

## Shropshire Biodiversity Action Plan



### Lowland Heathland



**This plan is currently under review by Shropshire Wildlife Trust and a new version will be available early in 2009.**

*Lowland heathland is characterised by dwarf shrubs such as heather, cross-leaved heath and bilberry, in association with gorse, broom and a number of grasses. It is typically found as part of a mosaic of habitats including scrub, woodland, grassland, bog, open water and bare ground. Lowland heathland tends to be associated with nutrient-poor acidic soils and is generally found below 250 metres in altitude. This habitat is particularly important for a range of birds, reptiles and invertebrates, many not found on upland heaths.*

*Shropshire's lowland heaths are generally small isolated fragments dispersed across the county. The heathlands of south Shropshire are especially notable for their transitional nature between southern lowland types and northern upland heather moorland. At these sites, vegetation characterised by bell heather and western gorse typically grade into moorland vegetation dominated by heather, with crowberry and cowberry on the upper slopes.*

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### 1 Objectives and Targets

#### 1.1 Objectives

- A. Protect all heathland by ensuring no further loss or degradation.
- B. Increase the extent of lowland heathland through re-establishing degraded sites or through habitat creation.
- C. Improve the quality of existing lowland heathland through appropriate management.
- D. Improve knowledge of the extent and status of semi-improved lowland heathland through survey, research and monitoring.
- E. Increase awareness of the importance of lowland heathland.

#### 1.2 Targets

- Restore 50 ha of severely degraded lowland heathland that has been replaced by woodland of low biodiversity value by 2010.
- Re-create 100 ha of lowland heathland (linking fragmented sites or extending existing heathland) by 2010.
- Re-introduce favourable management such as appropriate levels of grazing to all lowland heathland by 2005.

### 2 Current Status

#### 2.1 Importance

Lowland heathland is a priority habitat in the UK Biodiversity Programme. British heaths cover 58,000 ha or 20% of Europe's lowland heathland, and are of significant international importance. The need for safeguard and conservation of heathland is recognised in the Berne Convention and EC Habitats and Species Directive.

The heathlands of south Shropshire are especially valuable due to their transitional nature between southern lowland and northern upland heathlands. The Stiperstones and The Hollies SSSI supports an internationally important example of this habitat and has been notified as a candidate Special Area of Conservation (cSAC) under the Habitats and Species Directive. The area is particularly notable for its dry heaths – considered to be one of the best examples in the European Union.

The 'Back to Purple' project has secured substantial financial resources from the Heritage Lottery Fund for the management and restoration of lowland heathland on and around The Stiperstones. This has raised awareness and concern for heathlands in south Shropshire, but there is still little concern for the small

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remnant sites of north Shropshire which are different in character and landscape setting.

A wide range of species, including several that are uncommon and rare, are reliant on the special characteristics of heathlands. For example, the nationally scarce silver-studded blue butterfly is found on Prees Heath. This is the last surviving Midlands colony of this butterfly which was formerly widespread throughout this area and north-west England.

### **2.2 Trends**

The extent of lowland heathland throughout Shropshire has been severely reduced as a consequence of agricultural encroachment and afforestation. Many heathlands that remain have lost wildlife interest. In north Shropshire this is often due to cessation of traditional management and replacement of heaths with woodland. In south Shropshire, several heaths are common land and have suffered from excessively high levels of grazing.

### **2.3 Area / Extent**

There are 46 sites in Shropshire that support lowland heathland, covering an area of approximately 900 ha. However the total lowland heathland resource in Shropshire is actually less than 900 ha, as the large sites in the Shropshire Hills also include lowland heathland transitional to upland types.

Large heathland sites in the Shropshire Hills such as The Stiperstones (580 ha), Catherton Common (69 ha) and Silvington Common (43 ha), form the bulk of the total heathland resource. Most other sites are small and fragmented and less than 5 ha.

### **2.4 Distribution**

The majority of small heathland fragments occur in the Meres and Mosses Natural Area, with a few others in the Midlands Plateau Natural Area near Telford. Hodnet Heath, Prees Heath and Brown Moss are some of the most important sites in these Natural Areas. The few large remaining blocks of heathland occur in The Shropshire Hills Natural Area. These sites are particularly valuable because of their size and for their important transitional heathland communities. However irrespective of their size, these sites still suffer from the effects of fragmentation.

## **3 Current Factors Affecting the Habitat**

- Fragmentation and isolation of heathlands resulting in deterioration of the quality of wildlife sites.
- Lack of appropriate management resulting in replacement of heathland with woodland of lower wildlife value.

