

Noise and the Park

Noise levels in Richmond Park are low. In the centre of the Park they are very low; it is the quietest place in London. On a winter's evening, we have recorded ambient noise levels in the centre equivalent to rustling leaves or a whisper.

The low noise contributes enormously to the peace and tranquillity that is the main reason people come to the Park. It also encourages a rich and thriving wildlife since many species have evolved very sensitive hearing that depends on low noise.

Owls and bats need a low noise environment to locate and hunt their prey – an argument we made against evening outdoor cinema screenings in the Park. High noise levels affect species' behaviour. Some birds sing at higher frequencies in response to noise. Other species can't adapt – noise causes some frogs to call less often and to take longer to find a mate. Noise is increasing everywhere, not just in urban areas. A study of 25 US National Parks found that there were intrusive levels of noise for 25% of daylight hours, mainly from traffic and aircraft. There is a growing view that noise pollution is so ubiquitous that it is an important factor in the large-scale decline in biodiversity.

Quiet places, where the ambient noise level is very low, are especially vulnerable to noise intrusions, because distant or small noises can have a significant impact. The Davies Airports Commission's consultation mentioned this concept of "relative noise" and we wrote to them pointing to the centre of Richmond Park as a prime example.

The Park's greatest noise pollution comes from aircraft. One source is the

irregular but very noisy helicopter flights from Battersea. The other is Heathrow.

About a third of aircraft landing at Heathrow use a flight path just north of the Park, creating a constant intrusion for a mile into the Park. Much worse, up to 20% of flights take off over the centre of the Park. Their scream is deafening. With a third runway it's likely the landing flight path will move south to be over the Park's northern area and two take-off paths, not just one, will be over the Park's middle and south.

Other noise in the Park is less significant but still a problem. Traffic noise creates a constant hum up to half a mile from the peripheral road – enough to impact wildlife, especially birds. Loudspeakers from sporting events destroy the Park's tranquillity for the day. And Ballet School events are a particular concern because of its location close to the quiet centre of the Park.

Because the noise in the Park is much lower than in the surrounding areas there is a tendency not to give it much attention. But it is a real and potentially growing problem for visitors and wildlife. We should not accept any increase in noise pollution and ought to take every opportunity to reduce it.



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