

Account of Purley on Thames

Habitats and Ecology

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Introduction

Purley contains within its borders a wide number of ecological areas. An ecological area is distinguished by such factors as degree of dampness, soil composition, shade and aspect, land use. Each has its own distinctive collection of plant and animal life. In summary they are:-

- Banks of the Thames
- Other smaller watercourses
- Gravel pit
- Flood meadows
- Open fields on river gravels
- Open fields on chalk hillsides
- Hedgerows
- Verges of highways
- Railway Embankments
- Gardens
- Buildings
- Copses and small woodlands
- Sulham Woods

Most of these have been managed to some extent or other by man, but a number have been almost overlooked by man and allowed to revert almost back to nature.

Banks of the Thames

Up to the beginning of the second world war the Purley bank of the Thames was clear so that barges could be towed by horses using the footpath. Since the demise of the horse drawn barge however the south bank has acquired trees and shrubs as well as patches of reed beds.

The banks vary considerably along the length of the river. There are parts where the bank is built up, eg around the lock, parts where there are shelving beaches to allow cattle to drink, reed beds, and steeply sloping banks from the meadows down to the river. Especially in these latter areas there can be found burrows for the small riverside mammals and around the reed beds some very secluded habitats for birds and insects as well as small mammals.

The plant life is typical river edge water loving species with plenty of willows. The river itself is of course a habitat for fish and all sorts of aquatic creatures and forms a magnet for a very wide variety of water based birds.

Other smaller Watercourses

Other watercourses include the Sul Brook, the West Brook and a number of drainage ditches. many of the plants and insects are similar to those found on the banks of the Thames but there are far fewer and smaller fish and the number and variety of birds is greatly reduced.

Most of these courses can be subject to drought and the Sul Brook for example has on many occasions almost dried up leaving fish stranded. The Sul Brook has an arm which passes through the Purley Hall Canal and consequently has carried water lilies down to the Thames, where they may be seen in profusion in the semi stagnant waters around the mouth of the brook and for a few hundred yards or so downstream.

Gravel Pits

These include the old gravel pit on Home Farm as well as the two artificial lakes on Westbury Farm. The water being stagnant attracts many different species of insects and plants from the moving watercourses.

Flood Meadows

Most of the meadows on the south side of the river are subject to flooding on a regular basis. This tends to induce a much more lush grass crop and they are still used for grazing cattle. However all sorts of other water loving plants can be found here and nowhere else.

Open Fields on River Gravels

The former west common field has been divided by the railway. North of the railway the land used to be used for growing crops but now it is being turned into parkland for the Springs Farm Equestrian Centre. There has been a massive planting of trees and shrubs of all sorts. South of the railway on either side of the A329 the land is still farmed conventionally by Sulham Estate.

The Common east field forms part of Home Farm and while most of the land is used to graze cattle, crops are grown to provide fodder and part is taken up with the Allotments.

Open Fields on Chalk Hillsides

To the east of Long Lane all the land has been overwhelmed by housing. To the west what used to be grazing is now mainly ploughed and used to grow grains to qualify for an EU subsidy. Part of it is reserved for ground nesting birds in the season.

Hedgerows

There are still a wide variety of hedgerows in Purley providing home for many species of birds, insects and small mammals.

Verges of Highways

There are several distinct areas adjacent to highways such as the A329, Long Lane and Purley Lane. Such verges tend to have two parts, the immediate verge which is cut regularly and the residual area which is usually left to nature and which is rarely penetrated by man. Many areas are infested with bramble and the problems with lead pollution has tended to deter people from blackberrying and so they are interfered with even less than they were only a few years ago.

It is in these areas, especially the railway embankment, that one is perhaps most likely to come across snakes and other retiring creatures such as badgers, rabbits and mice.

Railway Embankment

This is a very protected habitat although every few years the railway send in men to cut back any large trees. It tends to be less disturbed and affected by lead pollution from car exhausts than the highway verges. There have been many sightings of large cats and it is believed to be home to a family, possibly of Lynx.

Gardens

The variety of habitats in back gardens in Purley is far too wide to generalise. However there is a very large number of secluded areas supporting bird and insect life as well as a number of rarer plant species.

Squirrels abound as did hedgehogs and other mammals. Regrettably the hedgehogs have now virtually disappeared.

Buildings

The buildings of Purley provide homes to a wide variety of creatures ranging from rats and mice, through birds, insects and spiders. Many houses have niches in which bats roost.

Copses and small Woodlands

There are many remnants of woodlands including Pike Shaw and what is now referred to generally as Skerritt Woods. But there are also trees surrounding the recreation grounds and bowling green as well as the churchyard and marina.

Sulham Woods

Sulham woods lie just over the border to the south and are in the Parish of Sulham but they have always formed part of the ecology of Purley. To the south of the woods is woodland managed by the Forestry Commission.

Isolated Trees

Perhaps the most notable isolated tree is the ancient oak on Long Lane opposite the entrance to Cecil Aldin Drive. This is reputed to be over 500 years old and, being hollow, is a great place for children to play.

Tree Preservation Orders

A very large number of the trees in Purley are subject to a Tree Preservation Order. These orders can apply to both an individual tree or to a small area of 'trees of whatever species'

Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Most of the land to the north and west of the built-up area is part of the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and thus has a high level of protection. North of the Thames is the Chiltern Hills which has a similar level of protection.