

Heathland

“On that part which is called Putney Heath furze and bramble grow thick and luxuriant. One may look far in some directions and see no houses..to spoil the effect of exclusion and wilderness. Over all is the vast void sky and the rapturous music of the skylark.”

(W H Hudson, 1898)

1. Aims

- To develop a strategic approach to the protection, management, creation and restoration of heathland within London.
- To promote the value of heathland and secure the involvement of Londoners in its conservation.

2. Introduction

Classic heathland is covered mainly by low-growing shrubs such as heather (or ‘ling’), which turn it a rich purple in late summer and autumn. This habitat could once be seen on large areas of common land around London, where local people grazed animals and drovers stationed their stock on the way to market. Such grazing helped to keep scrub and trees from invading the open landscape. Heathlands also played a vital role in local communities, as gorse and peat yielded a valued source of fuel and the open nature of heaths presented a perfect setting for village celebrations.

On a global scale the habitat has declined drastically and we in the UK are responsible for looking after twenty per cent of all that now remains. This decline has been acute in London too, where today heathland is limited to a few surviving fragments. Before it disappears altogether, we must act quickly to save these remnants, restore degraded areas and create new heathlands wherever it may be appropriate.

The heathland left in London is still a significant habitat type; important as the last refuge of a distinctive group of plants and animals. These include heather, dwarf gorse, the linnet, the green hairstreak butterfly and the adder, which is now a very rare and threatened species within the Capital.

Heathland is found on free-draining acid soils that are low in nutrients. It consists characteristically of an intimate mosaic of tussocky grasses and dwarf shrubs, with associated stands of common gorse, broom and hawthorn. Areas of bare ground may also be present, as well as boggy areas and small pools where the ground is locally wetter. Typical marginal habitats include acid grassland, bracken stands and young birch woodland.

3. Current Status

Lowland heathland is listed as a priority habitat for conservation in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (DOE, 1995). London's surviving fragments make up about 80 hectares in total, with the largest single area being found at Wimbledon Common and Putney Heath, split between the boroughs of Wandsworth and Merton. Other boroughs containing significant areas include Bromley, Croydon, Harrow, Hillingdon and Hounslow. Boroughs such as Kingston-upon-Thames, Barnet, Bexley, Camden, Greenwich, Richmond-upon-Thames and Redbridge each have very small relict areas.

Many of London's remaining heathland sites have suffered neglect and mismanagement and are fast losing their characteristic plants to coarse grasses, bracken and developing woodland. So much so that some heathland species, such as common cottongrass and bog asphodel, are now reduced to a few plants in a single site. Gauges of habitat quality on heaths include the age-range of heather and kindred plants, the extent of important associated habitat components such as scrub and bare ground and, of course, their comparative species diversity.

Because of their limited extent and degraded quality, London's heaths no longer support the nationally rare birds and reptiles associated with the habitat elsewhere in southern England, although the Dartford warbler, a highly specialised songbird of heathland habitat, might well be encouraged to make a comeback.

4. Specific Factors Affecting the Habitat

4.1 Amenity use

Much of London's remaining heathland is in public open spaces and on golf courses. The varied expectations of different site users put considerable pressure on the managers of these areas, who must attempt to accommodate competing recreational demands. Heathland habitat continues to be lost through a combination of intensive management imposed to provide formal recreation areas, inappropriate recreational uses and the mismanagement or passive neglect of heathland which allows scrub and woodland to develop.

4.2 Management constraints

The management required to limit succession on heathland is highly labour intensive. In the past when tracts of heathland were much larger, controlled burning of alternate portions was often used as a valuable management technique. This is now made impossible, as the remaining heathland fragments are too small for partitioning to be feasible. Today, fires caused either by accident or arson can be very damaging, especially to invertebrates.

Grazing is currently considered to be one of the best ways of managing heathland, but is constrained in London. The size and fragmented nature of the habitat is again a problem, most areas not being large enough to support average flock or herd sizes, while disturbance by the public and stock availability are also prohibitive. Solutions to such constraints might be found by Natural England's current Grazing Animals Project.

Restoration of heathland sometimes calls for tree felling. This is often extremely unpopular when members of the public are unaware of the overriding need for it. Respect for public opinion can therefore further constrain necessary action.

4.3 Eutrophication

It is feared that the nutrient enrichment of heathland soils from the polluted atmosphere, particularly nitrogen washed from the air by rain, is an insidious but important cause of habitat degradation. Car exhaust fumes are a major contributor. The vigour with which grasses such as purple moor-grass can invade dwarf shrub stands is thought to be evidence of this worrying process.

