



Dorset's heathland National Nature Reserves



Welcome to Dorset's heathland National Nature Reserves

This picturesque corner of Dorset is famous for the spectacular mosaic of open heathland and bogs which support some of England's rarest wildlife.

There are four separate heathland National Nature Reserves in and around Wareham: Hartland Moor, Stoborough Heath, Holton Heath (Sandford Heath) and Morden Bog.



© Natural England/Duncan Cooper

Ponies grazing on Hartland Moor

The Reserves are perfect for a gentle stroll or even a longer hike across a landscape that bursts into colour during the summer. And children will love the chance of spotting a carnivorous plant, or catching a glimpse of a rare sand lizard.

Two hundred and fifty years ago, heathland in Dorset covered over 150 square miles in vast tracts divided only by river valleys. Today only around 30 square miles remain, much of it in small fragments.

These sites now represent around 10% of Britain's heathland, and 2% of all that remains in Europe as a whole. Together with our partners, Natural England is reconnecting some of these isolated fragments and helping to re-create the landscape of Egdon Heath, so evocatively described in the novels of Thomas Hardy.

Seasonal spectacles

April – a great time to see reptiles basking in the early morning sun.

May – the hobby, a small falcon that spends the winter in Africa, returns to hunt over the valley mires, often plucking unwary dragonflies from the air.

June – Dartford warblers and stonechats are active in the early mornings, while nightjars begin to hunt in the twilight.

July – September – this is when Dorset's heathland is at its most colourful, with the pink and purples of bell heather and ling, and the mustard yellow of dwarf gorse dominating the dry heaths.



© Natural England / Nick Squirrel

Heathland wildlife

Birds

In the spring and summer you'll see stonechats singing from gorse bushes and woodlarks performing their tuneful, aerobatic display. Look out too for the distinctive long tail of the Dartford warbler, as well as more common birds such as meadow pipit and skylark.

The elusive nocturnal nightjar is a summer visitor that spends the day roosting in the heather before coming out at dusk to hunt insects on the wing.

In the winter, look out for visiting birds of prey such as the merlin patrolling the contours of the heath. You may also see the hen harrier, the male of which has an ash grey body and black wing tips.

Insects

Insects thrive in the variety of habitats on the heath. Both the heath and large marsh grasshopper have strongholds on the reserve, and listen out for the chirping of bog bush cricket and the rare great green bush cricket too.

You may also spot silver-studded blue butterflies and emperor moths along the mown fire breaks.



© Natural England / Nick Squirrel

A whole collection of dragonflies, with fantastic names such as the golden ringed, ruddy darter and keeled skimmer, can be seen hawking up and down wetter areas of the heath, searching for unsuspecting insects and defending their territories in aerobatic skirmishes. Small and large red damselflies also skirt over the mires, skilfully avoiding the webs of waiting crab spiders.

The sandy banks and open tracks are a particularly important feature of the Reserves, especially for rare burrowing bees and wasps, and the green tiger beetle, which basks on the bare sand.



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Hartland Moor and Stoborough Heath

Reptiles

All six species of British reptiles live on the Reserves, including sand lizards and smooth snakes. Your best chance of spotting a sand lizard is to look out for one basking on the sandy south facing edges of firebreaks. The vivid emerald green flanks of the male are most distinctive during the spring mating season. The more secretive smooth snake is rarely seen, preferring to hunt in the cover of the deep heather.

Plants

Bog plants thrive in the acidic, water-logged peat of the valley bottom. Look out for the rare marsh clubmoss and bog orchid, as well as sphagnum mosses, bog asphodel and carnivorous plants such as bladderwort and sundew, which traps tiny insects on its sticky red leaves.

On the dry heathland, ling, cross-leaved heath and bell heather dominate, alongside rarities such as Dorset heath, which thrives in areas where peat was once dug.

Hartland Moor and Stoborough Heath

These two adjoining Reserves form an extensive heathland site covering over 350 hectares. The Great Knoll, near to Soldiers Road, is the highest point on the Reserve, at 34m.

Hartland Moor takes its name from the Y-shaped bog that drains into Poole Harbour. Uniquely, while the northern branch is acidic, the southern arm is alkaline, leading to a superb mixture of plants, including the unmistakable bright blue trumpets of marsh gentian.

Heather dominates the dryer areas, while the verges are rich with wildflowers in spring and summer including marsh orchids, yellow rattle and marsh helleborines, as well as adders-tongue ferns.

Stoborough Heath also includes the 67 hectare Sunnyside Farm, which is home to rare plants including marsh orchids, smooth cat's ear and brown-beak sedge.

Holton Heath (Sandford Heath)

The eastern part of Holton Heath National Nature Reserve was once part of the Royal Naval Cordite Factory, which produced explosives during the Second World War. Due to dangers posed by contamination from materials from the factory this part of the reserve is closed to the public. However, Sandford Heath, which forms the western part of the site, is open and offers a network of paths to explore and enjoy.

