



Quantock Hills

Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Heathland birds of the Quantock Hills

HEATHLAND MANAGEMENT ~ THE KEY TO HEALTHY BIRD POPULATIONS

The ecological importance of the Quantock heathland is such that it has been designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). It also forms part of the Exmoor and Quantocks Important Bird Area (IBA) for its populations of stonechat, whinchat, peregrine falcon and nightjar. Maintaining the quality of the heathland is therefore extremely important.

Swaling

Swaling is a process of controlled burning that encourages young heather growth. It is undertaken by the AONB Service, National Trust and Commoners as part of the Countryside Stewardship Scheme (a scheme set up to support farmers and environmental farming practices).



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For ecological reasons swaling is carried out only in winter and on areas no larger than four hectares at a time. Each block of heather is burnt on a 15 year rotation, ensuring good grazing for livestock and a healthy habitat for wildlife.

Bracken

Bracken is an important component of the heathland habitat providing cover for species such as whinchat and nightjar. However bracken is a very competitive plant and needs to be controlled, especially if it threatens the recovery of heather after a winter burn. Some of the steep sided combs have become bracken dominated. Management of this habitat to reduce bracken density may favour some populations of heathland birds.



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There are two approaches to bracken control, mechanical or spraying. Both practices need to be undertaken during late spring/early summer and great care is taken not to disturb wildlife, especially ground nesting birds.

Grazing

The Quantock heathland survives today as a large unenclosed 'sheepwalk' and visitors to the Quantock Hills are sure to notice sheep, ponies and occasionally cattle grazing the open heathland. Commoners own the livestock that perform the vital task (in combination with swaling) of keeping the heathland free from invading scrub species such as silver birch and mountain ash.



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ENJOYING THE WILDLIFE

The Quantock Hills are a lovely place for people to enjoy whether it is for bird watching, walking or riding and the patient visitor will be rewarded with great views of wildlife especially heathland birds. However care must be taken to avoid unnecessary disturbance especially during the critical period of breeding.



Dog walkers are reminded to keep dogs on a lead when off Rights of Way and under close control at all other times, whilst other visitors are advised to keep to paths and leave any wildlife alone that you may come across. If in doubt, contact the AONB Service.

For contacts and information on the Quantock Hills go to: www.quantockhills.com or email Andy Harris on andy.quantockhills@somerset.gov.uk



For more general information on heathland birds contact:

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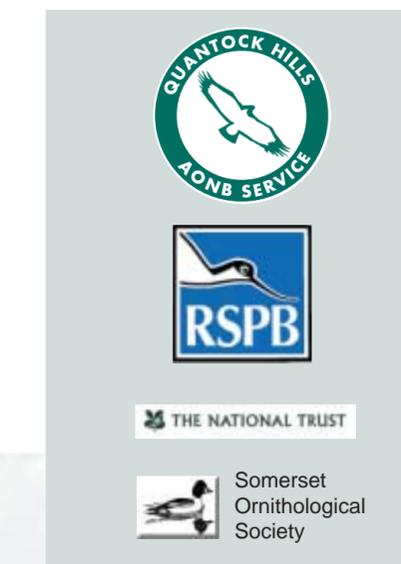
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RNID typetalk



Heathland landscapes are amongst the most important in Europe in terms of the unique wildlife they support. Once extensive across southern England, many heathlands were lost during the 20th century to built developments, agriculture or forestry. The majority of the remaining heaths are now protected by nature conservation legislation and are managed to conserve their wildlife, not least their special birds. In this leaflet, the importance of the Quantock heaths for birds is presented, based on recent survey work by the AONB Service, RSPB, Somerset Ornithological Society and the National Trust.



Mark Hamblin



Chris Gomersall



Mark Hamblin



Mike Richards



Photo courtesy of AONB Service



Cuckoo
Distinctive by sound, but hard to see, cuckoos are plentiful on the Hills, although their numbers are hard to count accurately.

Nightjar
Nightjars arrive in May from southern Africa to breed in nationally important numbers on the Quantocks heaths (and areas of felled forestry). Nightjars are nocturnal, so rarely seen, but the 'churring' of the males can be heard at dusk, a sound more similar to a cricket than a bird. At dusk, they can be seen foraging for moths ~ look out for the white wing patch and listen for wing clapping as they fly.

