



# Bedfordshire and Luton Habitat Action Plan: Lowland Heathland

Updated June 2008



## Lowland heathland

**National lead organisation(s):**  
Natural England

**County lead organisation(s):**  
The Greensand Trust  
Bedfordshire Heathland Forum

Lowland heathlands are characterised by dwarf ericoid shrubs typically comprising heathers and (in Bedfordshire) wavy hair grass. They are closely related to lowland dry acid grassland and often form integral communities with it.

### Current status

#### National status

Lowland heath is one of the most threatened habitats in the UK and is internationally important. Over 20% of the world resource occurs within Great Britain, therefore committing the UK to a global responsibility to maintain and improve the current heathland resource.

Heathland is highly valued, both as an important wildlife habitat and as a culturally beautiful and distinctive landscape, with purple heather, yellow gorse and containing distinctive animals and plants. It is much valued by humans for its history, landscape and wildlife, and as places of 'wildness' and unique beauty.

Many heathlands are a result of historic woodland clearance and low-intensity grazing, especially on common land and pasture. Heathland requires acidic soils; these were agriculturally poor and many areas were used for grazing stock. Current threats include loss of traditional management practices, resulting in an increase of scrub and woodland species, conifer afforestation, mineral extraction and agricultural improvements.

In England only 16% of the heathland present in 1800 remains. The UK has approximately 95,000 ha of lowland heathland, of which most (61%) is found in England. The most significant areas for lowland heathland include Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Hampshire, Norfolk, Pembrokeshire, Staffordshire, Surrey, West Glamorgan and West Gwynedd.

#### Local status

All of Bedfordshire's heathland sites (37.5 ha) occur along the geological outcrop of acidic, sandy soils known as the Greensand Ridge. This is a distinct 'Natural Area'/'Countryside Character Area' as defined by English Nature and the Countryside Commission. A 1995 survey identified fifteen sites with a significant cover of dwarf shrubs where heather was present ([REF](#)). The sites can be grouped roughly into four discreet clusters:





- Heaths around Heath and Reach
- Wavendon and Aspley Heaths
- Heaths around Ampthill, and
- Heaths around Sandy.

Five of the fifteen sites are actively managed for nature conservation; the rest are mostly heathland remnants within forestry plantations. Two sites, Sandy Heath Quarry and Rammamere Heath are currently under a significant restoration programme to create and increase the amount of heathland present.

Several areas of heath once occurred on the clay-with-flints soils in South Bedfordshire; these no longer exist.

### Current factors affecting lowland heathland

- Lack of management, considered to be the chief cause of heathland loss and decline. An absence of grazing, cutting, mowing or prescribed burning has resulted in the majority of sites becoming overgrown with birch scrub or dense bracken. Once aggressive, dominant plant species have become established intensive management is needed to restore the heathland.
- Conifer plantation, affecting a quarter of the Greensand heaths. Rides can allow sunlight to reach the forest floor but few are wide enough to allow a viable heathland community to persist until the next forestry cycle.
- Visitor pressure, which can be considerable at sites near towns. Open areas attract dog walkers; the presence of dogs on these vulnerable sites can greatly disturb heathland wildlife. Trampling by people damages the fragile soils and vegetation, causing erosion, however some species like reptiles and invertebrates may benefit from such opening of sandy areas.

Some species are very sensitive to disturbance and will stop breeding or existing where pressure becomes too high. Large numbers of visitors with dogs also have important implications for management, as grazing is not a viable proposition for sites with extensive public access, and the safety of grazing animals cannot be guaranteed. Dogs – and cats – can cause considerable disturbance to ground nesting birds and reptiles.

- Isolation of sites, providing little opportunity for dispersal of animals and plants, particularly the less mobile species.
- Size of sites: small size of remaining heathland fragments makes the resident species much more susceptible to extinction from accidental fire, habitat changes or population crashes. Human intervention will be needed to reintroduce species that were once present but have been lost. Birds are an exception to this trend due to their mobility.

### Current action

#### Site protection





Five of the county's fifteen heathland sites fall within Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), although Shire Oak and Rammamere Heaths are both within the same SSSI. With the exception of Cooper's Hill, heathland forms only part of the interest of the SSSIs. Four of the SSSIs – Cooper's Hill, Rammamere Heath, Maulden Wood and Sandy Warren – are currently actively managed for their heathland interest.