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- Over-grazing leading to loss of heathland and its replacement by bracken and grassland of lower wildlife value.
- Recreational impacts from the many leisure activities which occur on heathland.
- Development pressure from housing and road construction.
- Problems in re-introducing grazing on Common Land, particularly on heathland in the north.

### **4 Current Action**

#### **4.1 Policy and Protection**

- Policies for the protection and enhancement of heathland have been included in statutory local plans and other policy documents such as Wildlife and Countryside Plans, Forest Design Plans, and Countryside Character and Natural Area Plans.
- The Ercall and St Lawrence's Hills, Telford Town Park and Granville Country Park support heathland and are designated as statutory Local Nature Reserves (LNRs).
- 8 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) include lowland heathland and are therefore protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act.
- The Stiperstones is owned and managed as a National Nature Reserve (NNR) by English Nature.
- The Stiperstones and The Hollies SSSI is one of the best heathland sites in the European Union and has been designated a candidate Special Area of Conservation (cSAC).
- Several heathland areas have been identified as county Wildlife Sites by the Shropshire Wildlife Trust.

#### **4.2 Management, Research and Survey**

- In the last few years a significant proportion of heathland has been brought into favourable conservation management with funding from English Nature and through the Countryside Stewardship Scheme.
- Sample sites have been surveyed for their invertebrate and bird interest and it is likely that many will support a diverse and interesting invertebrate fauna.
- English Nature, Shropshire Wildlife Trust and Telford and Wrekin Council have prepared management plans or management statements for sites under their care.
- A detailed report into the opportunities, techniques and costings of heathland restoration at The Stiperstones has been undertaken, and is relevant to other sites in the county.

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### 5 Benefits of Conserving Lowland Heathland

- Conservation of rare and characteristic species and habitats.
- Enhancement of the landscape, often with both cultural and historical benefits.
- Provision of a resource for both recreation and local tourism which, in turn, may have a significant positive impact on the local economy.

### 6 Key Species

<b>Birds</b>	stonechat, tree pipit, whinchat, nightjar
<b>Reptiles</b>	common lizard, slow worm, adder
<b>Butterflies</b>	silver-studded blue, large heath, small heath, dingy skipper
<b>Grasshoppers</b>	bog-bush cricket
<b>Beetles</b>	common tiger beetle
<b>Bees and Wasps</b>	many species of solitary bees and wasps
<b>Plants</b>	bell heather, yellow bartsia, sheep's-bit, deer-grass, cranberry, western gorse

### 7 Complementary Plans

UK Lowland Heathland HAP  
Shropshire Acid Grassland HAP  
Shropshire Upland Heathland HAP

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Habitat/ Species	Action code	Action text	Location of action	Start date	End date	Lead	Assisting
Lowland Heathland	SHR HEA CP 01	Continue to enhance awareness and understanding of the need for heathland conservation management amongst the public and landowners.	Shropshire	2002	-	SWT	NFU, BC, SC, T&W
Lowland Heathland	SHR HEA HC 02	Seek to achieve heathland restoration and recreation by full implementation of the 'Back to Purple' project	Shropshire	2002	2010	SWT	FC, SC
Lowland Heathland	SHR HEA HC 03	Encourage restoration of surviving healthy fragments of heathland on publicly owned land where appropriate	Shropshire, Brown Moss, Grinshill, Prees Heath	2002	2010	SC-ORS	SC-ORS, SC
Lowland Heathland	SHR HEA HC 05	Liaise with forestry landholders to restore heathland from coniferous woodland.	Shropshire	2002	-	FC	SC
Lowland Heathland	SHR HEA HS 01	Ensure full appropriate heathland management is undertaken in Environmentally Sensitive Areas operating in south Shropshire.	Shropshire	2002	-	NE	RSPB
Lowland Heathland	SHR HEA HS 02	Seek to re-introduce grazing on all local authority owned heathland using appropriate breeds	Shropshire	2002	2010	SC-ORS	
Lowland Heathland	SHR HEA HS 03	Double the amount of lowland heathland habitat for Silver Studded Blue at Prees Heath from 3ha to 6ha by 2015.	Shropshire, Prees Heath	2008	2015	BC	NE, SWT

### Key to Organisations

BC	Butterfly Conservation
SC	Shropshire Council
SC-ORS	Shropshire Council Outdoor Recreation Service
NE	Natural England
SWT	Shropshire Wildlife Trust
RSPB	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
FC	Forestry Commission
NFU	National Farmers Union

Plan created 2006  
Pdf correct 25.03.2009

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