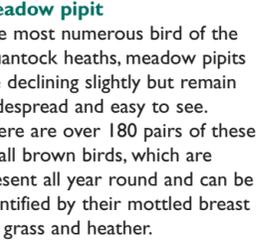


Skylark
Another widespread but declining species, skylarks are best located by their long, warbling song, performed while hovering high above the heaths. Skylarks favour the shorter vegetation of the Hills and occupy the flatter hill top areas. The Hills support around 60 breeding pairs and remain a local stronghold.

Tree pipit
Tree pipits are summer visitors and can be seen between May and August. They are similar in appearance to the meadow pipit but associated with scattered trees around the heathland edges. Look out for them performing their parachuting song flight on rigid wings, flying up from and then returning to a tree.



Meadow pipit
The most numerous bird of the Quantock heaths, meadow pipits are declining slightly but remain widespread and easy to see. There are over 180 pairs of these small brown birds, which are present all year round and can be identified by their mottled breast as they flit around amongst the grass and heather.



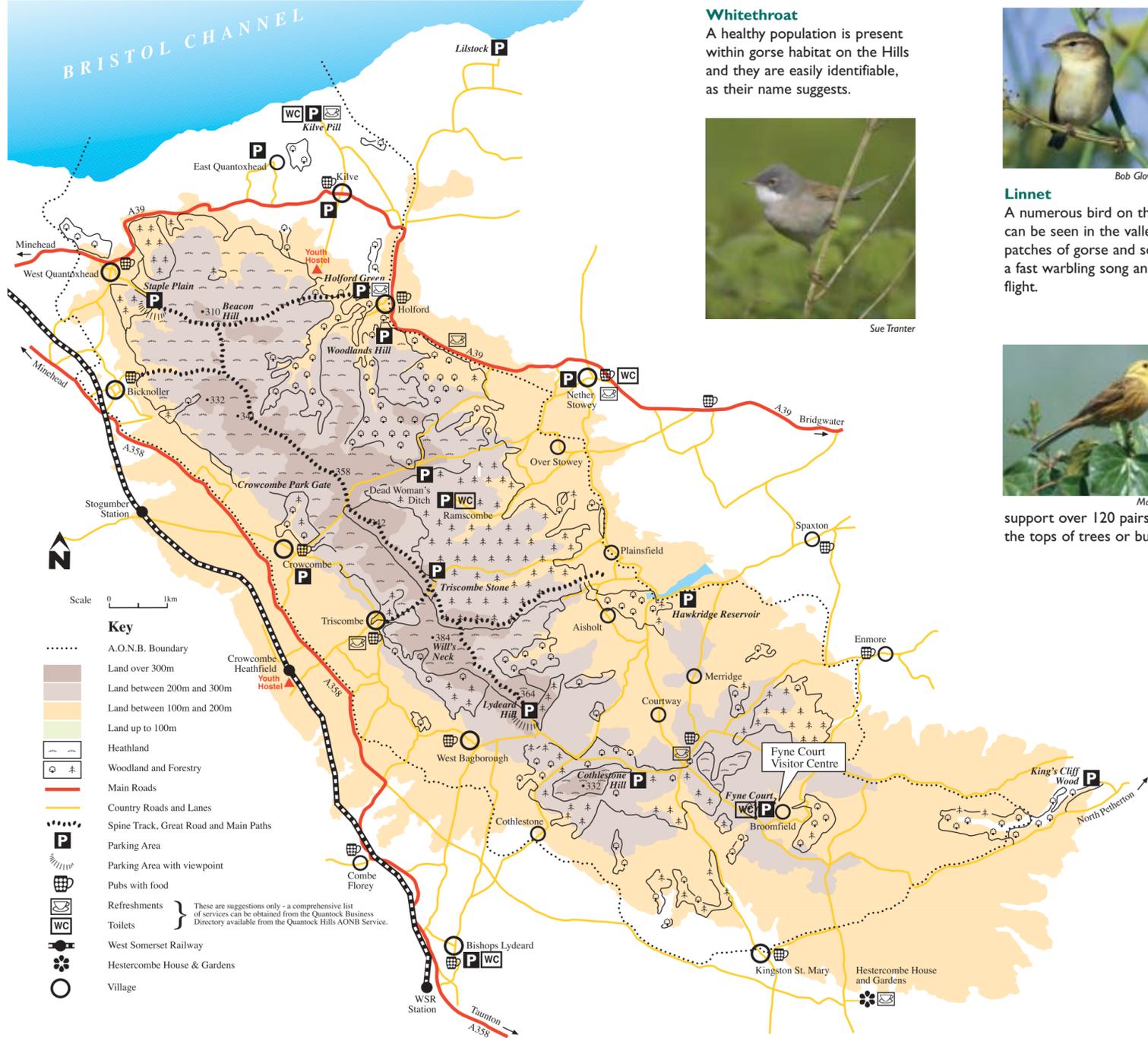
Redstart
These striking birds are found in the woodland and on the heathland/woodland interface and are a treat to see. Nationally, their numbers are declining, but they appear to be doing well on the Hills, arriving in April from their African wintering grounds.