A further five sites are designated County Wildlife Sites (CWS). This is a non-statutory designation that offers no legal protection against damage or interference, but does provide some protection from development through planning regulations. Three of these sites receive adequate management for heathland: Gamlingay Cinques, Rowney Warren and Stockgrove Country Park.

### **Management**

Several options are currently available to help manage, restore and re-create heathland; these include:

- Environmental Stewardship schemes – sites in this scheme include Rammamere Heath and Cooper's Hill
- Countryside Management Projects – two projects cover the Greensand Ridge Natural Area and have the ability to implement this Habitat Action Plan. These are the Greensand Trust and Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity.
- Mineral sites restoration – local authorities and environmental groups like the RSPB work extensively with the aggregates industry to restore disused quarries to heathland and acid grassland habitats. In Bedfordshire examples of such partnership working include Sandy Heath Quarry.

### Action plan objectives and targets

#### **Objectives**

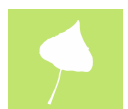
Maintain and where possible expand the range of lowland heathland in Bedfordshire

Maintain and where possible improve the condition of lowland heathland in Bedfordshire

#### **Targets**

- A. Maintain the 2007 extent (37.5 ha) and condition of lowland heathland in Bedfordshire and Luton
- B. By 2010 achieve favourable condition on 12.5 ha of lowland heathland, then maintain
- C. By 2020 restore 5 ha of lowland heathland that no longer meets the priority habitat definition. Restore an additional 14 ha by 2030
- D. By 2010 re-establish 20 ha of lowland heathland; restore an additional 110 ha by 2030
- E. By 2030 create at least one patch of heathland larger than 30 ha





## Proposed action

### Abbreviations

BCC Bedfordshire County Council  
 FC Forestry Commission  
 GST The Greensand Trust

NE Natural England  
 RSPB Royal Society for the Protection of Birds  
 WT Wildlife Trust

| Action | Implemented by |
|--------|----------------|
|--------|----------------|

### Site safeguard and management

|  |                |
|--|----------------|
| 1. Continue heathland expansion plans at The Lodge, Sandy and Sandy Heath Quarry (100 ha)  | RSPB (Lafarge) |
| 2. Continue heathland expansion at Rowney Warren (5 ha) and Copt Hill (5 ha)   | FC, GST        |
| 3. Achieve by 2010 favourable condition of Cooper's Hill SSSI (12.5 ha), through a programme of tree felling, gorse and heather management, mire cutting and turf stripping                  | WT             |
| 4. Begin by 2009 restoration of Pennyfathers Hill heath (3 ha) and Shire Oak Heath (14 ha)   | FC, GST        |
| 5. Continue to maintain the heathland/acid grassland mosaic at Stockgrove Country Park (10 ha)   | GST            |
| 6. Create by 2010 20 ha of new heathland at Millbrook Warren as part of the Center Parcs development   | ??             |
| 7. Update and where required prepare management plans for Old and New Wavendon Heaths, Shire Oak Heath and Copt Hill by 2009. Update by 2011 the management plan for Stockgrove Country Park | GST, NE        |

### Advisory

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|---|---------|
| 8. Provide advice and support as required to maintain positive management of Deepdale Tank Farm (15 ha) | GST, NE |
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### Future research and monitoring

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|---|------|
| 9. Produce by 2010 a refined map of heathland habitat opportunities in the county | BRMC |
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## Monitoring the Action Plan

The Heathland Forum will monitor this action plan annually and report progress in BARS.

## Complementary plans

A national action plan exists for lowland heathland

Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Cambridgeshire have also written action plans for lowland heathland.

This action plan links to other Bedfordshire and Luton habitat action plans, in particular those for acid grassland and lowland mixed deciduous woodland.

## Acknowledgements

The Greensand Trust and BAP Coordinator have compiled this action plan with assistance from the Bedfordshire Heathland Forum. For more information please contact the Biodiversity Partnership Coordinator. Members of the Heathland Forum include: Bedfordshire County Council, Mid Beds District Council, South Beds District Council, Buckinghamshire County Council, Aylesbury Vale District Council, RSPB, the Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Bedfordshire Natural History Society, Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity, Lafarge, Bedfordshire Reptile and Amphibian Group, Forestry Commission, and Natural England.

## References

The Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Northamptonshire and Peterborough. 2004. Heathland and acid grassland on the Greensand Ridge in Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire: a desktop study to identify possible restoration sites.

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