**Wildfires: an increasing peril for Surrey’s wildlife**

Few readers of this newsletter will be surprised to read that wildfires have put Surrey on the front line of the climate and nature emergency.  Recent major outbreaks on Hankley and Chobham Commons and Ash Ranges are high-profile examples of how our internationally-significant heathland is proving more susceptible to the hotter, dryer conditions we’ve all struggled with this summer.  Now, following a massive outbreak that started on Pirbright Ranges July, Surrey Wildlife Trust is urgently asking for donations to help this most precious of heathland habitats, and 200 red deer that help maintain it, recover.

Pirbright Ranges is one of the largest areas of lowland heath in Surrey and home to many rare and threatened species.  Patches of ground continued to burn even five weeks later, and to date well over 650 hectares of pristine heathland has now been severely burnt, at great cost to wildlife.   Hundreds of recently fledged rare ground-nesting birds including European nightjars, Dartford warblers and woodlark - too young to fly away from the fire – will have perished.  The damage to the site will also have prevented their parents from nesting a second time this year and will change the availability of suitable nesting sites for years to come.  Reptiles like slow worms, grass snakes and adders have been unable to escape the fire, perishing alongside the many invertebrate species, including endangered heath tiger beetles that inhabit the last remaining heathland fragments in the southeast of England.

Surrey Wildlife Trust’s herd of red deer carry out a vital role by grazing the heathland – which is owned by the Ministry of Defence and inaccessible to the public - to prevent scrub including Scots pine, common gorse and silver birch from taking over the site.  This allows slower-growing dwarf scrub and specialist heathland plant species to flourish, creating the foundation of the unique and threatened heathland ecosystem.  Following the fire, hundreds of meters of fencing and heavy-duty sleepers that keep the deer safely on site now needs to be replaced – and the ongoing welfare of the highly-stressed herd will depend on regular vet checks and inspections by SWT staff.  Supplementary food in the form of haylage will also be made available to the deer to ensure they have enough food to maintain good condition heading into winter.  The Trust calculates that this work will cost at least £40,000, with further expenses likely to be incurred in the future.

Rising temperatures and a lack of rainfall has led to increasingly large, uncontrollable blazes that destroy large areas of heathland. The Pirbright Ranges Fire has potentially burned deep into the ground, affecting plant species including round-leaved sundew, marsh clubmoss and bell heather over hundreds of hectares.   Whilst the heathland will regenerate over time, it is likely to be eight to twelve years before it returns to full health.  The deer will perform a unique and irreplaceable role in ensuring the lowland habitats recover during this time.

Given that around 85% of heathland in the UK has been lost over the past 150 years through agriculture, development and changes in land management, we can ill-afford to lose more of our heathland habitats. Surrey Wildlife Trust manages several areas of heathland, including Chobham Common National Nature Reserve and Wisley and Ockham commons that are particularly susceptible to fire in dry conditions – and strain on resources in the years ahead is set to be severe for all who manage and protect these diverse and sensitive habitats.  Dealing with the impact of the Pirbright Ranges fire is expected to account for more than 30 additional days of SWT staff time this year alone.

Emergency services are facing increasing calls to deal with wildfires, and resources increasingly struggle to keep up with demand.  Surrey Fire and Rescue has asked visitors to our wild places to help keep Surrey safe by packing a picnic instead of a BBQ, never having campfires or bonfires when the weather is dry, and ensuring they dispose of cigarettes and litter correctly.  But even with the right precautions in place, there’s little doubt that wildfires will be a persistent and growing problem in future years.

A report published in July by The Wildlife Trusts - the UK’s sixth largest landowner - revealed that half of The Wildlife Trusts’ extensive network of nature reserves will have more than thirty days of very high fire risk each year. The Wildlife Trusts’ first climate risk assessment, *Changing Nature,* examines the impacts of the changing climate across their estate, which covers nearly 400 square miles.

The research finds that, by the 2050s, assuming a 3°C of global warming by 2100, almost all the Wildlife Trusts’ reserves will see more than 1°C increase on hot summer days by 2050.  55% of reserves will see nearby river flows drop by more than 30% during times of low flow, and half of The Wildlife Trusts’ nature reserves will have 30+ days of very high fire risk yearly.

Despite these huge challenges, Surrey Wildlife Trust believes that will the help of local people and businesses, it’s possible to protect our natural heritage as weather patterns change.  Diverse and healthy ecosystems underpin every aspect of our economy and way of life, so it’s vital that we work together to protect them.

**Notes:**

**Surrey Wildlife Trust** is one of 46 [Wildlife Trusts](http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/) working across the UK. With the invaluable support of volunteers and members we manage over 7000ha of land for wildlife and people in Surrey. We also work with other organisations and landowners to protect and connect wildlife sites across the county and inspire local communities and young people to care for wildlife where they live. [surreywildlifetrust.org](http://www.surreywildlifetrust.org/)

More information about how to support the appeal is at <https://www.surreywildlifetrust.org/wildfire-appeal>

*Changing Nature* can be downloaded[**here**](https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/AdaptationReport.pdf)**.**