Whinchat
Similar in appearance to stonechats, but with a white stripe above the eye, whinchats are present in small numbers on the heaths, with 22 pairs recorded. Arriving in May from their African wintering grounds, whinchats occupy tall heathland vegetation with bracken, especially the wetter areas. On the Quantocks, they are associated with valleys in the central area of the Hills.



Stonechat
These striking birds can be easily seen perched on the top of bracken or gorse bushes ~ listen for their distinctive call, like stones being knocked together. Stonechats thrive amongst the gorse and heather, which is vital for nesting and foraging, and have increased in number over the last 15 years, to over 100 pairs.

Dartford warbler
Dartford warblers nearly became extinct in Britain after being hit hard by the severe winter of 1962/3, when the national population dropped to just 10 pairs. Over the last decade, thanks to milder winters and conservation efforts, their numbers have recovered and their range has spread. In this time, they have colonised the Quantock heathlands and the population is now a healthy 38 pairs. They can be secretive and difficult to spot but look out for them in patches of bushy gorse and heather.



Whitethroat
A healthy population is present within gorse habitat on the Hills and they are easily identifiable, as their name suggests.



Willow warbler
A summer visitor, willow warblers are birds of the woodland/ heathland interface and are best recognised by their song, a series of descending notes. Willow warblers are declining nationally, so the Quantocks population is an important one.

Linnet
A numerous bird on the Hills, linnets can be seen in the valleys amongst patches of gorse and scrub. They sing a fast warbling song and often call in flight.



Yellowhammer
This striking yellow bird is thriving on the Quantocks, in stark contrast to massive declines on lower lying farmland areas. The heath, with its mix of heather and gorse provides ideal nesting habitat and the Hills now support over 120 pairs. Look out for the males singing from the tops of trees or bushes.

Birds of prey
With a healthy population of the smaller birds along with successful heathland management, the Quantock Hills attract a wide variety of top predators in the form of birds of prey. Just as the smaller heathland birds, raptors use and visit the hills at different times of the year. Some remain all year round, some species visit only during the summer to breed and hunt whilst others overwinter using mature heather as roosting sites.

The careful observer can be rewarded with regular views of buzzards soaring on thermals, peregrine falcons and sparrowhawks skimming across the heather and kestrels hovering at the top of open combs. Seasonal visitors include hobbies which can be seen chasing skylarks and pipits, and the spectacular red kite and Montagu's harrier sometimes pass through. On a winter's evening, low flying hen harriers and short-eared owls can be seen quartering the heath.



Species	Population (territories/pairs)	Trend on Quantock Hills 2000-2006	UK trend (1995-2005)	Important Areas on the Quantock Hills
Skylark	58	Declining	Declining	Widespread on hill tops
<i>Tree pipit</i>	78	<i>Increasing</i>	<i>Declining</i>	<i>Aisholt Common</i>
<i>Meadow pipit</i>	187	<i>Declining</i>	<i>Declining</i>	<i>Widespread in valleys</i>
Redstart	36	Increasing	Declining	Woodland edge
Whinchat	22	Stable	Declining	Black Ball Hill, Black Hill, Hurley Beacon
Stonechat	108	Slight decline	Increasing	Widespread in valleys
<i>Dartford warbler</i>	38	<i>Increasing</i>	<i>Increasing</i>	<i>Hurley Beacon, Black Hill, West Hill, Pardlestone Hill</i>
Whitethroat	71	Increasing	Increasing	Widespread in valleys
Willow warbler	131	Increasing	Declining	Woodland edge
Linnet	140	Increasing	Declining	Widespread in valleys
Yellowhammer	126	Increasing	Declining	Widespread in valleys

Source of UK data: The State of the UK's Birds 2005 (RSPB)
Species in bold are 'Red Listed' and are of high conservation concern nationally based on severe population declines. Species in italics are 'Amber listed' because of restricted distribution or less severe declines.