planted over the last two years will have a better chance of survival. It is important for wild life in general to ensure that there is diversity.

Restoring Car Parks and Footpaths

Horsell Common Preservation Society carries out a careful programme of work for both recreation and conservation. As so many visitors come by car, this means that car parks and footpaths need to be in good condition. In March, Jeremy, Rupert and George spent a day resurfacing Shores Road car park.



Wet winters make footpaths very muddy. One footpath in particular has been very muddy and rutted because it is heavily used by horses and people.

In November, a new footbridge and hardcore path were laid where Grasslands exits towards Horsell Common Road.

Wildlife Surveys

We have already started surveying for reptiles this year and were pleasantly surprised to see a slow worm recently, despite overcast and blustery conditions.



One of my regular Sunday volunteers, Rebecca Thomson, has kindly offered to help me. Two sets of hands are definitely easier than one when you're trying to identify species, take photos, and write down results all at the same time! I am very grateful to Rebecca for assisting me.

We will also start surveying for butterflies again in April. Our trusty little group of experts will walk our two transect routes every week through to the end of September, providing us with more data we can use to check if our habitat management efforts are on the right track.

There have been sightings of the rare Silver-Studded Blue butterfly throughout the Common, but it will be interesting to see if their numbers climb even further this year, given recent mowing and clearance work undertaken to help



their populations link up.

Brimstones have already been seen this year, hopefully soon to be followed by Peacocks, Orange Tips and Commas as the days get longer and sunnier.

Working together

We recently teamed-up again with the Thames Basin Heaths Partnership to host a session for local charity LinkAble which provides support to people with learning disabilities and autism. On their last visit, they carried out practical scrub clearance on the Bedser Trail. This time, they were hoping to spot some of the rare insects and birds that would have benefitted from their work. It's a big thank you to Michael Jones, Education & Engagement Officer for Natural England, for organising this session and choosing Horsell Common to host it, a great example of partnership work in action for the benefit of the local community!

Nestbox Project

In 2025 our tree-surgery contractor installed three of the nest boxes made for us by the Woking branch of the Men's Sheds charity.

Now that the ground is starting to dry up, they can once again get in position with a cherry-picker to install the rest. We still have three barn owl, three little owl, and two kestrel nest boxes to install.



Birds, Bees and Blossom

Insect Survey on Wheatsheaf Common

Last year I did an insect recording survey of Wheatsheaf Common to check the population after the extensive remodelling of the area. I also did a survey in 2022, and I have made a comparison of the two years. As might be expected, the increase in the number of ponds and the associated vegetation has enabled a wider range of insects to make the Common their home. The 2022 list probably underplays the number of species because for much of that year, the site was largely stripped bare of vegetation and not accessible.

The most notable find in 2025 was young pine trees encrusted with silk webbing and ginger brown excrement pellets produced by larvae of the hieroglyph sawfly, *Acantholyda hieroglyphica*. This was new to Britain in 2024 when it was first found in Bedfordshire. The Wheatsheaf Common discovery is a first for Surrey. Similarly infested pine trees have subsequently been found in the Sand Pit and other parts of Horsell Common. This insect seems to have a preference for small pine trees that are growing in sparsely vegetated places, so Wheatsheaf Common is currently providing the ideal habitat.

Andrew Halstead

Andrew has been a Trustee for Horsell Common Preservation Society for so many years that he has lost count. He leads the Estate Management sub-committee of trustees, joins the weekly Tuesday morning working parties and leads insect walks during Thames Basin Heaths week. He can often be seen in the summer months with a sweep net as he carries out surveys on insects. He has a truly encyclopaedic knowledge of insects and has listed more than 200 on Common land. He worked as an entomologist for RHS for many years.

What is that bird?

As we start to enjoy warmer weather, one of the real delights is the onset of spring bird song. While a few species can be heard all year round, more and more join in as we move through February and March. By April the spring migrants are arriving, and soon the full dawn chorus will be heard.

Just hearing birds brings pleasure to many people, but in time recognising the different songs and the individual variations can enrich the experience enormously.

If you would like to start learning bird songs, we are now lucky to have an excellent free phone app from Cornell University called Merlin Bird ID. This app can be used to help ID a particular song you are listening to, or it can draw your attention to a bird you might not have picked up on. In addition, being aware of the song can make it easier to spot the bird itself.

