

BOOKHAM COMMON
Surrey

from www.discoverbutterflies.com the website
for the book *Discover Butterflies in Britain*
© D E Newland



Turkey oaks on Bookham Common

Bookham Common is a well-known open, undulating area of oak woods, scrub, grassland and ponds. It is near Leatherhead, on the north side of the Guildford to Leatherhead road A246. The Guildford to Leatherhead railway line passes immediately south of the Common in a short tunnel.

Owned and managed by the National Trust, this is an SSSI with a total area of some 150 ha (370 acres).

TARGET SPECIES

Purple Emperor (for which this is one of the best sites in Surrey), White Admiral, Silver-washed Fritillary, White-letter and Purple Hairstreaks.

Bookham Common, which is properly known as Bookham Commons in the plural, consists of three connected open areas, Great Bookham Common, Little Bookham Common and Banks Common. In the 1920s, they were given to the National Trust by their separate owners and, since then, have been managed by the Trust as a public open-access common. This became an SSSI in 1961. The commons are on the edge of the London Clay belt, where it adjoins the chalk of the North Downs, and the site is partly covered with sand and flints. This makes for a variety of habitats including wetlands and damp heathland. There are now a dozen ponds, the five largest man-made for fish production in the 17th century.

The Commons have been intensively studied for many years as they come within range of the London Natural History Society. The LNHS has been working here since 1941 and now organizes monthly events and field study days to which everyone is invited, beginner or expert alike. As a result, a huge amount is known about the wildlife here.

For butterfly lovers, this is one of the main sites for the Purple Emperor. In the 1980s, Ken Willmott made a detailed study of their ecology and conservation at Bookham Common and his work threw new light on all stages of their life-cycle. By painstaking observations and a great deal of time spent searching, he uncovered much new information which has now been incorporated in published accounts of their ecology.

A good place to start is at the tunnel car park, which is over the short railway tunnel at the southern edge of the site. This is a short distance from the centre of Great Bookham and not far from St Nicolas Parish Church.

At the beginning of their flight season, in early July, you may find male Purple Emperors coming down to the ground in this car park or along the start of both rides, not far from the car park. My wife once had a close-up view of one while waiting for me in our car. Since the time was 6:30 pm, I had been concentrating on looking for high-level activity, and arrived back from further away just in time to see her beautiful specimen leaving to return to the tree tops.

Two main rides leave the car park, one heading north-west and the other north-east. If you take the easterly route, fork left after a little over $\frac{1}{4}$ mile to leave the edge of the Common and head into the Eastern Wood which leads you up to the car park at Mark Oak Gate. The tall Turkey Oaks here are one of the main assembly areas for Purple Emperors where you should see high-level activity particularly in the afternoon and evening. Before their importance as an assembly area for Purple Emperors was recognised, the National Trust planned to fell these Turkey Oaks as they are not an indigenous species, but Ken Willmott persuaded them not to. The westerly route along the ride called Common Road takes you along the side of Hill House Wood (on your right-hand side after about $\frac{3}{4}$ mile) and there is another regular assembly area in the tall trees at the northern edge of this wooded area, east of the car park at the north-west corner of the Common.

There is a good distribution of willow along the edges of the main rides, so there are good opportunities for breeding (Purple Emperors lay only on bushes and trees of the willow family) and, with luck, you may see a female Purple Emperor descending to lay her eggs on the willows. Females are often significantly larger than males, with more pronounced white markings, but with none of the purple sheen. There is also plenty of bracken and bramble scrub which attracts White Admirals and Silver-washed Fritillaries, both of which are fairly common here. If the scrub is below elm trees or elm suckers, bramble blossom sometimes attracts White-letter Hairstreaks down from the elm. And if you can find Hemp Agrimony growing in some of the wet areas on the common, this may provide a nectar source for Purple Hairstreaks and allow you to see them at close quarters.

There are no facilities at the Common, but toilets are available and refreshments can be found in Great Bookham village, which is close. The surfaces of the two main rides are good, and suitable for wheelchairs and mobility scooters for much of their length (the easterly route is more difficult). Access into the wilder areas of the common is not however be practicable for most mobility vehicles.



Tunnel car park at Bookham Common



Turkey oak near Mark Oak Gate



Eastern ride at Bookham Common



Broadway looking south



Bookham Common bracken and bramble undergrowth



Bookham Common, the Broadway with wide verges and willow



Bookham Parish Church just south of the Common



White Admiral on bramble at Bookham Common in July



Pond at Bookham Common with bird hide



Bookham Common pond in July



White Admirals nectaring together at Bookham Common



White Admiral, Bookham Common, in July



National Trust sign



NT's Tunnel Car Park sign



White-letter Hairstreak at ground level



Purple Emperor on the author's trouser leg



Purple Hairstreak on scrub below oaks



Purple Emperor on moist ground in early July

LOCATION

Explorer Map 146: Dorking, Box Hill & Reigate
Landranger (pink) Map 187: Dorking, Reigate & Crawley
The National Trust's tunnel car park is at TQ130557

There are 3 main car parks: the tunnel car park at the south end on the edge of Great Bookham village, and two northerly car parks on Cobham Road (at the north-east end) and on Bookham Road (coming south from Cobham at the north-west end of the common). Bookham station on the Leatherhead to Guildford railway line is only a short distance from the tunnel car park.

Tunnel car park is a good place to start, whether coming by train, car, cycle or on foot. The best time for Purple Emperors is July, or sometimes the last day or two in June, and both the main rides starting from the tunnel car park are good places to look for males coming to ground. They may do this at any time of the day, but particularly during the morning. Good places to look for White Admirals and Silver-washed Fritillaries are along areas of scrub and bramble, particularly in the northern half of the common. Access to the Purple Emperors' assembly areas in the Mark Oak and Hill House Wood areas are easily reached by following the main rides northwards.

There are no facilities at Bookham Common, but these and refreshments are available at Great Bookham not far away. Wheelchair access is good along the main rides, although it can be difficult if you want to leave the hard-surfaced tracks.

St Nicolas Church, Great Bookham, is at Bookham crossroads in the middle of the village and has an interesting history. The National Trust's Polesden Lacey is just south of Great Bookham and the house overlooks Ranmore Common which adjoins the very good butterfly site at Denbies Hillside.