4.4 Climate change

Current predictions are that the climate in London and the South East of the UK will change towards hotter drier summers, with warmer wetter winters and more frequent extreme events such as storms and flash-flooding. Storms pose relatively little risk to heathland, and indeed the loss of trees would generally benefit the habitat. On the other hand, prolonged dry spells increase the risk of loss or serious damage through fires.

It is impossible to accurately predict the ecological effects of a rise in average temperatures and shifts in seasonal weather patterns. A number of species such as the Roesel's bush cricket (*Metrioptera roeselii*) and the wasp spider (*Argiope bruennichi*) have rapidly spread north and increased greatly in the London area during the last decade, apparently as a response to climate change. Although some species may be seen to benefit, the broader effects of community shifts in the flora and fauna of acid grassland remain unknown. The timing of the seasons is critical to the breeding success of most species. Erratic and more extreme weather conditions can threaten many kinds of plants and animals, including butterflies and migratory insectivorous birds. A main aim of this Action Plan is to increase the quality and extent of Heathland in Greater London. Managing for biodiversity and to maximise the natural ecological functions of the habitat will increase its resilience to the impacts of climate change. Larger, less fragmented parcels of habitat are typically more species-rich, ecologically robust and less vulnerable to localised disasters such as fires and floods. The funding of surveys to monitor the effects of climate change and the results of positive management is now of even greater importance.

5. Current Action

5.1 Legal status

All of the heathland sites identified in the London Biodiversity Audit are included within Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC).

Some sites receive statutory protection, either as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), for example Wimbledon Common, Keston and Hayes Commons (Bromley) and Croham Hurst (Croydon); or as Local Nature Reserves (LNR), examples being Stanmore Common (Harrow), Hounslow Heath (Hounslow) and Rowley Green Common (Barnet). Poor's Field (Hillingdon) and Richmond Park (Richmond) are within National Nature Reserves (NNR). Wimbledon Common, Richmond Park and

Epping Forest are all Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) for their invertebrate and habitat interest.

In Planning Policy Statement 9: Biodiversity and Geological Conservation (PPS9), the Government has indicated that local authorities should conserve habitats of principal importance (which includes heathland) and identify opportunities to enhance and add to them. The Government Circular: Biodiversity and Geological Conservation – Statutory obligations and their impact within the planning system states that “The potential effects of a development, on habitats or species listed as priorities in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan, and by Local Biodiversity Partnerships, together with policies in the England Biodiversity Strategy, are capable of being a material consideration in the preparation of regional spatial strategies and local development documents and the making of planning decisions”

Specially protected species associated with London’s heathland sites include common lizard, slow-worm, adder and possibly great crested newt and hobby. The presence of these species may impose legal restraints on management.

5.2 Mechanisms targeting the habitat

These current actions are ongoing. They need to be supported and continued in addition to the new action listed under Section 7.

5.2.1 Management and restoration

The majority of publicly owned sites have management plans and some have benefited from grant aid schemes, financing various fencing and scrub clearance projects. Unfortunately, present resources are not reversing the decline in the quality of London's remaining heathland. The current management effort is simply insufficient to permit the extensive restorative action which is now required.

However, the working group has published ‘A recovery Strategy for London’s Heathland’ which is guiding restoration of the habitat across London. Agri-environment schemes are funding work at key sites such as Wimbledon and Hayes Commons and a SITA Trust project is helping the restoration of some of the smaller heathland sites in Bromley, Croydon, Greenwich, Harrow and Merton. Such schemes are successful in expanding the quality and extent of heathland habitat, but only when there is a long-term commitment to their maintenance.

The current revision to the London Plan (‘Further Alterations to the London Plan’) details strategic targets for ‘restoration and creation of priority habitats in London by 2015’. For Heathland the target is to conserve 100 ha and increase the area of habitat by 30 hectares.

6 Flagship Species

Flagship species are chosen as being characteristic of heathland in London and easily identified for visitors to sites to see and enjoy.

Heather/ cross-leaved heath/ bell heather/ dwarf gorse/ common gorse	<i>Calluna vulgaris/ Erica tetralix/ Erica cinerea/ Ulex minor/ Ulex europaeus</i>	The heathers are responsible for heathland's distinctive purple blaze, juxtaposed with the yellow gorse. This collection of plants is largely responsible for the strikingly colourful image of heathland and gorse provides an exotic coconut smell on warm days.
Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	The linnet occurs in a range of habitats where scrub is a major component. Across London it is restricted by the lack of quality habitat, but most of the Capital's surviving heaths support breeding linnets.
Green tiger beetle	<i>Cicindela campestris</i>	This striking, metallic-green beetle thrives in the open ground on London's better quality heathland.
Bumblebees	<i>Bombus spp</i>	Many species of bumblebee forage over heathland, where they play an important role in pollinating heathland plants. One species, the small heath bumblebee, <i>Bombus jonellus</i> is particularly associated with heaths.

