



Bedfordshire and Luton Habitat Action Plan: Lowland Heathland

Updated September 2015



Foreword

We are fortunate in Bedfordshire to have a fantastic range of habitats and species within a relatively small geographical area. It is a county of marked contrasts, with the chalk habitats of the North Chilterns, the heathland and acid grassland of the Greensand Ridge and the woodlands and rolling countryside of the Ouse Valley. The fact that species such as adders, dormice and otters are all now expanding their ranges to varying degrees is something we should be proud of and testament to the work of the organisations and individuals involved, but we should not be complacent. There is much to be done, and these Biodiversity Action Plans set out the scale of that challenge very clearly. Only by continuing to work in partnership, putting the case for nature ever more strongly and clearly, can we hope to build on recent progress, bring the natural environment to the fore of the thinking of key decision-makers and reverse long-term declines.

Jon Balaam, Chair of Bedfordshire Local Nature Partnership



Biodiversity Action Plans Overview

The **UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP)** was created in response to a commitment at the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity. It summarises the status of the most threatened habitats and species in the UK and then sets out a series of actions to halt their decline and then reverse it. There are National Action Plans for 1150 species and 65 habitats. The last meeting of the Convention on Biological Diversity took place in Nagoya, Japan during October 2010. During the convention the BAP was replaced by the **Aichi Targets**, which were signed by 192 governments. These 20 Targets aim to halt the loss in biodiversity worldwide by 2020. Within the targets there are a range of challenges, from protecting our best habitats and rarest species, to restoring the services our natural environment provides and tackling climate change. The *UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework* (July 2012) describes how the Aichi Targets will be implemented across the UK and is underpinned by a Biodiversity Strategy for each Country. In England this is *Biodiversity 2020: A strategy for England's wildlife and ecosystem services* (August 2011).

Although the Aichi Targets are the focus from the most recent Convention on Biological Diversity, the BAP is still a very valuable reference nationally and locally. It has been used to draw up statutory lists in some of the more recent Acts of Parliament which aim to protect and enhance biodiversity. In 2006 the **Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (NERC)** came into effect. In Section 41 of the Act there is a list of habitats and species which are “*of principal importance for the purpose of conserving biodiversity*”. This lists all the BAP habitats and species which are still regarded as priorities for conservation under the *UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework*. The list includes 56 habitats and 943 species. It was included to assist public bodies with the statutory duty placed on them by Section 40 of the Act. This is often referred to as the ‘Biodiversity Duty’ and states that public bodies have to:

“In exercising their functions, have regard, so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions, to the purpose of conserving biodiversity.”

The aim of the Act is to embed nature conservation within all the relevant policies and decisions that public bodies make. Public bodies include a range of organisations from the Borough and Ward Councils to bodies carrying out functions of a public character under a statutory power. There is a Guidance Document that accompanies this Act to assist local authorities to implement the Biodiversity Duty.

Priority species and habitats are also recognised in the **National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)**, which came into effect in early 2012. The NPPF replaced most of the planning guidance which was previously available. It promotes the preservation, restoration and re-creation of priority habitats and ecological networks as well as the protection and recovery of priority species (paragraph 117).

Although the BAP is no longer promoted nationally it is written into legislation and policies which are being currently used. To support this locally, the BAP is still in use to inform and guide many projects and is kept relevant.



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 current heathland sites (37.5 ha) occur along the geological outcrop of acidic, sandy soils known as the Greensand Ridge, which is a distinct 'National Character Area' (NCA) as defined by Natural England. A 1995 survey identified fifteen sites with a significant cover of dwarf shrubs where heather was present (Natural England, 2008). 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. Four sites, Sandy Warren/Sandy Heath Quarry (c.100 ha), Maulden Wood/Heath (c.3.5 ha), Rammamere Heath (c.20 ha), and Rushmere Country Park (c.28 ha), are currently under significant restoration programmes to create and increase the amount of heathland present.

Several areas of heath once occurred on the clay-with-flints soils on the Chilterns 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 plantations, 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 many 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/Shire Oak Heath, Maulden Wood/Heath 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 Rushmere 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, Rushmere Country Park, Maulden 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.

Achievements since publication of first Action Plan

Since the publication of the 2008 Heathland BAP, significant progress has been made on managing and restoring areas of heathland at various locations along the Greensand Ridge, and is likely to exceed the targets set in 2008. This includes continuing the restoration and creation of c.100 ha of heathland/acid grassland at Sandy Warren and Sandy Heath Quarry by the RSPB working in partnership with Lafarge-Tarmac; the restoration of an additional 10 ha at Rammamere Heath from a former conifer plantation by Lafarge-Tarmac and the Greensand Trust; and creating and restoring c.17 ha at Rushmere Country Park by the Greensand Trust and Central Bedfordshire Council by clearance of conifer plantations and secondary birch woodland. Work is also underway to create c.3.5 ha of heathland adjacent to Maulden Heath on land leased by the Greensand Trust from the Forestry Commission. Trial heather burning management has also been undertaken by the Wildlife Trust at Coopers Hill. The Greensand Heathland Forum has continued to meet annually to discuss heathland and acid grassland management and has visited most of the above sites where management and restoration work is ongoing.



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. Continue restoration of approx. 150 ha of lowland heathland/acid grassland at Sandy Warren/Sandy Heath Quarry, Maulden Wood/Heath, Rammamere Heath and Rushmere Country Park.
- C. Restore an additional 100 ha of Lowland Heathland by 2030.

