

# Nightjar walk at SSSI Sutton Heath 16 May 2025

This visit was organised on behalf of the Greenprint Forum in response to a kind offer by Chris Ryde, Countryside Officer for East Suffolk Services Limited, who manage 65.5 ha of the SSSI of Sutton Heath, to conduct a guided tour of the site one evening in mid May to listen out for, and hear about, nightjars.

A total of 13 of us attended this knowledge-share opportunity, and whilst we were gathered in the car park prior to setting off on our guided walk, we were delighted to be greeted by the call of a nightingale – though sadly this was not to be a herald of any observations of nightjars that particular evening, though we were privileged to receive the tour of the site by our knowledgeable and passionate guide.

Nightjars are a bird listed as “Amber” on the List of Birds of Conservation Concern [bocc-5-a5-4pp-single-pages.pdf](#), with particular requirements of large areas of mosaic habitat of mosaic heathland with stands of trees that sites like SSSI Sutton Heath provide.

Lowland heathland is a habitat that is globally rare, with around 20% of all lowland heathland worldwide being found in Britain. Even so, only around 8% of its former extent remains today. Loss of habitat is thought to be one of the main reasons for the decline of the nightjar as well.

Nightjars churr to attract mates and hold their territory. They are a ground-nesting bird, laying 2 eggs per clutch directly onto the ground. They are thus highly vulnerable to disturbance caused by dogs running loose for example – even if a dog does not destroy the nest or catch the parent bird, the disturbance caused, particularly if repeated by different dogs over a period of time, is detrimental to their breeding success. They are a migrant species, usually arriving by May, and then departing in September to return to its overwintering home in Africa.

Lowland heathland is naturally a dynamic, transitional habitat. However as a type of habitat that is now much more fragmented and rare than it was in the past when normal day-to-day land use activities in the region sustained it, it now requires intensive, active management, including the manual removal of saplings, to prevent the eventual domination of trees leading to natural succession to a woodland habitat.

Lowland heathland is a rare and special habitat, with its own distinctive community of species, with adders, whitethroats, woodlarks, Dartford warblers, the nightingale we heard on our arrival, and others too. Stonechat have nested here since 2012. Without active management, the heath would become secondary woodland and lose its special community of species including the nightjar.

The Site Management Plan for the portion of SSSI Sutton Heath managed by ESSL on behalf of ESC is available via [Sutton Heath & Upper Hollesley Management Plan](#)

