

HABITAT ACTION PLAN : Lowland Heathland

Associated Species Action Plans

Brown hare

Green hairstreak

Vaccinium species

1. Current Status

The lowland heathland within the West Midlands is characterised by the presence of ericaceous species (heathers) and western gorse (*Ulex gallii*) growing on the Triassic sandstone and Carboniferous coal measures on land below 300m in altitude. They occur to the north and east of the region with fragments in South Birmingham, south-west Dudley and Sandwell. The dominant type is heather - wavy hair-grass with restricted examples of heather - western gorse in a mosaic with wet heath cross-leaved heath - sphagnum moss. They are ecologically connected to the wider group of heathlands to the North, collectively known as the ‘Staffordshire Heaths’.

Within the U.K. there is an estimated total of 58,000 ha of lowland heathland of which approximately 32,000 ha is within England. The Birmingham and Black Country region has an estimated area of 250ha of lowland heathland, which is approximately 1% of defined habitat areas, of which 70ha is estimated as being wet heathland.

Associated Habitat Action Plans

Lowland Dry Acid Grassland

Woodland

Lowland heathland is a priority for nature conservation because it is an internationally rare and threatened habitat. It has developed a unique assemblage of plants and animals through the continual practice of low intensity grazing, and the removal of turf and scrub for fuel.

The West Midland heaths are important because of their ecological links as transitional heaths and their geographical position within the U.K. This importance is reflected in the site designations, with notable areas such as Sutton Park SSSI recently being designated as a National Nature Reserve and the northern areas of Walsall being Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation, with publicly owned sites receiving Local Nature Reserve status such as Pelsall North Common and Shire Oak Park. In the north of the Region, many of the traditional heathland areas are registered as common land under the 1965 Commons Registration Act. These areas, such as Brownhills Common and the Pelsall Commons, cannot be regarded as ‘traditional’ commons since grazing rights were not granted upon them, but their designations were early attempts at safeguarding the sites as public open space.

2. Current factors affecting habitat

In the past the West Midland heaths were treated as ‘wastes’. They have been extensively disturbed by mineral extraction (deep as well as surface mining) along with encroachment by development including roads, railways and canals, vandalism through uncontrolled burning and fly tipping, forestry, and a lack of understanding from site owners leading to re-landscaping for amenity purposes, removal of grazing and neglect.

The main factors affecting the habitat at present are:

- excessive encroachment of trees, shrubs and bracken;
- uncontrolled burning and grazing;
- draining of wet areas;
- neglect, leading to a simplification of vegetation structure and an eventual change of habitat to rank grassland or acidic woodland;
- nutrient enrichment, particularly the deposition of nitrogen, especially on heathlands adjacent to main roads;
- mineral extraction;
- loss of low intensity grazing, and;
- uncontrolled recreational use.

3. Current action

3.1 Legal status

Many of the heaths have statutory designations of NNR and SSSI under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, LNR under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 and are registered commons under the 1965 Commons Registration Act.

A majority of the heaths have non-statutory protection as SINC or SLINC with policies in the Unitary Development Plans of the Local Authorities that do not normally allow development on these sites.

3.2 Management, research and guidance

The majority of heathlands within Walsall are managed through the Countryside Stewardship scheme, which is administered by MAFF.

English Nature part fund management within Sutton Park NNR through their Wildlife Enhancement Scheme.

Local Authorities part fund management works through the use of their direct labour, contractors and conservation volunteer groups.

Heathland restoration trials are being carried out at various sites within the region in order to provide guidance on the restoration of degraded heaths and the creation of new heathlands. Many organisations, including EN, RSPB, FA, Wildlife Trusts and the

network of Heathland Partnerships, have produced articles and guidance notes on the management and restoration of lowland heathland which includes ‘traditional’ management techniques such as grazing and burning and ‘new’ techniques such as turf removal and inversion, mowing, spraying and the management of sites for the commoner reptiles, birds and invertebrates.

