

## Protecting the Ground Nesting Birds on Greenham and Crookham Common

Greenham and Crookham Common, close to Newbury in West Berkshire, is a registered common permitting open access to all, and has become an extremely popular place for dog walking and other outdoor pursuits. The area is also an important nesting site for some of Britain's most endangered birds. West Berkshire Council (WBC) and Berks Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) have joined forces to champion all wildlife at the site and as the 2010 nesting season gets underway, they are working hard to meet the needs of both visitors and the vulnerable ground nesting birds. Katty Baird, writer for BBOWT, tells us more.

### Vulnerable ground nesters

The table below shows some of the birds of conservation concern that nest on the common.

Species	Conservation Status (BoCC)	Favoured nesting area	Estimated # territories in 2009
Nightjar	Red	Heathland and woodland edges	2-3
Dartford Warbler	Amber	gorse	5
Skylark	Red	short grass/heather	32
Woodlark	Amber	short grass/heather	10
Lapwing	Red	gravel	8-10
Ringed Plover	Amber	gravel	2
Little Ringed Plover	Schedule 1	gravel	6

These birds (with the exception of Dartford warbler which nests low down in gorse bushes) make their nests on the ground. The brooding adult blends in very well with

its surroundings but this camouflage means it is easy for people or dogs to unknowingly stray to close and frighten the birds from their nests. The eggs or chicks are then left unprotected and vulnerable to chilling or predation from birds such as magpies and rooks.

### **Nest disturbance**

Dog walking is very popular on Greenham and Crookham Common and it is dogs off leads that are the primary concern for the ground nesting birds at this site. Dogs pose a particular threat as they rarely keep to paths, race over large areas and snuffle around in undergrowth that is not easily accessible to people.

Studies at other heathland sites in southern England have shown that birds nesting close to paths are more likely to suffer from disturbance than those on more remote nests and that dogs are often the cause of this disturbance. However, it is important to remember that anybody straying from the paths and into nesting areas can frighten the birds. Also, although such disturbance will make it harder for the parent birds, it will not necessarily result in failure of the eggs to hatch or young to fledge. Other factors, such as weather, contribute to the breeding success of these birds.

### **Helping to protect the nests**

Last year various access restrictions were introduced on the common, supported by two on-site wardens. Similar measures are in place again this year (see list below), and BBOWT has received a grant from GrantScape to fund three temporary wardens, as well as a project officer and a team of volunteers and conservation trainees. The funding from GrantScape comes from the Landfill Communities Fund, which distributes some of the tax paid on waste sent to landfill sites to environmental projects.

- ***Access restrictions***

Between 1<sup>st</sup> March and 31<sup>st</sup> July, all visitors should stay on the main paths and keep away from the nesting areas which are clearly marked. Dogs should be kept on a short lead. Kites and radio-controlled vehicles are not permitted.

- **Wardens**

Three wardens (two full time, and one part time) will work on the common and neighbouring Bowdown Woods every day until the end of August, engaging with visitors, keeping an eye on the birds and helping with survey work. From mid-April they will also lead weekly guided walks, where visitors can learn more about the common and its wildlife.

- **Survey work**

A breeding bird survey will be carried out, specifically looking at Ringed Plover, Little Ringed Plover, Lapwing, Skylark, Woodlark, Stonechat, Dartford Warbler and Meadow Pipit. Over a number of visits to the common, the breeding territories for each species will be mapped. In addition, for Lapwing, peak number of adults and the number of birds with broods will be recorded. Later the age or size of chicks will also be noted. Lapwing is a high profile ground nesting bird on the common, and this data will allow breeding productivity for this species to be estimated.

### **Work to help birds continues all year**

During autumn and winter, practical management work is undertaken to create suitable habitats to encourage the ground nesting birds. A combination of grazing, mechanical cutting and topsoil scraping is carried out to keep open areas of heather; encroaching birch scrub is controlled; areas of gorse are managed for Dartford Warblers (and can help divert visitors and livestock from some areas). Assistance is always appreciated, so if you fancy doing something practical, why not come along to a friendly conservation work party on the third Sunday of each month? New faces are always welcome, visit [www.gccv.org.uk](http://www.gccv.org.uk) or call 01635 580792 for more details.

### **Come and visit!**

The common can be great for birding. Some of the more unusual species that can be seen here include ring ouzel, little grebe, red backed shrike, lesser spotted woodpecker and grasshopper warbler (and if you nip over the road to BBOWT reserve at Bowdown Woods you can add more species to your list!). If you want to find out more, there are regular bird walks led by a local ornithologist, which leave from the control tower car park on the second Wednesday of each month. There is

also a varied programme of other events throughout the year, including family wildlife explorer days in the school holidays and an evening nightjar walk in June. Call the nature discovery centre on 01635 874381 (email [naturecentre@westberks.gov.uk](mailto:naturecentre@westberks.gov.uk)) or visit [www.bbowt.org.uk](http://www.bbowt.org.uk) for more details.

### **A partnership between WBC and BBOWT**

Greenham and Crookham Common forms the core of the West Berkshire Living Landscape, an initiative led by BBOWT and delivered in partnership with WBC. The Living Landscape area stretches northwards to the Nature Discovery centre in Thatcham and encompasses important wildlife sites such as Thatcham Reedbeds and Bowdown Woods. Although some of the land is already owned by BBOWT or WBC, the initiative is working with the other landowners, advising on wildlife-friendly ways to manage their land and ensuring that any future developments are sympathetic to the needs of local wildlife. Linking important wildlife sites together in this way should create a bigger and better place for nature to flourish and people to enjoy. To find out more, visit [www.bbowt.org.uk](http://www.bbowt.org.uk).