

FILEX 9 is a simple introduction to the vast subject of Wildlife on Exmoor. It describes some of Exmoor's special habitats and typical flora and fauna (plants and animals). Some of the rare species (types of plant and animal) found on Exmoor are also named. There are short features on red deer and the Exmoor pony.

## Wildlife on Exmoor

One of the main reasons why Exmoor was chosen as a National Park was the beauty and variety of its wild landscape. This includes:

- moorland
- woodland
- villages and farmland
- river valleys (called combes)
- coast and cliffs.

Each type of landscape provides many different habitats for a huge number of animals, birds, insects and plants.

### On Exmoor:

- there are 40 native species of land mammals, including the red deer, Exmoor pony and 15 species of bat
- 275 different species of bird have been spotted in the last 50 years, of which 111 species now nest in the National Park including moorland birds such as the Stonechat and Dartford Warbler and woodland species such as Pied Flycatcher and Redstart.
- nearly 1200 species of flowers and grasses have been recorded, and over 600 species of lichens which show that the air quality is very high
- 3634 species of insects have been identified. These include over 1200 species of moths and butterflies and nearly 1200 species of beetles!

But it isn't just the number of species that makes Exmoor's wildlife so special. There are many unusual habitats on Exmoor which have not been disturbed, where uncommon, and even rare, plants and animals live.

Some of the habitats are so unusual that they have been made Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI or 'Triple S I's for short). The Countryside and Rights of Way Act (2001) normally associated with the 'right to roam' has also increased the protection of SSSIs and important species. Some of these sites are also significant in a European context and have been given the recognition as Special Areas of Conservation (SACs).



Photograph - Mark Thole



Dormouse

## Habitats on Exmoor

### Moorland

Most people think of moorland when they think of Exmoor. About a quarter of Exmoor National Park is open uncultivated moor and heath lying between 305 m (1000 ft) and 519 m (1700 ft) above sea level.

Moors are found on wet, acid soil. There are grass moors where many grasses and sedges grow, including purple moor grass and deer sedge, and heather moors with mainly ling.

Heaths are found on free-draining soil. Ling and bell heather grow there along with gorse, whortleberry and bracken.

The moorland appears natural and undisturbed but it was partly created by human beings who destroyed the prehistoric woods on the hills by cutting down trees and grazing domestic animals. In order to keep moorland we need to stop small trees and bushes growing there. This is done by swaling or burning the vegetation on the moor and by grazing.

- It is very important that swaling takes place at the right time of year before birds build their nests and reptiles come out of hibernation, and not too often or grass and bracken will take over from the heather.

The Exmoor pony, though not strictly wild, roams the moors and the sharp-eyed may see red deer. Birds include the soaring sky-lark with its trembling, high-pitched song, snipe and kestrels. You might see a buzzard swooping after its prey. The merlin is a rarity.

### Woodland

Around 8,400 hectares of Exmoor, or about 12% of the National Park, are wooded. About a quarter of the wooded area is “ancient semi natural woodland” generally the most important areas for wildlife.

These sites are known to have been under continuous tree cover for at least 200 years (when the earliest reliable maps were produced). But many are likely to be much older and may date back for hundreds evens thousands of years.

A great variety of plants are found in woods as old as this. Some, like the woods belonging to the National Trust at Horner and at Watersmeet, are specially protected as SSSIs. These woods feel old with gnarled trees festooned with ferns, mosses and lichens. Lichens grow where the air is really clear and there are more than 240 different species in woods around Dunkery. The main trees are sessile oak, ash and hazel. The oak used to be coppiced (cut down to allow plenty of new growth) to produce bark for tanning leather and timber for charcoal burning and boat building. The hazel was coppiced to produce spars for thatching and struts for making hurdles.

- One of the main threats to Exmoor’s woodlands is the spread of *Rhododendron ponticum*, an alien invasion plant which quickly takes over woodland habitats.

Fallow deer and roe deer live in the woods together with grey squirrels, hedgehogs and dormice. Red deer may shelter there. Woodpeckers, tree-creepers and nuthatches all nest in holes in trees; wood warblers and pied flycatchers feed on insects in the oak canopy. Butterflies are numerous and often colonies of wood ants can be found living in scattered mounds of twigs and leaf litter.



Stonechat

### Coast and cliffs

Exmoor’s coastline is the highest in England. Cliffs rise to 250m (820 ft) and coastal hills to 433m (1420 ft). On exposed cliffs nesting birds include guillemots, razorbills, kittiwakes, ravens and rare peregrine falcons. Some areas sheltered from the Atlantic gales have natural woodland almost down to the beach where sessile oak, yew and rare whitebeams grow.

The rocky beaches are regularly scoured by the very high tides but there are plenty of seaweeds and molluscs. Protected by the shingle beach at Porlock is a saltmarsh where you might see curlews and oyster-catchers as well as unusual plants, including sea blite and glasswort, which used to be used in glass making.

### Rivers and streams

There are more than 483 km (300 miles) of rivers and streams on Exmoor flowing down narrow combs or valleys, usually wooded in the lower stretches. There are plenty of fish in the clear water, including brown trout and loaches. Some rivers are spawning grounds for salmon. Water insects, including damselflies and dragonflies, are abundant.

Nesting birds include the dipper and grey wagtail.

In some places you might see a stately grey heron or the blue flash of a kingfisher.

- The otter has gradually increased in numbers since the 1970’s but still needs help to protect its habitat.
- Sadly, the water vole appears to be virtually extinct, and this is believed to be the result of the changes in the way its habitat has been managed and predation by mink.

