

Our threatened heaths

Heaths today need legal protection, public support and positive management if they are to keep their special wildlife, and survive for future generations.

Many heaths have been designated as nature reserves or Sites of Special Scientific Interest, which offers protection against adverse development and neglect. Heathland is a fragile flower kept alive by constant management. Unmanaged, a heath will be invaded by bracken, brambles and thorn scrub, and will later become woodland.



© Gary Williams/NWT

The best managers of heathland are sheep and rabbits: their constant browsing keeps the invaders at bay.

Fencing is essential to keep livestock in - not people out. Please note: sheep are terrified of dogs, which may chase them, causing serious harm or even death. When walking your dog near sheep always keep it on a lead. From April to July you will also need to keep it on a lead to protect ground-nesting birds.

Tomorrow's Heathland Heritage

Tomorrow's Heathland Heritage is the biggest ever project to conserve and re-create heathland in Britain. £26 million is being spent over ten years, of which over £750,000 is marked down for the Brecks:-

- ◆ To restore 6,284 ha / 15,527 acres of existing heathland (20% of total area in 1900);
- ◆ To re-create 300 ha / 741 acres of heath on forest land managed by Forest Enterprise;
- ◆ To expand the Norfolk Wildlife Trust's 'Flying Flock' of sheep used to improve grazing;
- ◆ To improve public awareness of Brecks heaths, and access to them;
- ◆ To study the process of heathland regeneration.

Tomorrow's Heathland Heritage is helping to fund this leaflet, and many of the heaths mentioned in it.



About the Brecks



The Brecks is 370 square miles/940km² of countryside in Norfolk and Suffolk

The Brecks is one of the great natural areas of Britain. It is a place of strange beauty and hidden stories which go back to the Stone Age.

Ancient heathland once covered huge areas of the Brecks, created by the axes of prehistoric farmers and the nibbling teeth of sheep and rabbits. 'Brecks' were temporary fields cultivated for a few years and

then allowed to revert to heath once the soil became exhausted. Sand storms were once a regular occurrence, such as the one which engulfed the village of Santon Downham in 1668. Through many centuries the heaths, and the mysterious, fluctuating Breckland lakes known as meres, became home to a distinctive range of plants and animals.

Over the last hundred years the ancient character of the Brecks has been changed forever. The large-scale pine plantations of Thetford Forest and the use of modern farming technology have transformed much of it into more productive land. The remaining stretches, and the more open parts of the forest, are now vital areas for wildlife conservation. The Brecks is an ideal area for quiet recreation, and the forests now welcome over 1 1/2 million visitors each year.

Discovering the Brecks

Find out more about the natural and cultural heritage of the Brecks with publications by the Brecks Countryside Project.

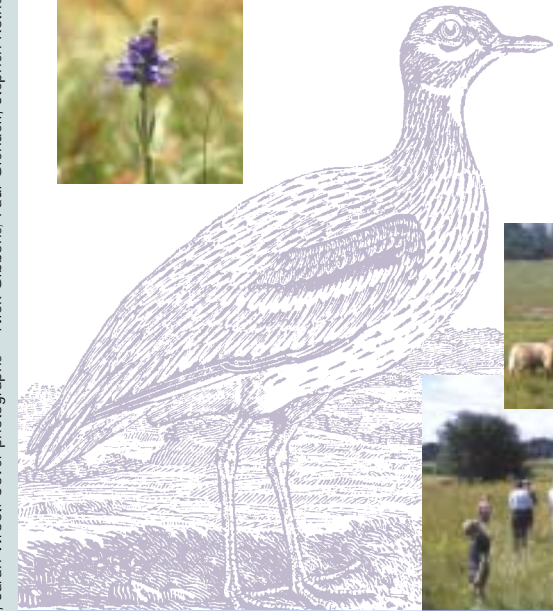
- ◆ **Booklets:**
 - 'Wild Brecks' (nature) • 'Historic Brecks' (landscape)
- ◆ **Leaflet packs:**
 - 'Riding in the Brecks' • 'Cycling in the Brecks'
 - 'Walking in the Brecks'
- ◆ **Brecks topic leaflets:**
 - 'Getting to know the Brecks' • 'Wild Places in the Brecks'
 - 'Historic Places in the Brecks' • 'Birds of the Brecks'
 - 'Flint axe to Gunflint' • 'Heathland in the Brecks'
- ◆ 'The Brecks File': a multimedia resource file for schools (KS 2)

For more information contact Tourist Information Centres at Brandon, Bury St Edmunds, Newmarket, Swaffham and Watton; visit Ancient House Museum, Thetford, or see the Brecks website www.brecks.org

Brecks Countryside Project

Heathland *in the* Brecks

Discover the beauty of ancient heathland in the Brecks



The Brecks



Heathland today

Heathland is one of the most threatened landscapes in Europe. Where once it was a useful local resource, today it is often seen as wasteland.

Whenever new fields, roads, factories and housing estates are planned, heaths are often the first land to be seized. In the last 100 years over 80% of Britain's lowland heaths have been lost to developments, including forestry.

© David Mason



Today, heaths are getting the recognition they deserve.

They are landscapes with a long history going back to prehistoric times, when early farmers first cleared the land. Heaths developed on areas of poor soil with fragile fertility. Burning, grazing, arable farming, turf-cutting and the harvesting of furze & bracken have all helped to create our heaths, and keep them alive down the centuries.



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Lowland heath in England is typically an open landscape of heather and grasses, low bushes such as gorse, and occasional trees. The soils are generally freely draining sands and gravels. There may be patches of bare ground, and sometimes wet areas and open water. This lonely landscape is home to a unique variety of wildlife, which is what makes heathlands so important for nature conservation.

© Peter Wakely/English Nature



Holt Heath, Dorset

Brecks heaths are special

The Brecks area of Norfolk and Suffolk is famous for its dry heaths. They are the nearest thing in Britain to continental heaths and steppes.



Distinctive heathland plants and animals have developed here, many found nowhere else in Britain.

The key to understanding life on a Brecks heath lies in the soil. Take a look: you will often see chalk as well as sand. Heaths with chalky soil support a wide variety of colourful downland flowers; those with acidic, sandy soil support mainly coarse grasses, lichens and heather. Some heaths have an intricate pattern of both soil types, created by frost action in the Ice Age. They have an even greater variety of plants and insects. Other heaths have dunes of windblown sand.



Section through chalk and sand

Brecks specialities include the woodlark and stone curlew, threatened plants such as spiked speedwell and Spanish catchfly, and many rare insects.

In the past the Brecks was an open landscape of sheepwalk, rabbit warren and breck abounding with heathland wildlife. Today it is mostly a landscape of forest and farmland: 84% of its heaths have been lost since 1900. This loss has now stopped, but proper management of the remaining areas is vital, to safeguard their wildlife.



Thetford Warren, as it was in 1866

© Ancient House Museum, Thetford

Take a day out discovering Brecks heaths. Many are described overleaf, and most have free access.