6. Objectives, Actions and Targets

Most of these actions are specific to this habitat. However, there are other, broader actions that apply generically to a number of habitats and species. These are located in a separate 'Generic Action' section which should be read in conjunction with this document. There are generic actions for Site Management, Habitat Protection, Species Protection, Ecological Monitoring, Biological Records, Communications and Funding.

Please note that the partners identified in the tables are those that have been involved in the process of forming the plan. It is not an exclusive list and new partners are both welcomed and needed. The leads identified are responsible for co-ordinating the actions – but are not necessarily implementers.

Target 1 Provide guidance and support for heathland site Managers

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
1.1 Identify key heathland species with specialist requirements	Achieved 2002	Working Group	
1.2 Maintain network of heathland managers and conservation bodies to continue the work of the advisory 'London Heathland Working Group'	Annually	NE	Site Managers, LA, NE, LWT, LNHS, GLA, CL, RP, BC
1.3 Produce best practice habitat management guidelines in the urban context	achieved	NE	Working Group, Reptile SAP Working Group
1.4 Distribute guidelines to all heathland site managers	achieved	NE	Working Group
1.5 Maintain annual programme of training in management, monitoring, interpretation and communication for site managers	Annually	Working Group	Site Managers, GLA, LWT, LA, Reptile SAP Working Group

Target 2 Monitor the condition and extent of all London's heathlands

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
2.1 Work in partnership with the Acid Grassland Habitat Action Plan Working Group to develop a simple and practical monitoring protocol for site managers to quantify and report the quality and extent of heathland and acid grassland on sites.	2008	TRP/NE	Site Managers, Reptile SAP Working Group
2.2 Work with the Acid Grassland Habitat Action Plan Working Group to train all site managers in the heathland habitat monitoring protocol	2008	TRP/NE	Site Managers, Reptile SAP Working Group
2.3 Monitor the extent and quality of all London Heathland sites at least every 4 years. Data gathered to be submitted to Greenspace Information for Greater London (GIGL)	From 2008	NE	Site Managers, Reptile SAP Working Group

Target 3 All heathland sites to be in improving condition by 2015. 20 ha of heathland habitat to be restored, or in some cases, created by 2015

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
3.1 Review existing management plans for all sites & evaluate their requirements for restoration funding	Achieved 2001	GLA	Site Managers, Working Group
3.2 Identify those sites that especially require restoration	Achieved 2001	GLA	Site Managers, Working Group
3.3 Produce targeted & costed heathland recovery strategy	Achieved	Working Group	LWT, EA
3.4 Apply to the SITA trust for funding the restoration of suitable sites as recommended by the Heathland Recovery Strategy.	2007	Working Group	
3.5 Work with the Acid Grassland HAP working group to apply for funding and commission a feasibility study to consider the creation of 20 ha of new heathland habitat as recommended by the Heathland Recovery Strategy	2009	Working Group	

Target 4 Promote appreciation of heathland landscapes by means of a programme of site visits and educational materials by 2015

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
4.1 Develop & distribute contacts for walk leaders and speakers to all site managers	Achieved 2001	Working Group	Site Managers
4.2 Invite Ward Councillors to visit local heathland sites, to appreciate site priorities and potential. One biennial visit to each borough	2006	Working Group	Site Managers
4.3 Produce a leaflet on London's heathland resource to help raise awareness of its value within local communities & investigate other mechanisms for promoting heathlands	Achieved	GLA	Common Ground, Working Group
4.4 Apply to the Heritage Lottery Fund for a 'Your Heritage' grant in order to raise public awareness of the importance of heathland habitat in London. The project to include a series of training events, provision of site specific interpretation, leaflets and support for local groups.	Achieved		

Relevant Action Plans

London Plans

Woodland; **Acid Grassland**; Churchyard and Cemeteries; Parks, Amenity Grasslands & City Squares; **Reptiles**; Open Landscapes with Ancient/Old Trees Audit;.

National Plans

Lowland Heathland; Lowland Dry Acid Grassland; Lowland Wood Pasture and Parkland; Built Environment and Gardens;.

Key References

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Abbreviations

BC - Butterfly Conservation
CG - Common Ground
CoL - City of London
EA - Environment Agency
GLA - Greater London Authority
LA - Local Authorities

LBBF - London Borough Biodiversity Forum
LBP - London Biodiversity Partnership
LNHS - London Natural History Society
LWT - London Wildlife Trust
NE – Natural England
TRP - The Royal Parks

Contact

The Lead for this habitat is Natural England

Paul Losse
Natural England
20th Floor
Portland House
Stag Place
London SW1E 5RS

Tel 020 7 932 5914
Email paul.losse@naturalengland.org.uk
Web www.naturalengland.org.uk