If you enter the Reserve from the western access near Sandford, you'll find an area of woodland that includes beech, alder and birch. This gradually changes to mature Scots pine, before you emerge from the trees onto the open heath.

When the Reserve was bought by Natural England, conifers and rhododendrons had already spread over much of the heathland. Much of this has now been removed and heather has been quick to re-colonise the land, growing back vigorously from dormant seed in the soil.

An imposing gun tower can still be seen on Sandford Heath; one of a ring of anti-aircraft defences that once protected the cordite factory.



View of Morden Bog and decoy pond

© Ben Buxton

Morden Bog

The dry heath in the north of the Reserve contains some of the oldest heather in Dorset. Dominated by ling, there is a magnificent carpet of pink and purple during the summer, with splashes of yellow from the flowering dwarf gorse.

This dry heath slopes southwards and as the ground becomes wetter, cross-leaved heath abounds, its pink haze of flowers and grey leaves provide the perfect backdrop for other colourful plants.

The wet heath in turn develops into the largest valley bog in Dorset, which forms the majority of the National Nature Reserve. The mire is dominated by purple moor grass speckled with pockets of other plants such as the aromatic shrub bog myrtle, white cotton grass and bright yellow clumps of bog asphodel.

Looking after the heaths

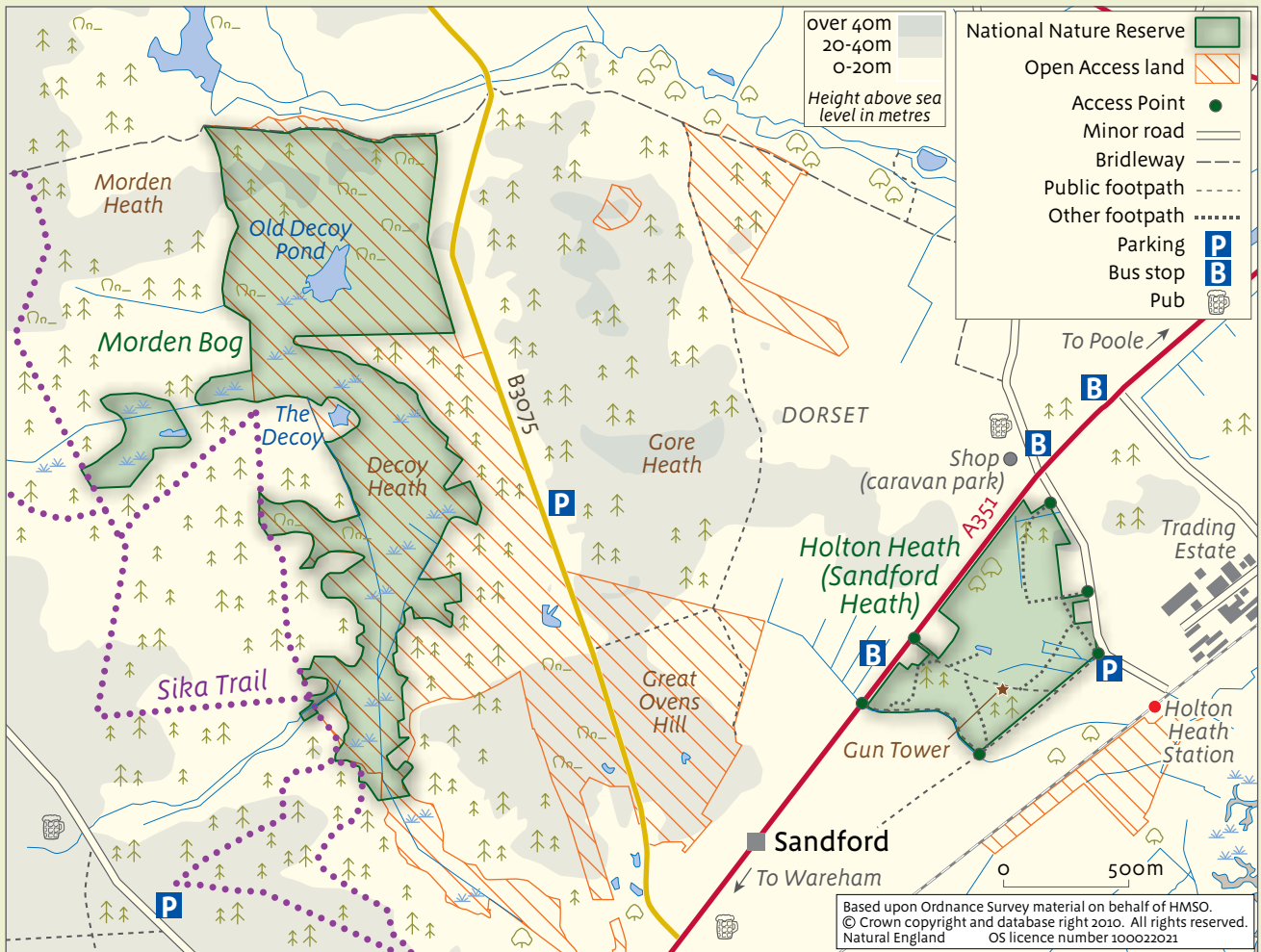
We aim to care for wildlife – here's how you can help:

