

Surrey Wildlife Trust launches urgent wildfire appeal

Surrey Wildlife Trust is urgently asking for donations to help one of Surrey's most precious heathland habitats, and around 200 red deer that help maintain it, recover from a devastating wildfire.

In July, a wildfire broke out on Pirbright Ranges, one of the largest areas of lowland heath in Surrey and home to many rare and threatened species. Patches of ground continue to burn for three weeks and over 650 hectares of pristine heathland has now been severely burnt, at great cost to wildlife.

Surrey Wildlife Trust's herd of red deer carry out a vital role by grazing the heathland 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 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 immediate impact of the fire also includes the potential loss of hundreds of recently fledged rare ground-nesting birds including European nightjars, Dartford warblers and woodlark which may have been too young to fly away from the fire. 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 remaining heathland fragments in the southeast of England.

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.

Around 85% of heathland in the UK has been lost over the past 150 years through agriculture, development and changes in land management. 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. Strain on resources in the years ahead are 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.

Surrey Wildlife Trust's director of reserves management, James Herd, says: *"Wildfires have put Surrey on the front line of the climate and nature emergency – and we urgently need extra support to meet the challenge. 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. All donations we receive will go directly to ensuring their welfare and the continuing safety of Surrey's heathlands and their unique plants and animals."*

"With the help of local people, we will do all we can to

explore what more can be done to protect our natural heritage as weather patterns change. It's vitally important that people in Surrey can continue to reap the benefits of diverse and healthy ecosystems."

Pirbright Ranges is owned by the Ministry of Defence. For safety reasons, it is not accessible to the public. The herd of red deer that grazes the site is owned and managed by Surrey Wildlife Trust.

David Nolan, Area Commander for Surrey Fire and Rescue Service said: *"Surrey Fire and Rescue Service is urging people to be wildfire aware. We have seen an increase in the number of wildfires we are attending recently and are asking residents to help keep Surrey safe. Please pack a picnic instead of a BBQ, and don't have campfires or bonfires when the weather is dry! Ensure you dispose of cigarettes and litter correctly."*