

COUNTY: SURREY

SITE NAME: SMARTS AND PREY HEATHS

DISTRICT: WOKING

Status: Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) notified under Section 28 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

Local Planning Authority: WOKING BOROUGH COUNCIL

National Grid Ref: SU 985 557  
SU 989 555

Area: 37.8 ha (93.3 acres)

Ordnance Survey Sheets 1:50,000: 186

1:10,000: SU 95 NE

Date notified (under 1949 Act): -

Date of last revision: -

Date notified (under 1981 Act): 1993

Date of last revision: -

Other Information: This site forms part of Thames Basin Heaths proposed Special Protection Area for Birds (pSPA), proposed for designation under the European Commission Directive 79/409 on the Conservation of Wild Birds (the Birds Directive). It is managed by Woking Borough Council.

### Reasons for Notification

The adjacent commons of Smarts Heath and Prey Heath lie either side of Hoe Stream, south of Woking. They consist of a mosaic of heathland habitats including wet and dry heath, scrub, and fringing woodland. The heathland supports characteristic heathland birds, including occasional breeding nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus*, a bird listed on Annex 1 of the Birds Directive.

Heathland was once very extensive in western Surrey and nearby parts of Berkshire and Hampshire, occurring on the large tracts of common land which were an important part of the rural economy until the 19th Century. Most has now been destroyed by agricultural improvement, urban growth, road building and forestry. Much of that which remains, particularly the smaller fragments, has been invaded by scrub and woodland due to lack of traditional stock grazing.

Smarts and Prey Heaths were not grazed for many years, and gradually became invaded by birch *Betula* spp and Scots pine *Pinus sylvestris* scrub, which developed in places into species-poor secondary oak *Quercus robur* and pine woodland. In recent years, however, conservation management has succeeded in reversing this trend, clearing scrub and reintroducing grazing, and the surviving open heathland areas have begun to recover.

The heathland habitats are predominantly damp, the sward being dominated by ling heather *Calluna vulgaris*, cross-leaved heath *Erica tetralix* and purple moor-grass *Mollinia caerulea*. Other plants include creeping willow *Salix repens*, dwarf gorse *Ulex minor*, deergrass *Trichophorum cespitosum* and both long-leaved and round-leaved sundews *Drosera intermedia* and *D rotundifolia*. In drier areas the sward consists of ling

heather, bell heather *Erica cinerea* and dwarf gorse, becoming grassy in places with purple moor-grass and common bent *Agrostis capillaris*.

Scrub remains along roads and paths and in scattered clumps, providing shelter for birds, mammals and invertebrates. It consists mainly of brown and silver birches *Betula pubescens* and *B pendula* with sparse heathland plants on the ground.

The diverse habitats within the site, particularly the open heath and scrub, provide suitable breeding areas for characteristic heathland bird species, including nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus*. The nightjar has been declining in Britain for many years, due mainly to loss of habitat. Improvement of the heathland habitat on this site in recent years and the closeness of strong nightjar populations on other sites provides an opportunity for recolonisation by this species, which currently breeds here occasionally.

Smarts and Prey Heaths form part of Thames Basin Heaths pSPA, which consists of a group of heathlands extending from Wisley in Surrey to Tadley in Hampshire and Bracknell in Berkshire, supporting nationally important populations of a number of bird species. These include nightjar, listed on Annex 1 of the Birds Directive as being rare and in need of protection. Thames basin Heaths pSPA, taken as a whole, supports an estimated 9.0% of the British breeding population of nightjar.