



Nature and wildlife at Beckenham Place Park

Beckenham Place Park has a wide variety of high-quality habitats including: the most extensive area of ancient woodland in Lewisham; the most diverse acid grassland; the most natural stretch of river; probably the oldest pond; and the only willow carr. Consequently, it is designated a Local Nature Reserve (LNR) and a Site of Metropolitan Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC). The park contains a high diversity of plants and animals including numerous locally rare species and several nationally rare invertebrates.

Woodland

About 30 hectares (almost 1/3) of Beckenham Place Park is woodland, and about 20 hectares of this is ancient woodland. This is the term given to areas of woodland that have been in existence since at least 1600. They can be identified by certain ancient woodland indicator species, such as wood anemone, that are slow spreading and therefore less likely to be found in newer woodlands. The park's ancient woodland is in a large block in the middle of the park.

The main woodland in the middle of the park appears on Rocque's map of 1745 as Langstead Wood. By the First Edition Ordnance Survey Map of 1863 it had become known as Summerhouse Hill Wood. The northern part of the wood is marked on the 1863 map as the Ash Plantation, suggesting that someone (probably John Cator) had planted ash trees within the existing woodland here. Although the summerhouse has long since been demolished, these names are still in use today.



Woodland management is carried out from October-February (outside the bird nesting season) to keep a healthy balance between the canopy, shrub and ground flora layers. Without management the shrub layer, especially holly, has a tendency to take over and shade out ground flora such as bluebells. The park's woodland management also involves: the removal of invasive species such as rhododendrons and cherry laurel; the creation of glades (where more sunlight reaches the ground, and where insects such as butterflies can flourish); coppicing of sweet chestnut; and the creation of dead hedging to stop visitors walking through certain areas of woodland. The dead hedges are excellent habitats for insects too. Much of the woodland management is undertaken by park volunteers.



Trees

Most of these woods have a high forest structure, although there are few trees of any great age. Pedunculate oak is the dominant canopy tree over much of Summerhouse Hill Wood, with varying amounts of sweet chestnut and silver birch. An ash plantation was previously created within the woods at the northern end (nearer the wet woodland area) and this species is still prevalent in this location today.

Beech and other varieties, both native and exotic exist. Particularly notable among these are:

- a very large wild service-tree, an uncommon species which is regarded as a good indicator of ancient woodland
- at least one mature wild pear
- some particularly fine field maples

Other native trees present in the wood include wild cherry, rowan, common whitebeam, downy birch and hornbeam. The presence of half a dozen mature true service-trees in the southern part of Summerhouse Hill Wood is also of interest and was presumably planted in John Cator's time.

Other trees were certainly planted in the wood at this time, including a few common lime, Scots pine and other conifers. Sycamore and the closely-related Norway maple may have been first introduced at around the same time.



Sycamore is now widespread and locally dominant. This tree took full advantage of the demise of the English elm and spread rapidly throughout the woodland. Its spread is, however, slowing down due to a high incidence of sooty bark disease, a fungal infection which kills sycamore trees, leaving the dead tree with peeling bark which reveals the blackish underside which gives the disease its name. These dead and dying sycamores support a diverse beetle community including the nationally rare *Cicones undatus* which was only discovered in Britain 1984.

Norway maple is less widespread in the wood, but is nevertheless also spreading, and is potentially as invasive as sycamore. It currently dominates the woodland on the slopes of the steep cutting leading from the Crab Hill entrance to the park.



Other flora

The shrub layer comprises:

- hazel
- hawthorn
- holly
- canopy species.

The shrub layer is at its densest and most diverse in the part of the Ash Plantation east of the railway.

Elder and blackthorn are locally frequent and less common species include:

- black currant
- buckthorn
- wild privet
- dog-rose
- field-rose
- gooseberry
- red currant
- wych elm.



A number of exotic species have been planted, including the potentially invasive rhododendron.

The ground flora is diverse and includes a good number of ancient woodland indicators, many of which are rare or absent elsewhere in Lewisham.

Bluebells are particularly abundant, forming spectacular carpets of deep blue flowers in spring. Also present are:

- dog's mercury
- early dog-violet
- wood-sedge
- remote sedge
- stinking iris
- wall lettuce
- wood anemone
- wood melick
- wood millet
- wood forget-me-not
- wood meadow-grass.
- Wood spurge, scaly male-fern and yellow archangel are each found in only one locality within the wood (and nowhere else in Lewisham as far as is known).



Stumpshill Wood

Stumpshill Wood is a rather narrow strip of woodland which runs all along the western edge of the park. Despite its name, which suggests a history of coppice management, it has a high forest structure with a large number of very fine, mature and veteran oaks. Also present are: ash, field maple, beech, hornbeam, sweet chestnut. A good range of shrubs is present along with some of the park's best displays of wood anemones. Bluebells are frequent and there are small amounts of wood millet.