## Farmland and villages

The fields and hedgerows surrounding farms and villages are habitats for many small mammals such as badgers, foxes, hares, moles and rabbits. Many old hedgerows are made up of ten or more types of shrub. Beech hedges in the central part of Exmoor were planted to enclose fields taken from moorland and are less than 200 years old. Barns and other buildings sometimes house bats and owls which are protected species. Bats feed on insects associated with species rich hedges.

## Red Deer

Exmoor is unique in England as red deer have lived there since prehistoric times. Elsewhere they became extinct because people killed them for meat (venison) or because they ate farmers' crops. They have been re-introduced in some areas but Exmoor still has half of all the red deer in England. There are at least three thousand in North Devon and West Somerset, living on the moor and using the woods as a place of safety.

Red deer are the largest wild land animals in England these days. Adult stags stand 115 cm at the shoulder. Hinds are about 15 cm less. Only stags grow antlers. They shed them in April and early May and new ones start to grow immediately. As the stag gets older the antlers have more 'points' until they reach old age and start to 'go back'.



Red Deer on Exmoor. Photograph - Heather Lowther (ENPA)

Calves are born in June and July, and are usually dropped in moorland vegetation or by the edge of woodland. A single calf is normal and twins very rare. For a few days the calf will lie quietly, well-camouflaged with dappled spots on its russet coat looking like sunlight on dead bracken. Soon it is strong enough to run with its mother and join the herd. They keep together for a year or more.

Red deer eat a wide variety of food, including young shoots of heather, whortleberry, brambles, saplings and grass. They also feed on acorns, fungi, berries and ivy and can be a real pest to the farmer, raiding his fields for corn and root crops. They have eight biting teeth in front of the lower jaw, and none immediately above, biting against a hard gum pad. Footprints are called 'slots'.

Except during the autumn rut or mating period, red deer normally form separate stag and hind herds, though you may see mixed herds or a single stag or hind and calf. They are mainly silent animals, but hinds will bark at intruders especially if their young are about or as a warning to the herd. During the rut in October and November you can hear the stags belling or roaring. Their sight, hearing and sense of smell are excellent so it is quite difficult to get close to them.

## Exmoor pony

The Exmoor is a unique breed of pony which has lived on the moor longer than people have. It is important because it is the nearest breed we have to the original wild horses of Europe. It has evolved in response to its environment, becoming hardy and resilient to the cold and wet.

- These days the ponies are wild in the sense that the herds roaming freely on the moor are not tame and can survive without assistance, but all the ponies belong to someone and each herd is confined to a particular area of moorland. A few years ago people were afraid that the pony might become extinct so the National Park Authority bought young stock and now owns two herds. There are also six main privately owned herds.



Exmoor ponies

The Exmoor pony always breeds true to its type. Its colouring ranges from dun (a smoky-brown) to bay (red-brown) or brown (dark brown). Underparts and the area around the eyes and nose are a mealy buff colour while the mane, tail and points are black. The summer coat is fine and glossy but in winter the ponies grow a thick, two-layered protective coat. Average height is about 12 hands. The true Exmoor is a sturdy pony, well-proportioned and sure footed. It has a large, well-shaped head with 'toad' eyes, large and dark, slightly hooded and set under a jutting brow which throws off the rain.

Foals are born in the spring and early summer and spend the summer running with their dams and building up a store of fat to take them through the hard winter ahead. In the autumn the herds are driven down to the farms; foals are weaned and all the ponies are inspected and branded before being returned to the moor for the winter.

## Looking after Exmoor

The most important thing that Exmoor National Park Authority has to do is to look after the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of Exmoor – **this is called CONSERVATION.**

National Parks were chosen originally for their scenery, not their wildlife, but since they were created many habitats have been lost in the rest of the countryside, making the National Parks more important for wildlife.

The past 50 years have seen many changes on Exmoor, particularly as farming techniques developed and farmers began to use more machines, fertilisers and pesticides.

- Hedges were removed to make fields bigger
- Old flower-rich meadows and moorland was ploughed up
- Ancient woodland was replanted with commercial conifer crops
- Animals like the otter became rare because of river pollution and because the river banks were cleared of bushes and undergrowth.



Conservation work on North hill, Minehead.

Conservation doesn't mean preserving Exmoor as if it were a museum and never changing anything. Some things may need improving!

- The National Park Authority owns around 4500 hectares of land including moorland and woodland and manages it to conserve and enhance its wildlife interest. Tarr Steps Woodlands and Hawkcombe Woodlands have both been recently designated by English Nature as National Nature Reserves (NNRs).
- Many of our moorland sites require scrub, bracken and Rhododendron control, whilst in our woodlands we need to control species such as beech and sycamore (which are not native to Exmoor) and Rhododendron. Volunteers help carry out conservation work on some of our sites.
- Other areas of land on Exmoor are owned by organisations such as the National Trust – including Horner Wood National Nature Reserve – which also manage land for conservation.

In 2001, the National Park Authority produced its own Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) which aims to help conserve Exmoor's most important habitats and species. For example, we are:

- Recreating areas of heathland by removing conifers and grazing with Exmoor ponies.
- Reinstating wildlife rich areas of blanket bog
- Replanting woodlands with native trees
- Carrying out a programme of knotweed control across the National Park
- Creating woodland glades for the heath fritillary butterfly to encourage it back to its favoured habitat.



Heath fritillary



Grey Heron. Photograph - Heather Lowther (ENPA)