

High Moorland Visitor Centre

WILDLIFE REPORT

Introduction

Situated fairly centrally on the moor you have the option to explore all corners of Dartmoor from here. You are also between the North Dartmoor and South Dartmoor Sites of Special Scientific Interest which are vast areas of open moorland.

The Visitor Centre itself also has its own wildlife interest with a garden especially designed to incorporate several Dartmoor habitats all in one place. Here you can stroll around a mini 'Dartmoor' and see many of the native plants that you will see either on the moor, on the rock exposures, in haymeadows or in the woodlands. The garden also attracts a variety of woodland birds.

Walks from the town include walking west, along the Old Railway, part of the Dartmoor Way, to Foggintor Quarries and Swelltor Quarries. This walk will reward you with a variety of habitats including moorland, bogs, stream, rocky outcrops and a pond at Foggintor Quarry. South takes you over South Hessary Tor to Nun's Cross, crossing open moorland and skirting around Tor Royal Bog (no public access), the only raised bog on Dartmoor and an internationally rare habitat. Foxtor Mires are near Nun's Cross at Whiteworks and a small bog area at Meavy Head (SX584733), about half a mile from here next to the track on the way to Swelltor where you can see typical bog plants such as Bog Cotton and Lesser Spearwort (use Dartmoor Pocket Guide – Bog Plants).

The Dartmoor Way passes through Princetown on a circular route that sweeps around the National Park for over 90 miles linking hamlets, villages and towns. There is a walking and a cycling route.

Further afield good wildlife areas include Burrator Reservoir and the Walkham Valley which are to the west and south. The Dart Valley (to the east) which, between Dartmeet and Buckfastleigh, is cloaked in ancient woodland and is well worth a visit. You can access the woods at various places including Dartmeet, Newbridge and Hembury Woods. The views of the valley from Bench Tor near Venford Reservoir are particularly breathtaking.

North of here are Two Bridges and Postbridge which are also good starting points for wildlife walks.

Laminated cards called Dartmoor Pocket Guides can be bought from the Visitor Centre to help you with wildlife identification.

What you can see on site

Jack Wigmore Memorial Garden

The garden is divided up into several habitats and the species typical of these habitats on Dartmoor have been planted so that visitors can become familiar with them.

Plants in the woodland area include Wild Garlic, Wild Daffodils, Honeysuckle, Wild Strawberry, Greater Woodrush, Primrose, Wood Anemone, Herb Robert and Bluebells. Bluebells are a species of conservation concern and are protected in Britain, with respect to sale, under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Although widespread in Britain, the Bluebell is globally threatened and the UK holds up to 49% of the world population. Many of Dartmoor's woodlands are of ancient origin and therefore support a great variety of plant and animal species. The woodland area of the garden also attracts a range of birds such as Blue Tit, Great Tit, Chaffinch, Robin and Blackbird. Use the Dartmoor Pocket Guide – Woodland Plants and Woodland Birds to help with identification.

Rocks and trees are covered in a lush growth of mosses and in places the Polypody Fern has also taken hold. These species need moist, sheltered conditions to grow and this can be seen especially in the woodlands on Dartmoor. On more exposed rocks there are also Violets, Stonecrop, Wall Pennywort (Navelwort) and Bilberry. These plants are also typically found around rocky outcrops on the moor.

Moorland plants such as Bell Heather, Cross-leaved Heath and Ling can be seen in the garden, as well as Western Gorse, Broom, Bristle Bent (grass), Holly, Rowan and Downy Birch which are typical of the open moor.

More information about this garden is available from the Visitor Centre.

What you can see in the local area

Surrounded by moorland the landscape can look bleak but Dartmoor is internationally important for the habitats and species it supports. You can soon walk out onto open moorland from here. Typical plants such as Bell Heather, Ling, Western Gorse, European Gorse, Bracken, Purple Moor-grass and Bristle-bent all add colour to the landscape. Heathers and Western Gorse flower in late summer giving glorious splashes of purples and yellows. In the winter the grasses yellow, the bracken turn rusty-gold and the European Gorse is in flower so there

is colour all year. Use Dartmoor Pocket Guide – Moorland Plants to help with identification.

Birds such as Meadow Pipits, Ravens, Skylarks, Stonechats and Whinchats live on the open moor and overhead you may see Buzzards (use Dartmoor Pocket Guide – Moorland Birds for identification).

Although Buzzards are a relatively common sight in the south west they are much rarer in the rest of the country. They are very large brown birds that can be seen soaring high above you looking for rabbits, voles and carrion to eat.

Their numbers have increased greatly over the last two decades following the recovery of rabbit numbers after declines due to myxomatosis in the 1950s.

Quarries and other rocky outcrops are covered in colourful lichens which can withstand the exposed conditions of the moor - hot in summer and cold and wet in winter. Quarry ponds are often sheltered and are home to a variety of colourful dragonflies which can be seen hunting over the water's surface. The rocks themselves may harbour reptiles, such as Common Lizard and Adders, which can hide in the crevices for protection and bask in the sun to warm up before they start their day.



Adder

The Adder is Britain's only venomous snake, but because the venom is designed to kill only small animals like voles it is not particularly potent. Usually they will slither away if you come too close. Colouration in Adders is variable and differs between the sexes. The background colour is usually grey in males and brown in females. Both sexes have a thick, black, zigzag pattern running along the length of the back.