Overall, Merlin is a very useful aid for learning and appreciating birds, and many serious bird watchers now use it. However, a couple of things to remember:

Although Merlin is extremely good, occasionally it can be wrong, especially for less common species. Setting the correct region for your own location in the app's menu can help.

Most importantly, beware of the trap of spending your walk staring at your phone and using Merlin as a substitute for actually hearing the different birds. Instead, try to spend time actively listening, appreciate the beauty of the songs, and aim to use the app as a learning aid. You might find you have opened up a whole new dimension to a spring walk.

Margo Scott

Can you spot our heathland birds?

Though the heather hasn't yet bloomed, the spring weather is a wonderful trigger for these rare birds to look for mates and begin their breeding cycle once again. Though you may have spotted resident Dartford Warblers over winter, they are certainly chattier at this time of the year and their flitting across the open heath becomes more apparent.

Woodlarks may well be on their first brood by now, after choosing an area of bare ground or short grass to nest. The early spring warmth and sunshine has given them a real boost to get breeding this year!

Ground-nesting birds can be elusive, tricking visitors into believing they're not actually there. But fear not, a specialist team surveys these birds annually and reports on breeding success.

Breeding success is affected by a variety of natural factors including weather and predation. But these birds are also negatively affected by recreational disturbance,

particularly by dogs. Which is why we keep the message simple, keep **#PawsOnPathsPlease**.

This kind of advice may appear out of the ordinary, but lowland heath is no ordinary habitat. In fact, it forms part of the Special Protection Area purely for that reason – it is special. If you should bump into one of our wardens on your local heath, they'll be happy to explain why.

*Nicola Buckland, Communications Officer
Thames Basin Heaths Partnership*



What is this flower?

Could it be Cherry Plum (*Prunus cerasifera*) or is it Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*). Whatever it is, these clouds of delicate white blossoms have been decorating our hedgerows since February. Don't miss the Mimbridge meadows near the main Chobham road, where there is a long hedgerow of er... blackthorn? Look carefully and there are thorns and this species flowers later than cherry plum. Maybe we should check in autumn when there will be sloes on the blackthorn and small round orange "plums" on the cherry plum. Or to make flower identification easier, use the "Seek" App by iNaturalist. As we approach summer, the meadows and McLaren park have hundreds of wild flowers to spot!



Commercial Dog-walking

From 1st April 2026, commercial dog walkers will again need a licence in order to operate their business on land owned by the society. We have installed notices across our land holding reminding people to apply in time for the start of the 2026-27 licensing period.

Having this scheme helps to maintain a high standard of commercial dog walking on the Common, safeguarding the rare wildlife we have a duty to protect by minimising potential damage to the natural environment.



Mimbridge Meadows in March when the blackthorn is in full bloom.

Then and Now

Restoration of the Muslim Burial Ground

Driving along Monument Road in the 70's and 80's, you might have peered through the tall Scots Pines and spotted a domed roof and dilapidated brick walls overgrown with silver birch. It was very mysterious and local children walked nearby fearful of the ghosts and spirits.



This was the Muslim Military Cemetery that was established in 1917. The site, created on Common land purchased from the Earl of Onslow, was intended for soldiers who died from wounds or illness in temporary army hospitals on the South Coast. Nineteen Muslim soldiers from the First World War and a further eight from



the Second World War were laid to rest there.

Responsibility for the graves passed to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in 1921. However, repeated vandalism led the CWGC to re-inter the bodies in Brookwood Military Cemetery in 1969. The site became increasingly overgrown and damaged.

It was recognised by English Heritage as a Grade II listed structure in 1984 and in the 1990s, HCPS cleared vegetation and stabilised the walls and eventually, in 2011, received funding for restoration work from English Heritage, Woking Borough Council and other organisations.

A decision was made to create a memorial garden, centred on an Indian granite memorial stone inlaid with Portland stone panels engraved with the names of the original burials. The site was officially opened November 12, 2015. There was great collaboration amongst various groups, especially the Muslim community via the Shah Jahan Mosque, Woking Borough Council and Horsell Common Preservation Society.

The photographs tell the story, showing the overgrown state of the burial ground to its wonderful restoration and aptly renamed "Peace Garden". This is the final location of the new circular waymarked walk. It is a most beautiful, peaceful and restorative garden.



2015 Newly restored Peace Garden



2025 Peace Garden reaching maturity.

Surrey Uncommon

Discover the “Uncommon” side of Surrey

Have you ever wondered what goes on across our wild landscapes when the sun goes down, or why exactly those shaggy conservation cows are so important?