The overall importance of the ‘Staffordshire Heaths’ is beginning to rise on a national level as more survey work is carried out, particularly in the field of invertebrates.

4. Action plan objectives and targets
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Objective	Target
1. Protect remaining heathlands from damage, inappropriate management and development.	Ongoing
2. Maintain and improve, through appropriate management, all existing heathland within the region.	Ongoing
3. Increase the area of lowland heathland through the creation of new areas.	2 ha per year.
4. Undertake survey work to assess the condition and value of heathland sites.	2 sites per year.
5. Maintain links with others in adjacent Counties in order to exchange information on best practice and co-ordinate survey work.	Ongoing
6. Increase public awareness of the value of heathlands through positive media coverage and site interpretation.	Ongoing

5. Proposed action with partners to meet objectives

ACTION	POTENTIAL DELIVERERS		YEAR							Meets objective number
	Lead	Partner	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2011	
5.1 Policy and legislation										
Seek the inclusion of effective measures for habitat protection in the preparation of UDPs and other policy documents.	LAs	EN, WT	As Unitary Development Plans and other documents are prepared							1
Produce heathland strategy, which identifies areas for recreation and restoration.	EN	ALL	•	•						3
Seek to designate all heathland sites over 0.5 ha as SINC.	EN	ALL	•	•						1
Support Heathland Partnership of interested parties to protect and enhance the heathland resource.	EN	ALL	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	1, 2, 5
5.2 Site safeguard and management										
Produce best practice management regimes for heathland habitats.	WT	EN, LA, LO	•	•						2
Support initiatives to identify best management practice and encourage best management practice.	EN	LA, LO, WT, FWAG	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	2
Initiate management with management plans for all heathlands designated as SSSI, LNR or SINC.	LA	WT, EN	•	•	•	•	•	•		2

ACTION	POTENTIAL DELIVERERS		YEAR							Meets objective number
	Lead	Partner	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2011	
Identify sites for restoration / establishment of appropriate heathland communities and increase heathland resource by minimum of 2 ha per year.	EN	ALL	•	•	•	•	•	•		3
Introduce grazing on at least 2 existing heathland sites	EN	LA LO	•	•	•	•	•	•		2
Reverse effects of drainage on all areas of wet heath.	EN	LA LO	•	•	•	•	•	•		1, 2
Identify species as “flagship” species to promote management of heathland habitat and initiate appropriate management.	EN	WT, BC, RSPB, LA, LO	•	•	•	•	•	•		2
5.3 Advice										
Provide information and advice to site owners / managers as to habitat value and management.	EN	ALL	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	2
5.4 Future research and monitoring										
Undertake survey of at least 2 sites per year to determine extent of habitat area, value, state and management and produce detailed heathland inventory.	WT	EN, LAs	•	•	•	•	•	•		4
Formulate criteria for assessing conservation status of heathland.	EN	ALL	•	•	•	•	•	•		4

ACTION	POTENTIAL DELIVERERS		YEAR							Meets objective number
	Lead	Partner	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2011	
Undertake invertebrate survey on minimum of 2 sites per year	EN	WT, LA	•	•	•	•	•	•		4
5.5 Publicity										
Promote awareness and positive perception of habitat.	ALL		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	6
5.6 Links to other action plans										
Lowland acid grassland, Woodland, particularly scrub										

6. Co-ordination and Review

This Biodiversity Action Plan will be implemented over 10 years with a first review after 5 years. A group will be set up to co-ordinate implementation and to report to the Biodiversity Steering Group. This group will meet at a minimum on a yearly basis.

Review will be carried out in conjunction with related Habitat and Species Action Plans as appropriate.

Review will consist of measuring achievement of targets. The group will, with the support of the Steering Group, develop and implement appropriate monitoring methods, which will inform the review process.

The Action Plan will be revised and updated in the light of review results and any relevant changes in circumstances and/or additional information which becomes available during the review period.

In line with national guidance, the Steering Group will report to the UK Steering Group.