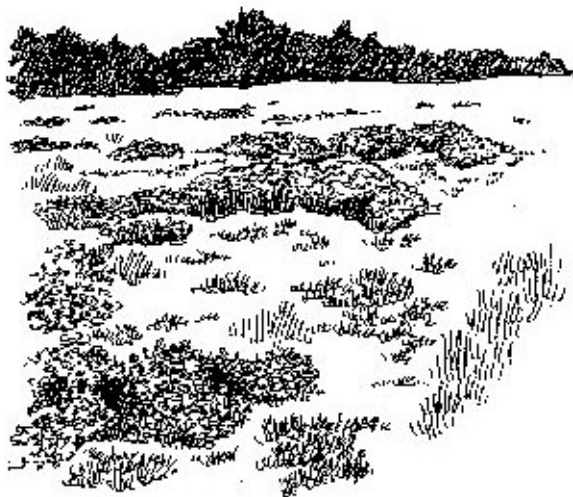


# Lowland Heathland

*Lowland heaths lie below 300m altitude and are characterised by vegetation dominated by dwarf shrubs, in particular various species of heather. They are characteristically found on acidic, sandy, free-draining soils that are nutrient-poor.*



## **1 Definition**

Heathland in Suffolk is characterised by a mixture of vegetation communities. In the Sandlings area, these include dwarf ericaceous shrubs, acid grassland, bracken, scrub and trees. In Breckland, the habitat is a more complex combination of different communities, reflecting the mix of acid and chalky soils. The mixture of communities found in Breckland is unique in Britain. Because acid grassland is a component of heathland in Suffolk, this plan runs concurrently with the one for acid grassland.

## **2 Current status**

### **2.1 National**

Lowland heath is a rare and threatened habitat internationally and the UK has 20% of the global total. Suffolk has over 3,000 ha of lowland heathland, out of a total of 58,000ha in the UK, which is 5.3% of the national resource.

### **2.2 Local**

Two important regions of lowland heathland are found in Suffolk: the Sandlings, along the coastal belt; and Breckland on the Norfolk/Suffolk border. Heathland in Suffolk is largely confined to these areas although smaller areas can be found in the upper Waveney Valley at Wortham Ling and Redgrave and Lopham Fens.

In the Sandlings 1,600ha of heath remain, approximately 8% of what were once extensive heaths. From 1932-1983 83% of Sandlings heaths were lost, largely to forestry (30%), agriculture (30%), buildings (9%) and military bases (5%). There are 42 Sandlings heaths ranging from 247ha at Minsmere and Walberswick to fragments under 2ha.

Breckland heath has declined more dramatically than Sandlings heaths. Between 1934-1980 86% of Breckland heathland was lost largely to forestry, agriculture and military bases. In Breckland as a whole 4,500ha of heath remain of which more than 2,200ha are found in Suffolk. There are 55 heathland sites in Suffolk Breckland ranging in size from Lakenheath Warren (570ha) to those less than 3ha.

Key National Biodiversity Action Plan species that use heathlands in Suffolk include Stone curlew, Nightjar, Woodlark, Skylark, Linnet, Natterjack Toad, Silver-studded Blue butterfly, Red-tipped Cudweed, Tower Mustard, Perennial Knawel and Small Alison. In addition two Suffolk Character Species adder and antlion, now have individual Local Action Plans.

### **2.3 Natural Areas**

Brecklands, Suffolk Coast and Heaths.

### **3 Current factors affecting Lowland Heathland in Suffolk**

*In previous decades agriculture and forestry have been the primary cause of loss of heathland but this is no longer the case. Current factors include:*

- Neglect is the main threat to lowland heathland; lack of management leads to encroachment by trees and scrub. In the Sandlings (1986) only 38% of heaths were dominated by true heathland communities. Of the remaining heathland areas 16% disappeared to woodland, 13% to scrub and 33% were dominated by dense bracken stands.
- Development and change of land use are still a threat to heathlands. Examples include road schemes, development at Red Lodge, activities on both redundant and active MOD land and pressure to develop land around Ipswich.
- Recreational pressures: heathlands are very popular habitats for informal recreation. Some heathland species are susceptible to disturbance and are not compatible with public access.
- Summer fires: these are a problem particularly in the urban-edge heaths around Ipswich. They have the potential to wipe out Silver-studded Blue colonies, kill reptiles and destroy the nests and young of ground-nesting birds.
- Inappropriate grazing: although grazing is generally beneficial some practices can be damaging such as under or over grazing and supplementary feeding.
- Run off from agricultural land: soil and water washed off tillage and outdoor pig fields can contain high levels of nutrients which will result in vegetation changes and high volumes of material can smother invertebrate colonies such as Silver-studded Blue butterflies. Spray drift is also a problem where there are no buffer zones.
- Inappropriate management of heathland by golf clubs can lead to a loss of acid grassland through irrigation and additions of fertilisers and lime.
- Atmospheric deposition of nitrogen is contributing to nutrient enrichment and degradation of habitat loss in the Sandlings and Breckland. This is a prime issue for future research.
- Lack of protective designations of areas of potential heathland. Sandy, nutrient-poor soils can be reverted to heath if appropriately managed.

## **4 Current action**

### **4.1 Legal Status**

- Seventeen Breckland heaths are designated as SSSIs in Suffolk, and most of the larger heaths are designated as pSPA and cSAC because of their European importance for rare habitats and species.
- On the Sandlings, 85% of the heathland area is designated as SSSI and most of the larger heaths are designated SPA or cSAC.
- Some heathland sites have no designation as either SSSI or county wildlife site.

### **4.2 Management**

#### **General**

- Forest Enterprise (FE) have drawn up and agreed management plans with English Nature for its heathland areas and heathland rides in Thetford Forest and the Sandlings forests.
- Heathland Opportunity Mapping Project currently being undertaken through the East Anglian Region. A partnership lead by EEDA.

