

Enjoying Greenham and Crookham Common during the bird nesting season

By Katty Baird

Wildlife Haven

Greenham and Crookham Common on the southern edge Newbury forms the largest area of lowland heath in West Berkshire – a fragile and threatened habitat full of very special wildlife – and is particularly important for some of Britain’s rarest ground nesting birds, including nightjar, woodlark and lapwing. It is a fantastic place to enjoy wide open spaces and a ‘sense of freedom’, and has become a very popular place for dog walking and many other outdoor pursuits. The common is owned by West Berkshire Council, who has joined forces with our local wildlife charity, the Berks Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT), to champion and help protect its important natural history. As the nesting season starts, both organisations are working together to balance the needs of the many visitors with that of the vulnerable ground nesting birds.



Greenham Common by Rob Appleby

Disturbance to ground nesting birds



Woodlark by BBOWT

These birds make very well camouflaged nests on the ground, often in quite open areas, and it is easy for visitors to unwittingly stray too close and scare the brooding adult away. This leaves eggs or chicks unprotected and vulnerable to predators or chilling. Birds that are already struggling to survive in our countryside need all the help they can get to successfully raise young and although there are a number of factors that will affect the breeding success, minimising disturbance to the nests is something we can, and therefore should, do to help.

Wardens and walks

This year, funding from GrantScape has enabled three seasonal wardens to be employed during the nesting period (from 1st March – 31st July). They will be out and about every day, on the Common and neighbouring BBOWT reserve of Bowdown Woods, keeping an eye on the nesting birds and chatting with visitors. They will also lead guided walks from the Control Tower car park every Saturday at 10am on which you can learn more about the common and its wildlife. These walks are free, there is no need to book and dogs on a lead are very welcome.



Nightjar by Neil Aldridge

Zoning

For the first time a zoning scheme has been introduced on the common. There are two green zones (one at Pyle Hill (the car park closest to Newbury Retail Park) and the other at Crookham. Here there is unrestricted access for everybody, dogs can be exercised off the lead and there are pools for dogs to splash about in. The areas that are known to contain nesting birds have been clearly signed as red zones: all visitors should keep out of these areas. The rest of the common has been designated amber. Here all visitors are being asked to stay on the paths and dogs must be on short lead. Hopefully this zoning will provide clear information to allow visitors to continue to



Dogs can enjoy off-lead exercise in the green zones.

enjoy the site, whilst at the same time protecting the vulnerable nesting birds from disturbance.

10th Anniversary celebrations

This April marks ten years of Greenham Common being open to the public again, after its use as a military airbase. To celebrate, an exciting anniversary event is taking place on 10th April with guided walks, storytelling, craft demonstrations, children's activities and much more! Many other events run throughout the year, including family wildlife explorer days, birdwatching walks and local history walks. To find out more call the Nature Discovery Centre on 01635 874381 (email naturecentre@westberks.gov.uk), or visit www.bbwt.org.uk.

Tell us what you think!

The impact of the zoning on visitor usage will be monitored throughout the season. In addition, a detailed breeding bird survey is underway, monitoring the numbers of birds nesting and where possible the number of chicks reared. This information will be analysed and reviewed at the end of the summer and will be used to help inform approaches to protecting the ground nesting birds in future years. Feedback is welcome: If you have any questions or suggestions, please have a chat with one of the wardens or contact the ranger, Adrian Wallington on 01635 580792 or awallington@westberks.gov.uk

The common is a fantastic green space and allows local people the opportunity to get away from it all and reconnect with nature. But in order to keep it this way, the wildlife that lives here needs protection. We hope you enjoy your visit and can help us to keep this beautiful area the special place that it is.



Photo: K.Baird