# Supreme Court upholds right to wild camp on Dartmoor despite landowner challenge



Gentle bird song and the soothing gurgle of water flowing over boulders mark the onset of dawn on Dartmoor, where nature paints a serene picture for those who venture into its embrace. I find myself waking to the soft light illuminating the steep, tussock-clad hills where I spent the night. This moment of isolated tranquillity offers a blissful reminder of the importance of wild camping in spaces free from commercial encroachment—a right recently reaffirmed by a significant Supreme Court ruling.

For nearly two years, wild camping on Dartmoor faced uncertainties due to a legal challenge brought forth by Alexander Darwall, a multimillionaire hedge fund manager and the estate's owner. Darwall, along with his wife Diana, contended that the presence of campers hinders conservation efforts and posed a risk to their cattle on their expansive estate, comprising 1,619 hectares on the southern edges of the moor. However, this week, the UK Supreme Court unanimously ruled against his claim, determining that the right to open-air recreation extends beyond mere walking and horse riding to include wild camping. This landmark decision confirms Dartmoor as the only place in England where wild camping is legally recognised without a landowner’s permission.

The victory is not merely symbolic; it serves as a vital push for access rights, resonating particularly with groups advocating for broader access across England. Following the ruling, campaigners from the Right to Roam and the Open Spaces Society expressed their hopes that this precedent might inspire future legislative changes, potentially extending the right to wild camp elsewhere in the UK, akin to the longstanding permissions already in place in Scotland.

As I embark on my three-hour trek across rugged moorland, the absence of signs of litter or fire marks is stark compared to rampant environmental degradation seen elsewhere, notably from intensive agricultural practices. Dartmoor, while being overgrazed primarily by sheep, is a space where the connection between people and nature flourishes—a stark contrast to claims of environmental harm attributed to campers. Critics, including those from the Dartmoor National Park Authority, argue that poor land management, rather than wild camping, is the culprit behind ecological damage, a narrative supported by findings from Natural England.

What remains clear is the exhilarating sense of freedom wild camping provides. Unlike commercial campsites, where facilities cluster around large groups and familial tents, the sheer openness of Dartmoor's landscape fosters a deeper connection with nature. Here, the ethos of responsibility is paramount; adventurers must ensure they leave no trace, carrying out their waste and respecting the land.

However, the freedom to camp also accompanies responsibilities that some fail to honour. Reports of irresponsible camping arose during the pandemic, with flies of waste disrupting the very nature enjoyed by many. Yet the court emphasised that managing these issues is best placed within the framework of the national park's authority, rather than leaving it to private landowners to pursue legal actions. Campaigners highlight that the few misdeeds of a minor group should not overshadow the intrinsic value wild camping brings to public enjoyment of the landscape.

As I descend back from the moor, retracing the steps of one of the largest protests the countryside has ever seen, it is hard not to feel fulfilled by the collective efforts that have kept this area accessible for all. Following a previous High Court defeat for wild campers, thousands gathered in defiance, underlining the importance of Dartmoor not just as a natural reserve but as a keystone in the ongoing battle for access rights within the UK.

This ruling stands not only as a defence of the public’s right to roam but also as a reflection of evolving attitudes towards land use and conservation. It underlines a societal recognition that nature should be shared, bridging the gap between public interest and land stewardship.

As the sun begins to dip behind the hills, the richness of experience exchanged in these wild realms highlights the enduring connection between humanity and nature—an invaluable tapestry woven through the shared joy of wild camping on Dartmoor.

## 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), [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/78c9c272-2dd6-48ca-b396-f7efb8635cc2)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/23/blissful-isolation-wild-camping-on-dartmoor-to-celebrate-a-protected-right), [[3]](https://www.countrylife.co.uk/nature/dartmoor-is-the-ultimate-one-billion-star-hotel-furnished-with-all-the-trappings-of-the-cosmos-why-wild-camping-matters), [[5]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-devon-66237778)
* Paragraph 3 – [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/78c9c272-2dd6-48ca-b396-f7efb8635cc2), [[4]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/jul/31/wild-camping-dartmoor-court-appeal), [[6]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/jan/10/landowners-supreme-court-case-threatens-dartmoor-wild-camping-victory)
* Paragraph 4 – [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/78c9c272-2dd6-48ca-b396-f7efb8635cc2), [[5]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-devon-66237778), [[6]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/jan/10/landowners-supreme-court-case-threatens-dartmoor-wild-camping-victory)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/23/blissful-isolation-wild-camping-on-dartmoor-to-celebrate-a-protected-right), [[4]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/jul/31/wild-camping-dartmoor-court-appeal), [[7]](https://news.sky.com/story/wild-camping-ban-on-dartmoor-lifted-after-landowners-lose-court-case-12931301)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/23/blissful-isolation-wild-camping-on-dartmoor-to-celebrate-a-protected-right), [[3]](https://www.countrylife.co.uk/nature/dartmoor-is-the-ultimate-one-billion-star-hotel-furnished-with-all-the-trappings-of-the-cosmos-why-wild-camping-matters), [[6]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/jan/10/landowners-supreme-court-case-threatens-dartmoor-wild-camping-victory)