- Please do not light fires or discard spent matches or cigarettes.
- The cattle are docile but dogs can make them defensive. If the cattle crowd around you, let your dog off the lead.
- Dogs must be kept on a short lead while on Open



© Ben Buxton

Gun tower on Sandford Heath



Access ground between March 1 and July 31 and all year-round when near farm animals. Please clean up after your dog.

- No camping.
- To protect wildlife, cycling and horse riding are only allowed on marked routes.
- **Please follow the Countryside Code**

Respect other people

- Consider the local community and other people enjoying the outdoors

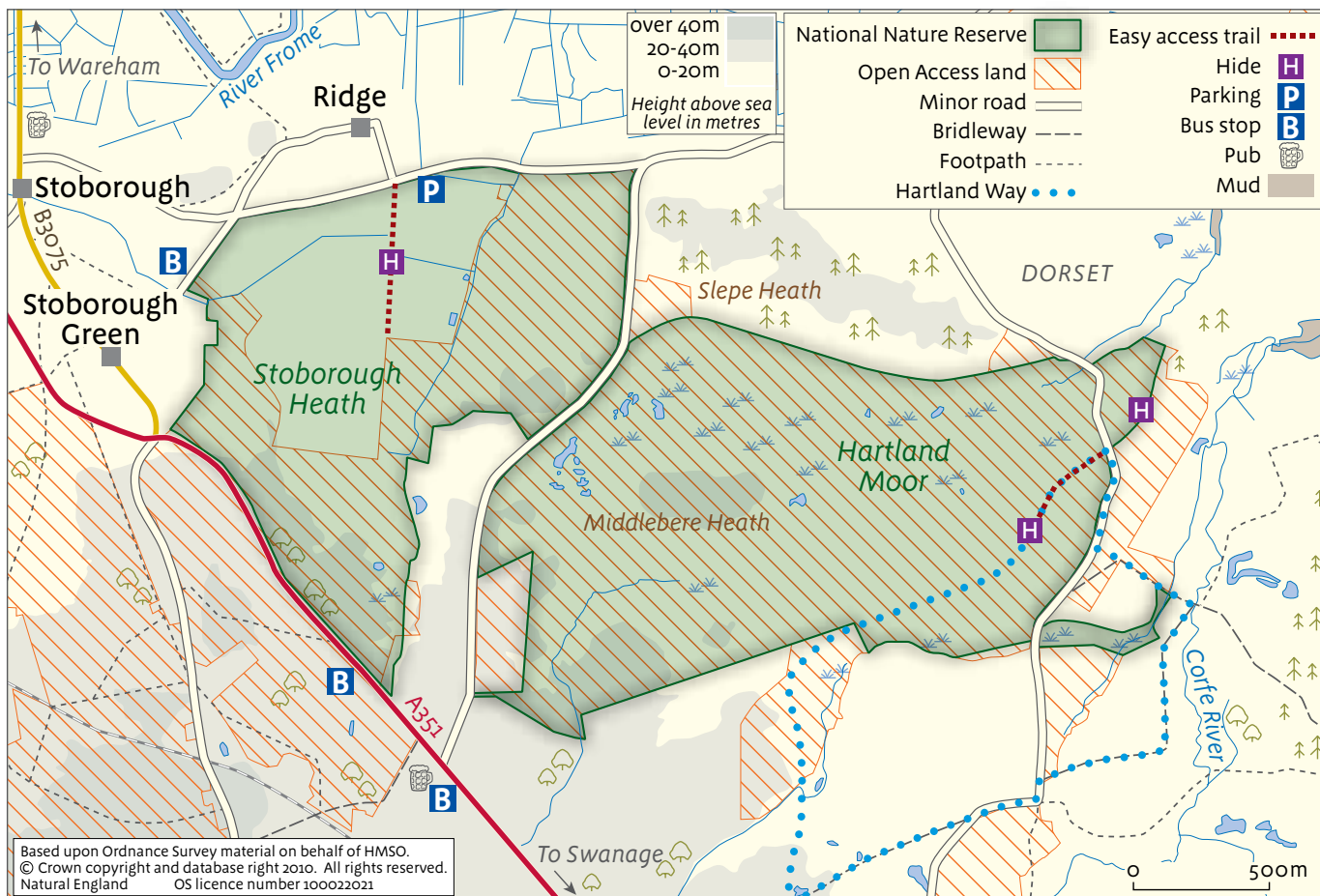
- Leave gates and property as you find them and follow paths unless wider access is available

Protect the natural environment

- Leave no trace of your visit and take your litter home
- Keep dogs under effective control

Enjoy the outdoors

- Plan ahead and be prepared
- Follow advice and local signs



Management

Heathland is a habitat that has been created by human activities since the Bronze Age and we need to continue to manage it today, by clearing scrub and allowing heather to flourish.

