

OPAL East Midlands
News release
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The East Midlands' heathland needs you!

It used to be a haven for fly tippers and a dumping ground for burnt-out cars. Now Mansfield's Oak Tree Estate is home to one of the rarest habitats on the planet.

That makes it the perfect spot from which to launch a new research project run by The University of Nottingham as part of the Open Air Laboratories (OPAL) network. The project aims to raise awareness of the unique, but often overlooked, heathlands environment.

New heathland research will examine why this habitat is disappearing from our local landscape, with schoolchildren and community groups playing a key part in gathering data. And Saturday 6 December will see the University join forces with Oak Tree SAFE Friends group, the Sherwood Forest Community Rangers, Mansfield RSPB and the Nottinghamshire Bat Group to encourage local people to get involved.

A Winter Wildlife extravaganza will take place at the Oak Tree Heath Leisure Centre in Mansfield, with activities including making bat boxes, winter bird feeders and decorations from natural objects; a species treasure hunt on the adjacent heath; and spider workshops — which will examine how money spiders colonise new habitats. Visitors will also have the opportunity to handle a live tarantula.

Dr Amy Rogers, community scientist in the School of Biology at the University is leading the outreach component of the heathlands research project. She said: "In Nottinghamshire we've lost 90 per cent of our heathlands since the 1920s. Heathland is now rarer than rainforest and it's in our back yard. OPAL is a great opportunity for local people to get involved in finding out more about this important habitat and help stop it disappearing completely. Communities will also be able to take part in research projects that will provide scientists with important data about the state of their local environment. By taking part in the OPAL launch event at Oak Tree Heath, people will be able to find out a bit more about heathland, take part in some fun nature activities and see how the Oak Tree SAFE group have helped transform 'The Heathers' from a dumping ground to a nationally-important heathland site."

OPAL has received a grant from the Big Lottery Fund and brings together universities and other agencies across the country such as the Royal Parks, the Natural History Museum and the Environment Agency. The project will inspire a new generation of nature lovers to spend more time outside understanding and enjoying the world around them.

Orchards, rivers, roadsides and woodlands are among the habitats that will be studied as part of OPAL across the UK. People will be encouraged to take part in national surveys collecting data on soils, water, air and climate. Projects will run until 2012, and information collected in the East Midlands will add to our knowledge of the UK's natural environments and biodiversity.

OPAL Director Dr. Linda Davies, from Imperial College London, said: "Everyone can take part in OPAL by exploring and discovering the natural world around them. There are activities to suit all ages and abilities and everyone's contribution is valuable. OPAL wants to inspire a new generation of nature lovers and increase environmental awareness, which has both local and global relevance."

The University's section of the project will examine heathlands across the region. University community scientist, Dr Amy Rogers, and PhD student Ed Tripp will lead the project, encouraging local schoolchildren and community groups to examine the heathlands on their doorstep.

Local heathlands are generally of a 'grass heath' type; with ling and bell heather interspersed with fine grasses such as wavy hair-grass, and shrubs such as gorse. They are characteristic of the poor acid

soils of the Sherwood and east Nottinghamshire sand lands areas.

Ed will look at the disappearance of local heathlands, examining the fragmentation of the habitats and nitrogen pollution. Heathlands are nitrogen-poor environments, promoting slow-growing plants such as heather. When polluted with nitrogen, the habitats are taken over by faster-growing, more common species, reducing the biodiversity of the area.

Nottinghamshire is very agricultural in terms of its land use, making the heathlands a valuable promoter of biodiversity. It's thought that the amount of heathland present in the region has dropped dramatically since the industrial revolution and the proliferation of man-made pollution. The research project will examine why this is.

Oak Tree Heath lies at the heart of Mansfield's Oak Tree Estate. In 2000 the Oak Tree SAFE community action group formed to transform the run-down area into a green space, featuring heathland, park areas and dense woodland.

Barbara Belford is a founder member of the Oak Tree SAFE group, which has worked hard to help turn Oak Tree Heath from a waste ground to a Site of Special Scientific Interest over the last few years. She said: "Before I got involved in voluntary work, for many years my time was spent writing letters to the local council complaining about the littered and neglected area. I decided after two years that instead of moaning and complaining about the problems in my area that I would do something about it. So, with the help and support of my husband Clive, friends and a few local residents we set up a community action group. The group has grown from strength to strength and has proved to be one of the success stories in Mansfield by improving the area as well as making it a safer, cleaner and welcoming place to live, work and visit."

Dr Rogers will use the heathlands research to create lesson plans and other resources for local schools. This will include an interactive blog where pupils can influence the path that Ed's research will take, alongside trips to heathland so that students can examine the habitat first hand.

The Winter Wildlife event will take place at the Oak Tree Heath Leisure Centre (next to Oak Tree Heath), Jubilee Way South, Mansfield, on Saturday 6 December from 12noon to 3pm.

— Ends —

Notes to editors:

- The University of Nottingham is ranked in the UK's Top 10 and the World's Top 100 universities by the Shanghai Jiao Tong (SJTU) and *Times Higher (THES)* World University Rankings.

More information is available from Dr Amy Rogers on +44 (0)115 846 6742, amy.rogers@nottingham.ac.uk or Internal Communications Manager Tara de Cozar in the University's Communications Office on +44 (0)115 8468545, tara.decozar@nottingham.ac.uk. It provides innovative and top quality teaching, undertakes world-changing research, and attracts talented staff and students from 150 nations. Described by *The Times* as Britain's "only truly global university", it has invested continuously in award-winning campuses in the United Kingdom, China and Malaysia. Twice since 2003 its research and teaching academics have won Nobel Prizes. The University has won the Queen's Award for Enterprise in both 2006 (International Trade) and 2007 (Innovation — School of Pharmacy), and was named Entrepreneurial University of the Year at the Times Higher Education Awards 2008.

Its students are much in demand from 'blue-chip' employers. Winners of Students in Free Enterprise for four years in succession, and current holder of UK Graduate of the Year, they are accomplished artists, scientists, engineers, entrepreneurs, innovators and fundraisers. Nottingham graduates consistently excel in business, the media, the arts and sport. Undergraduate and postgraduate degree completion rates are amongst the highest in the United Kingdom.

- The Open Air Laboratories (OPAL) network is a new nation-wide partnership initiative that will inspire communities to discover, enjoy and protect their local environments. It aims to create a new generation of nature-lovers by stimulating interest through local and national projects which are accessible, fun and relevant to anyone who wants to take part
- OPAL will provide the skills and materials needed for the first community-led study of the world around us.
- For more information, please visit www.OPALexplorenature.org
- The Big Lottery Fund's Changing Spaces programme was launched in November 2005 to help communities enjoy and improve their local environments. The programme funds a range of activities from local food schemes and farmers markets, to education projects teaching people about the environment. Imperial College London (the leading OPAL partner) was awarded a **£11,760,783** Changing Spaces grant in August 2007
- The Big Lottery Fund, the largest of the National Lottery good cause distributors, has been rolling out grants to health, education, environment and charitable causes across the UK since its inception in June 2004. It was established by Parliament on 1 December 2006. Full details of the work of the Big Lottery Fund, its programmes and awards are available on the website: www.biglotteryfund.org.uk