



Lowland Heathland Habitat Action Plan

1. Introduction

Lowland heathland is a priority for nature conservation because it is a rare and threatened habitat. In England only one sixth of the heathland present in 1800 now remains. It was listed as a priority habitat within the UK Biodiversity Action Plan and subsequently within Section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006.

2. Current Status

2.1 Description of habitat

Lowland heathland is characterised by the presence of plants such as heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), dwarf gorse (*Ulex minor*) and cross-leaved heath (*Erica tetralix*) and is generally found below 300 metres in altitude. Areas of best quality habitat typically offer a mosaic consisting of an ericaceous (plants belonging to the heath family) layer of varying heights and structures, some areas of scattered trees and scrub, areas of bare ground, gorse, wet heaths, bogs and open water. The presence and numbers of characteristic birds, reptiles, invertebrates, vascular plants, bryophytes and lichens are important indicators of habitat quality.

Important invertebrate species found within the heathland habitat include hornet robberfly (*Asilus crabroniformis*), which has its own Species Action Plan within this BAP, black-headed velvet ant (*Myrmosa atra*), archer's dart (*Agrotis vestigialis*) and a number of solitary bees.

It should be noted that acid grassland and heathland habitat can grade in and out of each other over time and at some point would reach a stage of needing to be reclassified. This would generate a loss in area of one habitat but of course a gain to the other and therefore should not necessarily be seen as a negative in the BAP process. On the Malvern Hills large areas are seeing an increase in the heathland plant bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*) within stands of acid grassland; in contrast, at Burlish Top, a change in heath to acid grassland is currently being recorded and the decision has been made to remove this site from the Lowland Heathland Habitat Action Plan. Details of any other large reclassifications will be reflected within the BAP.

2.2 Distribution and extent

The UK has some 58,000 ha of lowland heathland of which the largest proportion (55%) is found in England. The UK has an important proportion (about 20%) of the international total of this habitat. Heathland in Worcestershire was originally derived from woodland clearance and the Worcestershire Habitat Inventory (WHI) records approximately 120 ha of this habitat. Lowland heathland occurs at a number of geographically distinct sites across north Worcestershire although suitable soils for heathland are distributed across a much wider area, indicating that more extensive heathland may once have existed within the county. The heaths are linked ecologically and on landscape terms with those in Staffordshire: together they afford the Midlands Plateau Area national significance for lowland heathland habitat.

2.3 Protection of the habitat

- Legal protection can be granted through the designation of a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended).
- Lowland heathland is listed under Section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006.
- Sites not meriting SSSI status can be listed as a Local Wildlife Site (LWS). Although not a statutory designation LWS status does confer some protection through the planning system.

2.4 Summary of important sites

Worcestershire's extant heathland sites are generally found in urban locations around Kidderminster, Stourport-on-Severn and Bewdley. The most important sites are as follows:

Table 1. Significant heathland sites in Worcestershire.

Site	Designations	Ownership	Area of heathland
Hartlebury Common	SSSI/LWS/ Local Nature Reserve /Common Land	Worcestershire County Council	84ha
Devil's Spittleful and Rifle Range	SSSI/LWS	Worcestershire Wildlife Trust/ Wyre Forest District Council	50 ha
Pound Green Heath	SSSI/Nature Reserve	Worcestershire Wildlife Trust	18.7 ha
Lickey Hills Country Park	LWS/Country Park	Birmingham City Council	6.3 ha
Vicarage Farm Heath	LWS	Wyre Forest District Council	4.5 ha
Kingsford Forest Park	SSSI/LWS/ Local Nature Reserve	National Trust	4.5 ha
Habberley Valley	LWS/ Local Nature Reserve	Wyre Forest District Council	2.7 ha
Spinneyfields	Nature Reserve	Worcestershire Wildlife Trust	0.5 ha
Blackstone Farm (under restoration)	Nature Reserve/LWS	Worcestershire Wildlife Trust	19 ha (when fully restored)
Total (excluding Blackstone Farm)			171.2ha

3. Current Factors Affecting the Habitat

- Agricultural improvement, woodland planting and lack of management leading to succession towards woodland.
- The spread of invasive species such as bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*), birch (*Betula pendula*), gorse (*Ulex* sp.), broom (*Cytisus scoparius*), oak (*Quercus* sp.) and ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*).
- Fire caused by vandalism.
- Erosion caused by recreational use of sites and the illegal use of motorised vehicles.

