

## Acid grassland and invertebrates

by Hugh Bradshaw

Any visitor to the Park cannot help but notice the low grass hummocks evenly spaced in many of its open areas. These small mounds are actually anthills and the work of industrious yellow meadow ants.



The presence of these anthills, which can be over 100 years old, are visible indicators of the importance of these areas of grassland. Their existence in such numbers shows that these grasslands have remained undisturbed for many years. Nationally, uncontrolled development or conversion to recreational use has made this habitat scarce. However, the Park has the largest area of acid grassland in the London area and this habitat helped acquire the SSSI status for the Park.

Acid grassland is special as its soil is low in nutrients and, as a result, coarse grasses do not thrive there. This allows an abundance of finer grasses and wild flowers to flourish. Such a habitat is also rich in fauna, in particular insects and other invertebrates.

Although the yellow meadow ant is one of the most numerous insects in the Park, as they live mostly underground, they are unlikely to be seen. The conspicuous anthills are made from fine particles of sand and within them the ants build passages and galleries where

they keep the colony's eggs and young. The mounds absorb the sunlight and, by retaining heat, enable a constant temperature to be maintained. If the temperature changes, the ants can move the eggs to the sunnier side of the mound.

By late spring, these grasslands can be awash with butterflies, including meadow browns, small heaths, skippers and small coppers.

The anthills create ideal sandy areas where male butterflies often bask, awaiting a brave female to fly over them, whereupon the males will launch themselves in aerial pursuit.

At night moths, including the rare double line moth, may be found. The anthills' sandy walls enable grasshoppers, as well as many of the Park's 150 species of solitary bees and wasps, to lay their eggs in them. The burrows of these wasps are not inconspicuous and a short wait beside one may reward the observer with a glimpse of the nationally scarce red-banded sand wasp, the mining bee or bee-wolf wasp.

### Help protect the acid grassland

Always clear up after your dogs, as their faeces are rich in nutrients that encourage coarse grasses to grow which out-compete the rare flora.

Please keep to the paths, as the ant mounds are easily damaged by people stepping on them.