

The heaths are alive with the sound of ... well, mostly invertebrates. This is the peak time of year for the dragonflies, damselflies, bees, wasps, beetles and flies, everything that goes swish or buzz, as well as the butterflies of course. Now I have never heard a butterfly make a sound (apart from battered wings on a window) but I have listened to caterpillars single-mindedly crunching their way through their food. I think you will have got my drift by now: I am encouraging you to try to experience all the little sounds that make up an English high-summer day: the gentle rustle of the breeze in long grass stems, the zizz and buzz of the insects overhead, the scrape of a grasshopper. And look out for my favourite butterflies: the green hairstreaks. If you see a small piece of bramble leaf take flight, that will be a green hairstreak. Once you spot one they seem much too brightly coloured to be camouflaged, but when they settle back down on a plant, they disappear.

And only the odd chirrup from the birds. It's a funny time of year for the birds as they have generally pretty much finished raising their kids (unless they are onto a third brood), so all the competitive behaviour dies down and they go strangely quiet. After the middle of July you will have stopped hearing the blackbirds singing (as the males stop staking out territory) and only get alarm calls when they are spooked. This is largely because they are taking the chance to moult and renew their feathers for the winter, so they don't want to attract attention from the predators while they are a bit less able than usual to zoom out of danger.

On the reserve the breeding bird surveys for this year have been completed and are being processed, turning cryptically annotated maps into hard numbers. Dartford warbler numbers have roughly doubled since last year, and the other heathland specialists are on the way back up: bless that warm winter!

Meanwhile we have a chance to concentrate on some public events: we held the Big Wild Sleepout on Aylesbeare over midsummer and several families joined in to help build an Iron Age roundhouse, as well as experiencing nightjars, moths and bats and waking to a dawn chorus including turtledoves. One chap, who started mostly interested in the roundhouse, now has a whole new enthusiasm for nature and joined the RSPB on the spot!

As I write Heathweek is approaching and we are busy distributing leaflets and putting up posters to try and let as many people know as possible about the week-long series of events celebrating everything about the East Devon heaths. If you missed it this year, look out for the publicity next year: the last week in July is the usual time.

Also as I write the weather forecast is for thunderstorms this weekend. But by the time you read this we may have had a drier spell. So I am going to close with my usual seasonal plea: PLEASE be careful NOT to start fires on the heaths. Every year wildfires do untold damage to the habitats and kill the wildlife, as well as threatening property and even lives. This time of year, as the grass dries out and even the thin, peaty soil can catch light, is the most dangerous. My heart sinks whenever I see a black smoke cloud rising on the ridge, as I know my colleagues will be out fighting another fire along side the local fire brigades.

Take care and enjoy your visits!