#### **Sandlings**

- The management of the Sandlings heaths has benefited from a high degree of partnership since 1980 with the formation of the Sandlings Group and has continued with the Sandlings Walks project.
- In 1989 FE took 78ha out of forest production for permanent reversion to heathland as a result of the 1987 Storm.
- By 2003 most of the Sandlings heaths were under some form of management either directly through sympathetic ownership or through the Sandlings Group.
- The main funding mechanism for management has been Countryside Stewardship (CS), English Nature's Wildlife Enhancement Scheme (WES) and the Tomorrows Heathland Heritage programme (THH) funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

#### **Re-establishment**

- 'The Sandlings Walks' was launched to support heathland restoration work in the Sandlings. The successful project has been led by the Suffolk Wildlife Trust's Sandlings Project but involves all the partners on the Suffolk Coast and Heaths Sandlings Group. The 5 year project finishes in November 2003 and has contributed to the successful restoration of much of the remaining area of Sandlings heaths, encouraged the linking of fragmented areas and supported the re-establishment of heathland on arable land at Minsmere and Sizewell. The RSPB is involved in a major project to re-establish 158ha of lowland heath on arable land at Minsmere and in the future along with the National Trust convert Mount Pleasant Farm, Dunwich.
- Other reversion projects include SWT's work at Sizewell and other smaller sites in agri-environment Schemes.

A total of 246.46ha has been re-established but is still short of the 570ha target set in the previous plan. A further 100ha has already been secured for re-establishment during this plan period. Sheep Wildlife Enhancement Scheme established 2003, for five years. Funded by English Nature and Defra.

## **Breckland**

- The Breckland ESA, funded by Defra and introduced in 1988, has been the main mechanism for funding management of the Breckland heathlands. The scheme has successfully reintroduced grazing to many sites and has undoubtedly prevented the loss of heathland by tree and scrub encroachment.
- By December 1996 2,668ha had been entered into the ESA heathland management tier representing 63% of eligible heathlands.
- Tomorrow's Heathland Heritage Project in the Breckland (English Nature) was established in 2001.

## **Re-establishment**

- The Breckland ESA had funded the re-establishment of 127ha of heathland by December 1996. Forest Enterprise are recreating 300ha of heathland from forestry in Thetford Forest by 2006, 72 ha of which is in Suffolk.

## **5 Action plan objectives and targets**

Targets in this plan are short-term and based on current knowledge, assumptions about the ecological functionality and limits imposed by current funding streams and competition from other land uses. Targets should be regularly revised taking account of improved knowledge of species requirements, climate change and the amount of habitat required to achieve ecological functionality.

- 1 *Secure without damage or loss, all existing areas of heath and implement restoration management where it is needed.*
- 2 *Identify, and secure sympathetic management for all designated heathland areas with the aim of achieving favourable status by 2010.*
- 3 *Maintain and improve the wildlife value of existing heathland through appropriate and sustainable grazing management systems where this is feasible.*
- 4 *Encourage the establishment of heathland in the Sandlings and in Breckland (Norfolk and Suffolk) from arable and forestry use where possible. The Lifescapes heathland potential model should be used to target links between fragmented heaths for re-establishment to create sustainable heathland units.*
- 5 *Maintain and strengthen populations of key BAP species associated with heathland.*

## 6 Lowland Heathland: Proposed local action with lead agencies

Action	Date	Partners
<b>POLICY AND LEGISLATION</b>		
Protect good examples of remnant heathland as County Wildlife Sites.	2005 2007	SWT, LAs
<b>SITE SAFEGUARD AND MANAGEMENT</b>		
Ensure heathland sites are not adversely affected by development by ensuring enforcement of relevant policy.	2004 2005 2006 2007	SWT, LAs, EN,
Ensure SSSI site action plans include proposals for management, restoration and re-establishment.	2004	EN
Ensure golf course management enhances conservation value of heathland; Thetford, Rushmere, Thorpeness and Ipswich. Produce management statements to facilitate appropriate management.	2006	SWT, EN
Facilitate issue of felling licenses for removal of trees from heathland.	2004 2005 2006 2007	FC
Manage heath of FE owned land in Breckland and Sandlings with the aim of maintaining favourable condition and status.	2004 2005 2006 2007	FC
Secure funding to continue to manage and restore heathland sites, and acquire where necessary.	2004	SCHU, BCP, SWT, EN, RSPB, NT, FC, LAs
Encourage heathland re-establishment as after-use of mineral workings in Sandlings and Breckland.	2004 2005 2006 2007	SCC

<b>RESEARCH AND MONITORING</b>		
Exchange experience and ideas on heathland management through Breckland Wildlife Partnership and Sandlings Group and national interest groups eg; THH projects and GAP.	2004 2005 2006 2007	<b>SCHU, BHH,</b> SWT, EN, , RSPB, FC, NT, Defra, SCC Countryside Projects
Ensure co-ordinated monitoring of effects of heathland management techniques (EN Common Standards monitoring). Monitor heathland management and re-establishment.	2004 2005 2006 2007	<b>SWT, EN,</b> SCHU, RSPB, FE, NT, SCC Countryside Projects
<b>ADVISORY</b>		
Continue to promote uptake of Defra agri-environment schemes and EN schemes to lachieve management restoration and re-establishment targets.	2004 2005 2006 2007	<b>Defra, EN</b>
Provide conservation advice to heathland owners and managers through Agri-environment schemes and other projects.	2004 2005 2006 2007	<b>SWT, Defra, EN,</b> FWAG
<b>COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLICITY</b>		
Develop education activities relating to heathland.	2004 2005 2006 2007	<b>Heathland Habitat Working Group.</b>