It is important for wildlife to keep a mixture of different heather heights, and during the winter, controlled burning is carried out. Blocks of common gorse are also burned on a rotational basis, as the dense thickets are a fire hazard, while

the young compact bushes that re-grow are great nest sites for Dartford warblers and stonechats.

The Reserve also has a network of mown firebreaks and 'Emergency Water Supply' pools for the Fire Brigade. These are fenced off as they are deep and potentially dangerous.

Many of the firebreaks also have rotovated edges, giving added protection against the creep of fire. This bare sand is also great for burrowing bees and wasps, and egg laying sand lizards.

Hardy ponies and cattle have been reintroduced to graze some areas of the Reserve and help keep taller grasses such as purple moor grass in check, to prevent them from swamping smaller, rarer plants. Their grazing action provides more structure in the vegetation, particularly in the wetter areas.

How to get there

By car:

Hartland Moor/Stoborough Heath/Sunnyside Farm are 4km south-east of Wareham. The nearest car park is at Sunnyside Farm and there are also car parks at Norden (3km to the south), Arne and Wareham.

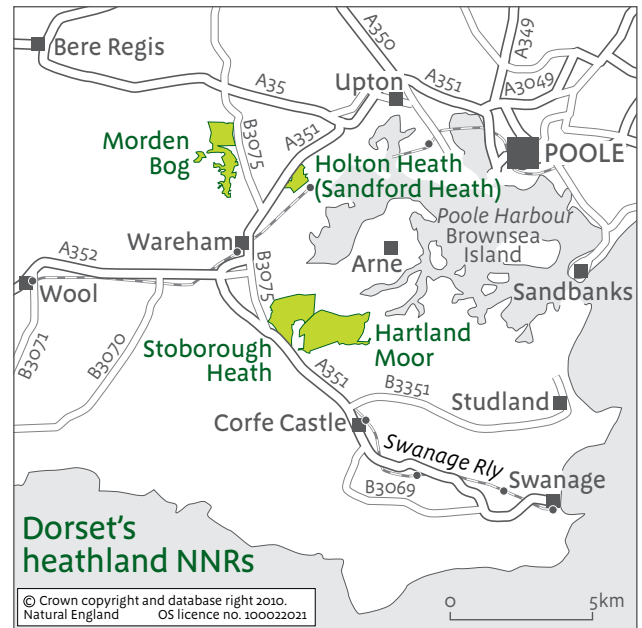
Disabled visitors can access part of Sunnyside Farm along a disused clay tramway and part of Hartland Moor via the Hartland Way. This 400m track is accessed via a gate opposite the turning to Middlebere Farm, and includes a birdwatching hide.

Holton Heath (Sandford Heath) is 4km along the A351 north east of Wareham. There is on road parking in Station Road.

Morden Bog is 5km north of Wareham, located within Wareham Forest. The Forestry Commission have several car parks, walking and cycling trails. Access to the Reserve is via tracks within the forest.

By public transport:

The nearest train station to Hartland Moor and Morden Bog is Wareham, which is served by South West Trains (0845 6000 650 www.southwesttrains.co.uk). A seasonal steam locomotive service is also available between Norden, Corfe Castle and Swanage which is run by the Swanage Railway (01929 425800 www.swanagerailway.co.uk).



Holton Heath station, 250m from the eastern entrance of Sandford Heath, is on the Weymouth to London line which serves Dorchester, Wareham, Poole, Bournemouth and Christchurch, as well as other stations in between. There are also bus services from Poole and Wareham.

The Wilts & Dorset Bus Co (01722 336855 www.wdbus.co.uk) operates the number 40 bus between Poole, Wareham and Swanage. There are bus stops along the A351, within a short walk of the entrances. First Group (Travel Line 0871 200 2233 www.travelline.com) operates the X53 bus service between Dorchester, Wareham and Poole.

Facilities:

The nearest toilet and refreshment facilities are in local villages. Wareham is well situated for all the Reserves.

For further information please contact:

Tel: 0300 060 2513

www.naturalengland.org.uk

Front cover image: Heather and gorse on the heath

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Natural England is here to secure a healthy natural environment for people to enjoy, where wildlife is protected and England's traditional landscapes are safeguarded for future generations.

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