# Supreme Court ruling secures public’s right to wild camp on Dartmoor



Gentle bird song and the soothing gurgle of water flowing over boulders awaken adventurers to the dawn on Dartmoor. Although the sun has yet to rise, its gentle light plays on the rugged contours of the valley, offering an unparalleled tranquillity. Such moments of peace, available only in nature’s embrace, were recently under considerable threat. A legal challenge launched by Alexander Darwall, a multimillionaire hedge fund manager, sought to curtail the right for the public to wild camp on this historic moorland where many seek solace and adventure.

Darwall, alongside his wife Diana, argued that wild camping was detrimental to their estate’s conservation efforts and posed risks to their cattle on their sprawling 1,619-hectare property. Their stance exemplified a broader tension between landownership rights and public access to natural spaces. However, the Supreme Court, in a landmark ruling, dismissed the claim that the law permitting public access to Dartmoor applied solely to walking and horse riding. The judges asserted that the term “recreation” should be understood to encompass wild camping, reinforcing the unique status of Dartmoor as the only place in England where such camping is permitted without explicit landowner consent.

Celebrations erupted outside the Supreme Court following the ruling, as campaigners felt vindicated in their battle to uphold public access to wild camping. A visit to Blachford Manor, the grand estate owned by the Darwalls, reveals contrasting attitudes towards the land. While the couple's extensive deer park and serene fish ponds reflect a personal interpretation of conservation, the judges underscored a community’s need for access to nature, strengthening the case for public rights in open spaces.

While wild camping is fraught with ambiguity across England, where cautious hikers often find themselves at odds with land ownership laws, neighbouring Scotland offers a stark contrast. There, individuals are free to pitch tents almost anywhere, barring enclosed agricultural land. This regulatory discrepancy has fuelled ongoing discussions about equitable access to natural spaces. With the Dartmoor ruling now setting a precedent, advocates hope for broader reforms that align access rights more closely with public enjoyment of the countryside.

Morning routines on Dartmoor's wild landscapes are markedly different from those at commercial camping sites, characterised by isolation rather than shared amenities. The beauty of wild camping lies in the responsibility it entails: adventurers must leave no trace, ensuring they carry out all rubbish and manage waste appropriately. However, during the pandemic, instances of “fly camping” — where groups irresponsibly left behind litter and abandoned tents — threatened to undermine the very ethos that wild camping embodies.

Significantly, the ruling pointed out the efficacy of managing irresponsible behaviours through proper oversight from local authorities, rather than through civil court actions initiated by private landowners. This perspective shifts the narrative around camping, acknowledging that while a minority may not adhere to outdoor ethics, they should not overshadow the broader impact of mismanaged land ownership.

Dartmoor's ecological challenges complicate the discussion further. Overgrazing, especially by sheep, has alarmed conservationists, prompting warnings from Natural England. The ongoing decline of wildlife species underscores the need for responsible land stewardship, highlighting that the actions of a few errant campers pale in comparison to environmental degradation initiated by some landowners.

During a long trek through Dartmoor's stunning landscapes, one can witness the natural beauty unmarred by litter. Instead, the only refuse encountered are remnants of agricultural activities, indicating a need for focus on responsible farming practices. The hills and valleys, rich with biodiversity, serve as a reminder of the delicate balance that exists between human enjoyment and ecological preservation.

As the trail descends, it also traces the path of one of the largest public access protests in the UK’s recent history. Following Darwall's initial court victory in 2023, thousands rallied to protect the right to wild camp, a response emblematic of a yearning for connection with nature that resonates across generations. The collective actions of these individuals have been crucial in ensuring Dartmoor remains a sanctuary for those seeking the freedom and peace that only wild camping can provide.

Dartmoor stands not just as a testament to the beauty of the British landscape, but as a beacon of hope for advocates of public access and environmental stewardship, a space where the rights of individuals to explore and connect with nature are upheld amidst evolving complexities of ownership and conservation in the modern age.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/23/blissful-isolation-wild-camping-on-dartmoor-to-celebrate-a-protected-right)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/23/blissful-isolation-wild-camping-on-dartmoor-to-celebrate-a-protected-right)
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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/23/blissful-isolation-wild-camping-on-dartmoor-to-celebrate-a-protected-right> - Please view link - unable to able to access data