If you're a regular on Horsell Common, you'll know that our heathland is far from “common”—it is a rare, globally precious habitat that is actually rarer than tropical rainforest.

To celebrate this unique landscape, we are thrilled to spotlight a fantastic new YouTube video series that brings our local ecology to life: [Surrey Uncommon](#)

What is Surrey Uncommon

Produced by the creative team at local video production company DreamingFish, Surrey Uncommon is a monthly video series dedicated to the hidden stories of the Surrey Heathlands. The series was born out of a desire to show—not just tell—why these habitats are so special and why they deserve every bit of our protection. From the eerie “churr” of the nocturnal Nightjar, to the fascinating “Aliens on the Common” (check out Episode 4!) and the colourful fungi that burst from the ground in the autumn (see Episode 1!), the series offers a front-row seat to the wildlife that makes Horsell Common and the Surrey heathlands its home. In the series we meet experts and amateurs alike, as well as take a look at what you can see on and around the Surrey heathlands each month.

Why Watch?

Whether you are a lifelong naturalist or a weekend dog walker, these episodes offer a fresh perspective on the ground beneath your feet:

- ◆ The rare & the remarkable: Learn why our local patches of Surrey are among the few places in the UK where you can find specialists like the adder or the Dartford warbler.
- ◆ Meet the engineers: In Episode 3, the series dives into the world of conservation grazing and beavers, explaining how these “ecosystem engineers” manage the land far better, quicker, and cheaper, than people.

- ◆ Protection through understanding: The series explores the delicate balance of our heathlands. By understanding how easily these habitats can be damaged—and how resilient they are when managed well—we can all become better guardians of our Commons.



What's next?

As we enter Spring for the first time in the series, we'll be doing dawn walks to see and hear the birds, as well as capture the reptiles, amphibians and other animals as they wake up and arrive from Africa.

How to Join the Journey

The Surrey Uncommon series is a celebration of the wild spaces we are so lucky to have on our doorstep. By watching and sharing, you're helping to spread the word that our heathlands are a national treasure, and why we should all work hard to protect them.

Search for @surreyuncommon on YouTube (and don't forget to like and subscribe!!)

You should be able to get all the episodes at :

<https://www.youtube.com/@SurreyUncommon>

Phil Miller

Date for your diary

HCPS AGM Friday 9th October in
Horsell Village Hall at 7:30pm

Walking on the Common

Discover Horsell Common with Guided Walks

Walks guided by HCPS: please book in advance with Caroline Hughes, caroline.hughes@horsellcommon.org.uk

Events organised by Thames Basin Heaths Partnership TBHP: check their website <https://tbhpartnership.org.uk> for all details.

Circular Walk Bedser Trail, Sandpit, Peace Garden with Caroline HCPS	Friday 17 th April 10am start Distance 2.4 miles
Habitat management to benefit wildlife with Senior Ranger, Rupert HCPS	Thursday 23 rd April 10am-12pm Distance 2 miles
Dawn Chorus walk with Simon Lumsden HCPS	Thursday 7 th May 5.30 to 7.30am Distance 3 miles
Bat and Moth dusk walk with TBHP wardens	Thursday 7 th May
Nightjar evening walk with TBHP wardens	June Date to be arranged
Circular walk Heather farm to McLaren Park with Caroline HCPS	Thursday 18 th June 1 to 2.30pm Distance 4miles
Thames Basin Heaths week	27 th July to 31 st , July
Discover insects with Andrew Halstead TBHP	Wednesday 29 th July, 10am to 2pm each hour
Circular walk Heather farm to McLaren Park with Caroline HCPS	Wednesday 5 th August 10am
Estate Management with Estate Manager, Jeremy Dalton HCPS	Thursday 3 rd September, 10am to 12pm 2miles
Fungi walk with Richard Alder HCPS	October Date to be arranged

Self-guided walks on Horsell Common

Two new interpretation boards have been installed for the “**Waymarked Circular Walk Bedser-Sandpit-Peace Garden**”, at Bedser Trail and Shores Road car parks, showing the route and places of interest.



Details for this walk and also the “**Waymarked Walk Heather Farm to McLaren Park**” can be found here:

<https://horsellcommon.org.uk/walks>

or scan the QR code on the interpretation board at the start of each walk

or simply set off and follow the arrows!