Wet woodland

Wet woodland (also known as “carr”) is a rare habitat in London. In Beckenham Place Park, it is found adjacent to the lake. When the lake level is high, some of the water flows over into the wet woodland area. This is helping to improve the wet woodland habitat, as prior to the lake’s creation in 2019, the “wet” woodland was rather dry, and species that grow in deciduous woodland were beginning to take over from those that prefer damper ground conditions. Now, wet woodland species such as alder are beginning to re-establish. Wet woodlands provide excellent habitat for invertebrates and amphibians, making it a good feeding ground for bird and bats. Species of bird such as marsh tits, willow tits, siskin and redpoll all like living near wet woodland. In Beckenham Place Park, the path around the wet woodland is also a good location for spotting gold crests, the country’s smallest bird, as there are a pair that like to feed in the vegetation along the path.

Acid grassland

Areas of the park are acid grassland (on acidic soil) or semi-improved acid grassland. This is a habitat that has declined in London owing to urban development, the creation of sports pitches and the improvement of soil quality (by adding nutrients) to create amenity grassland. It has also suffered from lack of management resulting in the grassland’s development into scrub or woodland. The acid grassland in Beckenham Place Park is largely around the edges of the old golf course fairways, where the grass was mown less often. These areas are now deliberately mown even less frequently to allow the grasses and plants specific to this habitat to re-establish. Many of the species of plants found in the park’s acidic grassland have characterful names, for example cat’s tail *Phleum pratense* and mouse-ear hawkweed *Pilosella officinalis*. A large array of animals can be found in well-developed acid grassland habitats: small mammals such as mice and voles attract birds of prey such as kestrels. The large range of invertebrates attract birds that feed on them such as green woodpeckers, which you might see pecking on the ground.





Meadows

There are several meadow areas in the park. These are on more neutral soil than the acid grasslands. Crab Hill is one such area. It is managed as a hay meadow and is cut just once a year, towards the end of the summer. This will allow its ecological value to increase, as wildflowers have more opportunity to grow, benefitting the insects that feed on them and in turn the birds and mammals that prey on the insects.

You will also see wildflowers growing on the western side of the park around the perimeter of the park near Stumps Hill wood and the boundary with the railway line. These areas are deliberately left to grow longer, and in the late spring and summer, the vibrant colours of the flowers is striking.





Photo credit: Richard Hughes

Lake

John Cator created a lake as part of his Georgian parkland. This was probably between 1785 and 1800, as he closed a road crossing his land to make it possible.

Restoring this lake was at the heart of the regeneration of Beckenham Place Park in 2019. The new lake sits in the footprint of the original, but at 283 metres it is only half the length. The current lake is also deeper, reaching depths of 3.5 metres compared to the original's 1.8 metres. Being deeper means there is more oxygen in the water, which supports more aquatic life.

The lake has three shelves built into its structure for water plants. Native species such as water forget-me-not and purple loosestrife encourage wildlife and add to the beauty of the lake. This new habitat is designed to support many species including. Pipistrelle and Daubenton's bats already live in the park. They benefit from the enriched feeding ground over the water. Water fowl have taken to the lake and Little Grebe successfully bred there in 2020, as did mallards, coots, and moorhens. Egyptian Geese are regularly seen on the lake and grey herons enjoy fishing from the reedy banks. In 2020, Hobbies nested in the park in a tree overlooking the lake. Hobbies (large birds of prey that migrate to the UK from African to breed in summer months) like to prey on dragonflies, swifts and swallows. All of these feed over the lake. It is thought to be the first time the hobbies have nested in the park. This is proof that, re-creating the lake has very rapidly established new food chains.





Ponds

Stumps Hill Pond, also known as 'the ancient pond' was restored in 2019-20 thanks to grants obtained by the Friends of Beckenham Place Park. During the restoration, the pond was de-silted and some overgrown vegetation removed so that the pond now has more sunlight reaching it. This means it is a healthier habitat for a range of aquatic plant and animal species. It has also been planted with marginal plants, and over time these will develop into an attractive habitat for nesting waterfowl. The pond is already popular with mallards, coots and moorhens, and the occasional Little Egret has been spotted fishing there too. Frogs have been sighted in the pond margins and it is hoped that, since the pond is deep, it might become a habitat for toads. The pond has a boardwalk and benches and is a lovely quiet spot for contemplation and wildlife watching!



