

## Cooper's Hill nature trail

1 As you climb out of the wood you'll pass areas of **acid grassland** giving way to **heather** further up. Both habitats are an important component of the heathland supporting many specialist plants and animals. These rare habitats are found here due to the light sandy soil, which is acidic and low in nutrients making it hostile to other plants. From the top of the ridge through the trees you can look west along the Greensand Ridge which runs between Leighton Buzzard and Gamlingay.

2 As you walk along this stretch you get some of the best views of the **open heath**. It is managed by careful cutting or burning the old heather in small patches to stimulate new growth and provide a mosaic of age structures. Uncontrolled fires can be a serious hazard so burning is only allowed under very strict control.

3 The heathland contains pockets of **gorse** and **broom** providing splashes of yellow when in flower. These scrubby patches are managed by periodically cutting back older growth to maintain young healthy bushes, supporting birds and pollinating insects through the year. If left uncontrolled this scrub would slowly creep out at the expense of the open heather. From here you can take a shortcut down to the war memorial at the end of the Alameda walk.



Common heather



4 The valley at the southern end of the heath contains areas of heather, grass and bare ground leading up to a small copse of oak trees. This mix supports a wide range of species, in particular heathland invertebrates such as the **green tiger beetle** and **solitary bees and wasps** which dig their nests in bare sand. **Green woodpeckers** can often be seen flying up from the ground where they feed and **common lizards** bask on sunny banks.

5 A small plantation of **pine trees** here and the war memorial behind them reminds us of the turbulent history of the site. Historically known as Amptill Warren it is likely that **grazing by rabbits** and other animals kept the heathland open until it was planted with conifers in the nineteenth century. During 1917 the trees were cleared as part of the war effort and the heath was able to recover.

6 Areas of **woodland** such as this can be found at the edges of the reserve where they provide shelter for birds and insects. **Spangle galls** on oak leaves and **knopper galls** on acorns are caused by parasitic wasps laying their eggs on the tree. Fungi thrive here from the iconic **fly agaric** to brackets of **birch polypore** on dying trees.



Green woodpecker

7 At the top of the steep hill on your left is a concrete cap showing the location of an old Royal Observatory Corps bunker dug during World War Two. A short detour up the steps also gives a good view back over the **open heath**. Lots of heather has been lost at the bottom of this slope due to a combination of heather beetle and increased nutrients from leaf litter causing the grass to take over. We combat this by thinning the trees and removing areas of turf to expose **bare sand** giving the heather seeds a better chance to germinate.



Common lizard