Armed with Dartmoor Pocket Guides – Moorland Birds, Moorland Plants, Moorland Insects and Bog Plants, available from the Visitor Centre, you will have plenty of opportunity to explore the wildlife of this important moorland area.

Wildlife sites within 5 km

South Dartmoor SSSI – this upland site contains some of the most extensive areas of blanket bog, valley mire and acid grassland/heathland in southern England. At an altitude of up to 500 m and a very high annual rainfall this area also provides the headwaters for several major rivers in South Devon. The area is

virtually treeless and grazed by livestock. Blanket bog occurs on the highest ground and here you will find Sphagnum mosses, Common Cotton-grass, Hare's-tail Cotton-grass, Purple Moor-grass, Cross-leaved Heath and Heather (see Dartmoor Pocket Guide – Moorland Plants). Many areas are dominated by Bilberry or a mixture of Heather and Bilberry and grassland areas support Purple Moor-grass, Mat-grass, Sheep's Fescue and Bristle Bent. Breeding birds include Red Grouse, Dunlin, Snipe, Whinchat and Wheatear, all of which are uncommon in Southern England (see 'Dartmoor – a special place for moorland birds' leaflet in this folder). The Two Moors Way passes right through this site.

North Dartmoor SSSI – is one of the largest areas of upland semi-natural habitat in southern Britain. It is particularly important for western blanket bog and mixed valley mires and supports a diverse upland breeding bird community. Within the site lies Black-a-Tor Copse National Nature Reserve, a high-altitude oak woodland, which is of national importance for lichens. Blanket bog with mainly Sphagnum Mosses and Purple Moor-grass as well as Hare's Tail Cotton Grass, Cross-leaved Heath, Round-leaved Sundew and Bog Asphodel occupies the highest ground. Mires in the valleys are home to Bogbean, Soft Rush and various sedges. Drier areas of moorland are dominated by Heather, Purple Moor-grass, Cross-leaved Heath and Western Gorse. Unusual plants on this site include Cranberry, Fir Clubmoss, Lemon-scented Fern, Tunbridge and Wilson's Filmy-fern and the rare Bog Orchid in some places. The only regular breeding colony of Golden Plover and Dunlin in southern Britain occurs here as well as the largest breeding colony of Ring Ouzel in southern England. Also present are breeding Whinchat and Wheatear (see 'Dartmoor – a special place for moorland birds' leaflet). Although most of this area is common land and open for access there are several military ranges on this site and few paths so check your map and firing dates and times carefully before going out.

Sampford Spiney SSSI – includes areas of ancient woodland of exceptional importance for its diversity of lichen flora which contains many rare species as well as plants such as Bluebells and Royal Fern. Some areas are waterlogged and contain typical moorland bog plants including Bog St John's Wort, Hare's Tail Cotton-grass and Bog Pondweed. The River Walkham and its tributaries are fast-flowing and provide a major spawning ground for Salmon, Sea Trout and aquatic invertebrates typical of this habitat. The whole area is important for birds including Dipper and Grey Wagtail near the river and Redstart, Buzzard and Wood Warbler in the woodland. Butterflies include the rare Marsh Fritillary, as well as Pearl-bordered Fritillary, Silver-washed Fritillary, Dark Green Fritillary, Green Hairstreak and Holly Blue. There are self-guided walks available in various books and some areas have public access but much is in private ownership.

Tor Royal Bog SSSI – is an internationally rare habitat this is the only large raised bog on Dartmoor. Various bog plants such as hare's-tail cotton grass,

cross-leaved heath, round leaved sundew, bog asphodel and numerous bog mosses can be found here. Unfortunately there is no public access.

Wistman's Wood – this National Nature Reserve is one of the most famous woodlands in Britain noted for its gnarled oak trees and luxuriant mosses and lichens. The trees are Pedunculate Oak (common in lowland Britain) rather than Sessile Oak which is more common in woodlands on Dartmoor. Mosses, liverworts and lichens are all classed as 'lower plants' as they do not produce flowers. Altogether 47 species of mosses and liverworts and 119 species of lichen have been recorded here. One of the rarest lichens *Bryoria smithii* is found only on four trees here and a few in Black-a-Tor Copse (also on Dartmoor) and nowhere else in Britain! The wood is situated on a valley side near to Two Bridges. It is relatively easy to walk to the site but please respect this precious place and view it from the edges!

Wildlife sites within 10 km

Burrator Reservoir - trails around the forest and reservoir are very popular. To the south of the dam is Burrator Wood which is ancient woodland where you can see Bluebells in spring.

Car parks as starting points for walks

- High Moorland Visitor Centre – Dartmoor Way, Foggintor and Swelltor Quarries, Nun's Cross, Tor Royal Bog, Foxtor Mires, North and South Dartmoor SSSI moorland.
- Two Bridges – Wistman's Wood, Beardown
- Postbridge – Bellever Forest, East Dart River
- Burrator Reservoir
- Venford Reservoir – Bench Tor, White Wood
- Dartmeet – Brimpts Farm, Dart Valley Reserve
- Newbridge – Dart Valley Reserve, woodlands and river.