- Other anti-social behaviour such as shooting.
- Reduced water availability. Hartlebury Common contains the only heathland bog in the county and this has been drying out in recent years. The Common has records for a number of plant species that occur nowhere else in Worcestershire and holds the only record for sundew (*Drosera rotundifolia*), although this is now thought to be extinct.
- Although positive in itself, the recent appearance of species such as woodlark (*Lullula arborea*) on Worcestershire heaths has necessitated the adjustment of management plans and work programmes.
- Management is dependent on continued, targeted funding. Even short gaps in funding can have disproportionately large impacts on the maintenance of quality habitat.
- Site management can be complicated with requirements varying considerably within a single site boundary.

4. Current Action

4.1 Local protection

The most important heathland sites in Worcestershire are owned and managed by either a conservation body or local authority, including Worcestershire Wildlife Trust, Wyre Forest District Council, Worcestershire County Council and Birmingham City Council. Most of them have SSSI or LWS status and are designated as Local Nature Reserves.

4.2 Habitat management and programmes of action

Management of all of the sites listed in section 2.4 (with the exception of Spinneyfields) is funded under active Higher Level Stewardship agreements with Natural England. The agri-environment scheme (now superseded) provided options for the maintenance, restoration and creation of lowland heathland habitat. Grants for 100% of the capital costs for preparatory work prior to heathland recreation were available, as well as for supporting actions such as scrub management and installing fencing to enable grazing.

The Heritage Lottery funded 'Tomorrow's Heathland Heritage' project ran from January 2002 until December 2005. Over £110,000 was spent on capital restoration work on seven heathlands across north Worcestershire through a partnership of the various land managers (Worcestershire Wildlife Trust, Natural England, Wyre Forest District Council, Worcestershire County Council and Birmingham City Council).

Worcestershire Wildlife Trust purchased 19 ha of land at Blackstone in 2006, adjacent to the existing Devil's Spittleful and Rifle Range reserve. The Trust has a program of heathland restoration on the site which primarily concerns reducing nutrient levels. With minimal agricultural inputs the site is proving to be a very important wildlife site as it transitions to heath.

Following a 2009 Public Inquiry Hartlebury Common SSSI was fenced in 2010-11 as part of a Higher Level Stewardship Scheme agreement to re-introduce cattle grazing to the common. Cattle now graze approximately two thirds of the site year-round. The scale of heathland restoration work was stepped up and included the removal of trees and scrub and treatment of bracken. Machinery and specialist contractors

delivered a large proportion of the initial work with continued, smaller-scale management now carried out by volunteer groups. Great effort has been spent on public engagement to educate local people about the Common and the importance of the habitat. After a sustained period of criminal damage and antisocial behaviour following the Public Inquiry decision, site managers now have a much more positive relationship with site users and visitors. Some illegal or undesirable activity still impacts the Common, including dumping of rubbish, burning out of vehicles and misuse by motorcycles. It is hoped that mixed browsing and grazing will be introduced to the remaining part of the Common within the life of this BAP.

The West Midlands Safari Park, Wyre Forest District Council and Worcestershire Wildlife Trust work together to manage the Devil's Spittleful and Rifle Range heathland complex. The aim is to maintain a mosaic of mostly open heathland landscape with scattered scrub and trees of various ages, as well as woody edges, isolated trees and some larger open areas. Continued funding via HLS has enabled earlier restoration works to be followed up with a regular program of scrub management to prevent some weed species such as bramble dominating. South facing compacted, sandy slopes have also been created to encourage solitary wasps with good results. Most of the site is grazed with livestock. Public engagement is important on much of the site to help visitors enjoy the remarkable landscape, reduce anti-social behaviour and to encourage people to help with the maintenance by volunteering.

4.3 Survey, research and monitoring

A National Vegetation Classification survey of all the major Worcestershire heathlands was carried out in 1999 and survey work has been carried out on some sites since then, including a programme of monitoring of the Tomorrow's Heathland Heritage funded work.

5. Associated Plans

Scrub, Woodland, Grassland, Adder, Hornet Robberfly.

6. Aim

Sustainable, long-term funding has been secured for the ongoing management of Worcestershire's existing flagship heathland sites.

7. Objectives

- Continue to manage and maintain the extent of the flagship heathland sites
- Ensure information on heathland management undertaken in Worcestershire, including experimental and 'failed' management, is communicated between heathland site managers to inform best practice and identify efficiencies in financial and labour expenditure
- Establish where heathland could be restored or created in order to enhance connectivity through north Worcestershire into Staffordshire
- Prioritise education and engagement with people living in close proximity to heathland sites to promote their importance and conservation value
- Maintain volunteer support for management and stewardship of heathland sites

- Raise the profile amongst members of the public and politically of the damage increasing recreational pressure can cause to sensitive heathland sites
- Focus species recording effort on reptile abundance, distribution and use of habitat on heathland sites

References and further information

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