

A Breath of Fresh Air

AUTUMN

The newsletter for schools from the Horsell Common Preservation Society

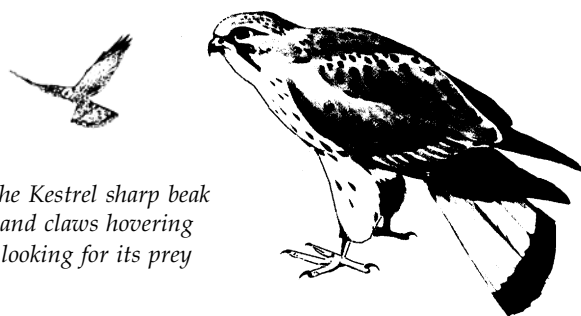
Things to look out for at this time of year

The Kestrel

The Kestrel is our most common raptor or bird of prey. Its main source of food is small rodents, large insects and earth worms.

You are most likely to see a Kestrel hovering high in the air over Horsell Birch, Grasslands Common or the Bourne Fields over by Fair Oaks Aerodrome. Hovering allows the kestrel to cover wide areas when looking for prey on the ground.

It is a fairly large bird about 34 cm in length. The adult male has a grey head and tail. The female a barred back and brown tail. Like all raptors it has big dark eyes. Large sharp claws to grab and hold its prey and a sharp hooked beak to help it tear its food apart.



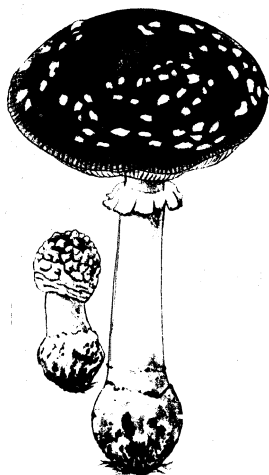
The Kestrel sharp beak and claws hovering looking for its prey

Toadstools and Mushrooms

Autumn is the time of year when we see a lot of fungi on the Common. Perhaps one of the most colourful and easy to spot is the Fly Agaric. It is bright red with white or yellowish warty patches on the top with a white stalk.

It can be found all over the Common usually under birch or pine trees. Like a great many fungi it is poisonous.

NEVER EAT ANY TYPE OF TOADSTOOL OR MUSHROOM unless you have checked with someone who knows whether it is safe. Always wash your hands if you have handled any kind of fungi.



Fly Agaric

Fly Agaric it thought to have got its name because many hundreds of years ago people would hang it in larders or pantries to deter and kill flies.

Did you know?

In the last 50 years we have lost 60% of the UK's heathland and much of what is left is in danger of turning into scrubland. That is why it is so important that we should protect the heathland areas of Horsell Common against the birch and pine trees that are taking over.

If you talk to some of the older people in the village they will tell you that when they were children you could stand on the common outside the Plough public house and be able to see all the way to Chobham. The area in between was just a mass of heather.

Heathland is very much man-made 40 or 50 years ago people still grazed cattle on the common. They would also have taken wood to burn in their houses.

Grasslands common on the far side of Littlewick Road has been fenced and as an experiment cattle are being allowed to graze the land in the hope that heathland can be recreated.

Heathland is very important to many types of wild life especially rare birds like the nightjar and Dartford warbler both of which build their nests on the Common. The Common is also home to rare plants, ants and wasps that are found hardly anywhere else in the UK.

At first glance heather does not look as if it will support much wild life, but if you take a walk across the Common on any one of these misty autumn mornings just look and see how many cobwebs there are that catch the early morning sun. Each one is a spider and each has to catch some small insect to eat to stay alive.

During the winter months the Surrey Wildlife Trust organise working parties to cut and pull up young pine and birch seedlings that have started to invade the heather. Details of the dates and times are shown over the page. Young people will need to be accompanied by an adult. You will need to wear wellies and it is advisable to bring an old pair of gloves as the pine seedlings can leave sticky gum on your hands.

Working Parties on the Common

Working parties meet at the six crossroads car park. Hand tools are supplied. Wear old clothes.

Sunday 11th October 10am until 1pm

Sunday 8th November " "

Sunday 13th December " "

Rubbish Dumping

Rubbish Dumping is a big problem on the Common. We spend over £3,000 a year clearing up other people's rubbish. One of the biggest problems is garden waste. What's wrong with a few lawn clippings? Well, rotting waste is not only unsightly it forms compost which enriches the soil causing changes in the natural pattern of vegetation - heathland plants like impoverished soil. Look at the areas where houses back onto the Common and you will see brambles and stinging nettles, these would not grow if were not for the enriched soil. Small wild flowers are simply smothered. Pests, weedkillers and diseases carried on waste damage and change the natural ecology. If you see anyone dumping rubbish Bob Shatwell would like to know his number is 0860 712503.

Common Warden's Word Search

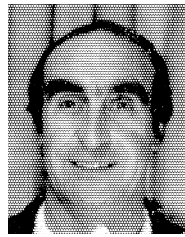
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Can you find the 17 hidden words of things that can be found on the common:

<i>Fungi</i>	<i>Fox</i>	<i>Adder</i>	<i>Stonechat</i>
<i>Dragonfly</i>	<i>Gorse</i>	<i>Heather</i>	<i>Oak</i>
<i>Deer</i>	<i>Mouse</i>	<i>Vole</i>	<i>Orchid</i>
<i>Badger</i>	<i>Nest</i>	<i>Brimstone</i>	<i>Beetle</i>
	<i>Dartford Warbler</i>		

Horsell Common Preservation Society

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Bob's Column

Bob Shatwell is the Common Warden. He can often be seen working on the Common. He is over 6ft so you can't miss him. If you see him stop and say Hello!

Turn the tables on mammals

The frustrating thing about British Mammals is that the majority of them are small, shy and only tend to come out at night. Winter makes it so much easier to watch mammals because they become more adventurous in looking for food, the natural food supply has dwindled, and the ground cover has been snatched away so making them easier to see. To increase the chance of seeing small mammals in your own garden create the mammal equivalent of a birdtable. This may attract visitors such as field voles, bank voles, woodmice, field mice or even the rarer yellow necked mouse. All these mammals are very nervous so you have to be careful where you put your mammal table. Near natural cover, such as the hedge, put a piece of board slightly off the ground, onto the board put seeds, (sunflower are good), fruit, (apple), and nuts, (preferably chopped hazel). Cover the board with a dome of chicken wire, this will protect the mammals while they feed and also keep the birds off during the day.

To stop any mammals from grabbing a piece and running away with it make the tasty morsels small, or sticky. This encourages the animal to stay until it's had enough thus giving you time to carefully observe it and identify it.

It is worth pre baiting the area before putting out the table to encourage the mammals to visit on a regular basis so that when you put out the table the animals should visit on the first night. Now all you have to do is wrap up warm, get a comfortable seat to sit on, arm yourself with a strong torch fitted with a red cellophane cover over the lens, (this allows you to see the animal without disturbing it), get out there after dusk and wait. Your patience should be rewarded. You may hear or even see a visiting tawny or little owl out hunting for your mice etc.

GOOD HUNTING!

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