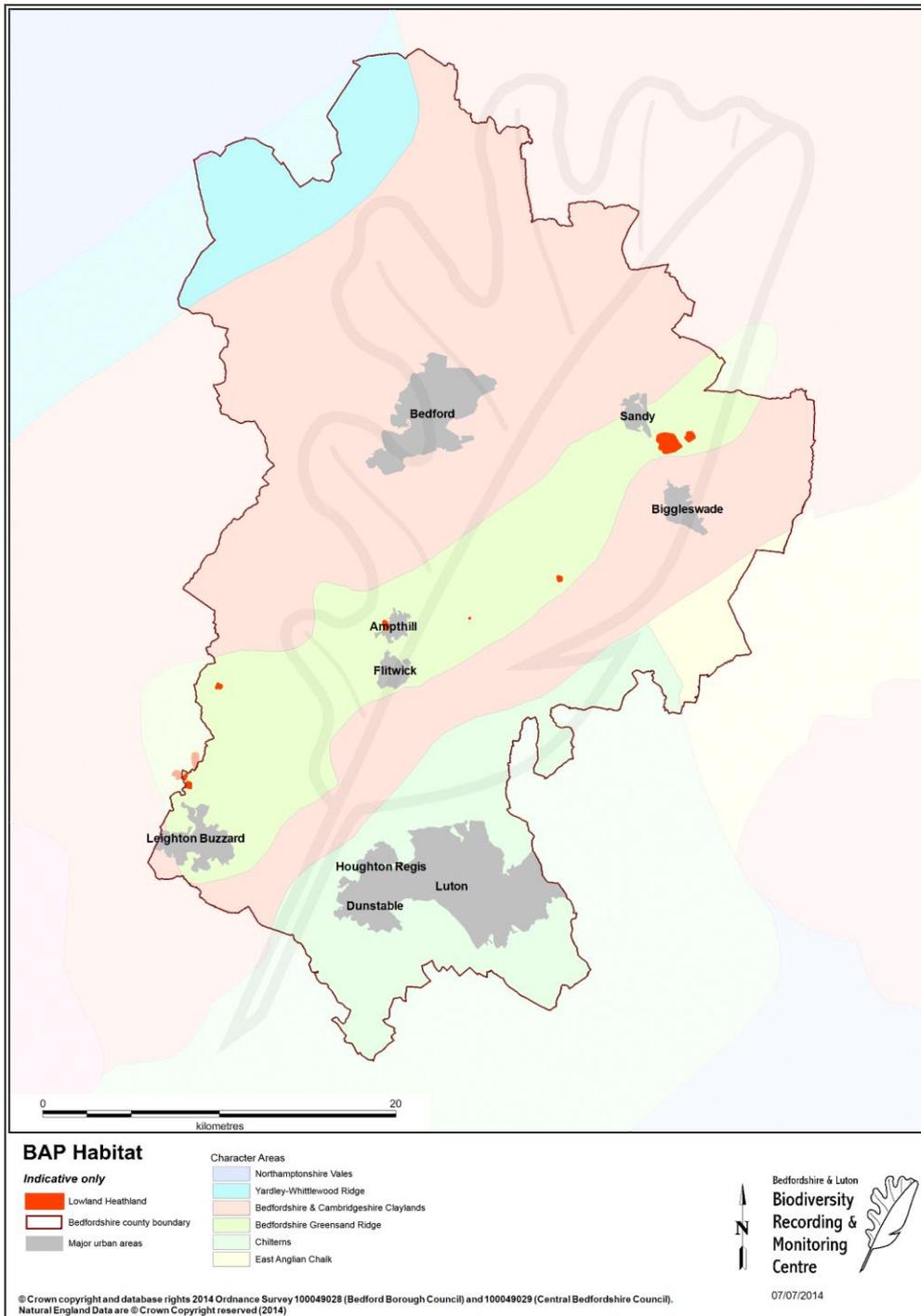


Figure 1: Distribution of lowland heathland across Bedfordshire

Proposed action

Partners

Center Parcs	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
Forestry Commission	The Greensand Trust
Lafarge-Tarmac	Wildlife Trust
Natural England	

Action

Policy and legislation

No local action identified

Site safeguard and management

1. Continue heathland expansion plans at The Lodge, Sandy and Sandy Heath Quarry (100 ha).
2. Continue heathland expansion plans at Rammamere Heath (20 ha), Rushmere Country Park (28 ha) and Maulden Wood/Heath (3.5 ha).
3. Continue heathland expansion at Rowney Warren (5 ha) and Copt Hill (5 ha).
4. Bring land into restoration management regimes where ever practical and where the greatest chance of long term success is evident.
5. Maintain 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.
6. Create 20 ha of new heathland at Millbrook Warren as part of the Center Parcs development.
7. Bring the private unit of Shire Oak Heath SSSI into favourable or recovering condition by 2015.

Advisory

8. Provide advice and support as required to maintain positive management of Deepdale Tank Farm (15 ha).

Future research and monitoring

9. Monitor botanical and faunal development of all major heathland restoration/creation projects to ensure best practice can be developed and is transferable.

Communication and publicity

No local action identified



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 has compiled this action plan with assistance from the Bedfordshire Heathland Forum. For more information please contact the Local Nature Partnership Coordinator. Members of the Heathland Forum include: Central Bedfordshire Council, Buckinghamshire County Council, Aylesbury Vale District Council, RSPB, Wildlife Trust BCN, Bedfordshire Natural History Society, Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity, Lafarge-Tarmac Ltd, 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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