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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
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/78c9c272-2dd6-48ca-b396-f7efb8635cc2> - On May 21, 2025, the UK Supreme Court ruled that the public has the legal right to wild camp on Dartmoor without landowner permission. This decision marks a major victory for access rights, especially in the only place in England where such camping has been historically permitted by law. The case was brought forward by Alexander Darwall, a hedge fund manager and Dartmoor’s sixth-largest landowner, who argued that wild camping disrupted conservation efforts on his estate. The Dartmoor National Park Authority (DNPA) and various campaign groups countered, asserting that wild camping does not harm the environment. The Supreme Court unanimously dismissed Darwall’s challenge, affirming public access rights and the DNPA’s role in managing this access. The judgment was celebrated as a landmark decision by outdoor access advocates, including the Right to Roam and the Open Spaces Society. These groups are now urging lawmakers to extend the right to wild camp across all of England and Wales, as is already legal in Scotland. Despite their loss, the Darwalls maintain their aim was conservation-focused and warn against diminishing landowners' roles.
3. <https://www.countrylife.co.uk/nature/dartmoor-is-the-ultimate-one-billion-star-hotel-furnished-with-all-the-trappings-of-the-cosmos-why-wild-camping-matters> - In this article, the author passionately defends the right to wild camp on Dartmoor, England’s last stronghold of legal wild camping, amid a legal challenge by landowner Alexander Darwall. Darwall has spent significant resources contesting local bylaws that allow public camping without landowner permission, citing environmental degradation and anti-social behavior. The writer counters these claims, citing evidence from Natural England that blames poor land management—drainage, agricultural burning, and grazing—as the true culprits of ecological harm. The article highlights the minimal impact of wild campers and portrays Darwall’s actions as an attempt to privatize public access, despite a rich history of customary camping rights bolstered by the 1985 Dartmoor Commons Act. The author argues that replacing legal rights with permissive access controlled by landowners undermines the connection between people and nature. He underscores the cultural, ecological, and personal values of wild camping, presenting it as vital for fostering environmental stewardship and public engagement with the natural world. The Supreme Court’s pending decision will determine whether this cherished freedom is retained or reduced to a temporary privilege subject to landowner discretion.
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/jul/31/wild-camping-dartmoor-court-appeal> - The case hinged on whether wild camping counted as open-air recreation, leading to a long debate in the court of appeal. Lawyers acting for Alexander Darwall, the landowner, argued it was not, because when camping one was only sleeping rather than enjoying a particular activity. Lawyers for the Dartmoor National Park Authority (DNPA) and Open Spaces Society argued that backpack camping was an ancient tradition and popular pastime on Dartmoor, and gazing at the stars before waking to the sound of the morning chorus was certainly open-air recreation. On Monday, the court of appeal panel, consisting of Sir Geoffrey Vos, Lord Justice Underhill and Lord Justice Newey, ruled that wild camping counted as open-air recreation and should be allowed on the commons. Vos said: “In my judgment, on its true construction, section 10 (1) of the Dartmoor Commons Act 1985 confers on members of the public the right to rest or sleep on the Dartmoor commons, whether by day or night and whether in a tent or otherwise.”
5. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-devon-66237778> - Dartmoor was the only part of England and Wales where there had been an assumed right to wild camp without landowners' permission. A ruling against wild camping on Dartmoor without landowners' permission did not consider the 'wider public interest', a court has heard. A High Court judgement found the long-held tradition had no basis in law, after a case brought by landowners Alexander and Diana Darwall. Lawyers for the Dartmoor National Park Authority (DNPA) told a Court of Appeal hearing it 'went too far'. A lawyer for the Darwalls said camping interfered with 'landowners' rights'. Tim Morshead KC, for the Darwalls, added that their objection was 'to that form of camping that involves the erection of tents' and that arguments over the meaning of recreation were a 'sideshow'. The Darwalls, who keep cattle on Stall Moor, part of their 3,450-acre (1,400-hectare) estate, brought a legal challenge over wild camping in December 2022, claiming some campers caused problems to livestock and the environment.
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/jan/10/landowners-supreme-court-case-threatens-dartmoor-wild-camping-victory> - It was the only place in England that such an activity was allowed without requiring permission from a landowner. The case hinged on whether wild camping counted as open-air recreation, leading to a long debate in the court of appeal. Lawyers acting for Alexander Darwall, the landowner, argued it was not, because when camping one was only sleeping rather than enjoying a particular activity. After the court of appeal decision, lawyers acting for Darwall, a hedge funder and Dartmoor’s sixth-largest landowner, asked the supreme court to hear the case. Darwall bought the 1,619-hectare (4,000-acre) Blachford estate on southern Dartmoor in 2013. He offers pheasant shoots, deerstalking and holiday rentals on his land. His attempts to ban wild campers from using his estate without his permission sparked a large protest movement, with thousands going to Dartmoor to assert their right to camp. It awakened a land rights debate in the UK, with the Labour party weighing in. The party previously said it would legislate for a right to wild camp in all national parks. However, it since appears to have U-turned on its land rights policy.
7. <https://news.sky.com/story/wild-camping-ban-on-dartmoor-lifted-after-landowners-lose-court-case-12931301> - Landowners had previously brought the legal challenge against the Dartmoor National Park Authority - meaning it again becomes the only place in England where wild camping can take place without the permission of landowners. Wild camping will once again be allowed on Dartmoor National Park after it was effectively banned following a case brought by two landowners. The case had hinged on whether wild camping was considered as 'open-air recreation' and led to protracted debates in the appeals courts over closed tents and whether sleeping was deemed to be an activity. Alexander and Diana Darwall brought the successful legal challenge against Devon's Dartmoor National Park Authority (DNPA) in January, claiming some campers caused problems to livestock and the environment. But lawyers for the DNPA said the case had rested on a narrow definition of open-air activities such as walking, horse riding and picnicking. They said the ruling could prevent activities such as birdwatching and stargazing. In the Court of Appeal ruling on Monday, Sir Geoffrey Vos said: 'The fact that a tent is closed rather than open cannot convert the wild camping from being an open-air recreation into not being one. In my judgment, that walker is still resting by sleeping and undertaking an essential part of the recreation.' Dartmoor became the only place in England that wild camping is allowed without permission from landowners following a piece of legislation in 1985, under which 'open-air recreation' is permitted if one enters the common on foot or horseback.