There is also a pond near Gardener's Cottage too, in a mini wildflower meadow. Despite its small size, the wildlife pond lives up to its name: it too has frogs, and dragonflies can often be seen darting over it in summer months. Wood pigeons and other birds often drink from it.

The River Ravensbourne

The River Ravensbourne runs through the park, mostly still within its natural bed. The whole of the park drains into the Ravensbourne. The fields next to the river were its natural flood plain and therefore often get very boggy during heavy rainfall and during the winter. The river banks are lined with willow and in spring, cow parsley is abundant. Kingfishers are occasionally seen along this stretch of the river - look out for a flash of blue as they fly by at speed.





Formal gardens

When John Cator built and lived in the mansion in the late 18th century, he created a garden within the more extensive grazed parkland. This was known as the 'pleasure grounds'. It was enclosed within estate railing to keep grazing animals out. Herbs and produce for the mansion kitchen were grown here. Cator also displayed specimen exotic plants from the Americas, brought to him by his father-in-law, Peter Collinson, who was a well-known botanist.

Today, the path layout and the planting of the formal gardens resonate its history. The North American species are what Cator is likely to have planted. They complement other exotic species and ensure plentiful colour and interest throughout the year. In addition, the estate railing which encloses and defines the pleasure grounds is the same as Cator used.

The flowers of the formal gardens attract pollinators throughout much of the year – listen for the hum of bees busily collecting nectar! There are also many species of bird to be seen on the feeders in the sensory garden and community garden, as well as more widely in the formal gardens. Goldfinch, for example, enjoy feeding on the teasel seed heads in autumn and winter, and also like the extensive lavender to be found in the formal gardens.



The lists below are not exhaustive, but give an indication of some of the fauna that can be spotted in Beckenham Place Park.

Animals

- Grey squirrel
- Badger
- Wood mouse
- Bank vole
- Common pipistrelle bat
- Soprano pipistrelle bat
- Fox

Birds

Egyptian Goose, Canada Goose, Greylag Goose, Mallard, Little Grebe, Common Moorhen, Eurasian Coot, Tufted Duck, Mandarin Duck, Great Cormorant, Little Egret, Grey Heron, Common Kingfisher, Herring Gull, Black-headed Gull, Common Gull, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Eurasian Green Woodpecker, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Ring-necked Parakeet, Common Magpie, Eurasian Jay, Carrion Crow, Eurasian Jackdaw, Tawny Owl, Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Eurasian Hobby, Common Kestrel, Common Buzzard, Grey Wagtail, Pied Wagtail/White Wagtail, Common Starling, Eurasian Blue Tit, Coal Tit, Great Tit, Long-tailed Tit, Goldcrest, European Robin, Eurasian Wren, Eurasian Siskin, Brambling, Dunnock House Sparrow, Common Chiffchaff, Eurasian Blackcap, Common Chaffinch, European Greenfinch, European Goldfinch, Eurasian Nuthatch, Eurasian Treecreeper, Eurasian Blackbird, Mistle Thrush, Song Thrush, Fieldfare, Redwing, Common Woodpigeon, Stock Dove, Collared Dove, Rock Dove, Barn Swallow, Common Swift,

www.ebird.org is a useful website for recording and looking up bird sightings. You can see birds that other people have spotted in Beckenham Place Park and the times of year that they saw them here: <https://ebird.org/barchart?r=L7264565&yr=all&m=>



Photo credit: Dusty Gedge Photography



Fungi

Lots of different types of fungus can be seen in Beckenham Place Park, particularly in the Autumn. Keep an eye out for deadwood, which is a good habitat for fungi, and look out for fungi growing in amongst rotting leaves on the ground in the woods. You might also see lichen and moss on trees and deadwood. Below is a list of some of the species of fungi that have been spotted in Beckenham Place Park. Remember not to touch or pick any fungus you see – some species are poisonous, and also, all species of fungi are vital for the healthy functioning of the woods (helping to recycle nutrients in the ecosystem) so it is important that they are not damaged or removed.

- Brown roll rim fungus (*Paxillus involutus*)
- Sulphur tuft (*Hypholoma fasciculare*)
- Ganoderma species (either *G. applanatum* or *G. australe*)
- *Clitocybe geotropa*
- *Lyophyllum decastes*.
- *Pholiota* species of fungi
- Wood blewit mushrooms (*Clitocybe Nuda/Lepista Nuda*)
- Yellow staining mushroom (*Agaricus xanthodermus*)
- *Psathyrella corrugis*
- *Chalciporus rubinus*
- Beefsteak fungus (*Fistulina hepatica*)
- *Hericium coralloides* –
- Hen-of-the-wood (*Grifola Frondosa*)
- Fly agaric (*Amanita muscaria*)

