

INTRODUCING THE BRECKS



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

The Brecks is one of the natural areas of Britain. It covers some 370 sq miles / 940 km² of the western Norfolk-Suffolk border. The area is founded on chalk bedrock, but this is largely covered by windblown sands, with some gravel and boulder clay. It enjoys a semi-continental climate, with low rainfall, hot summers and cold winters; frosts may occur in any month of the year. These harsh conditions strongly influence the range of plants and animals that survive in the Brecks, and contribute to the rich diversity of the area's wildlife.



© David Mason

The landscape is dry and undulating, with few towns and villages. Extensive areas of pine forest contrast with expanses of arable land and sandy heath. River valleys and occasional groundwater-fed wetlands provide essential permanent moisture.

In Mediaeval times sheep walks, rabbit warrens and temporarily-farmed 'brecks' had unstable soils prone to sand storms. Farmers in the 18th and 19th centuries tackled this problem by enclosing their land with pine hedges and shelter-belts. The farmed landscape we see today owes much to this process. The open aspect of the rest of the Brecks was largely transformed in the early 20th century when pine forests were planted on thousands of acres of heath and unproductive farmland. Today the remaining stretches of heathland are vital for wildlife conservation.



© Forest Life Picture Library

USEFUL INFORMATION

COUNTRYSIDE AGENCY

Government advisers on landscape and recreation
Eastern Regional Office, Ortona House, 110 Hills Road,
Cambridge CB2 1LQ. Tel: 01223-354 462

ENGLISH HERITAGE

Advisers to the Government on the built heritage and archaeology
23 Saville Row, London W1X 1AB. Tel: 0171-973 3000

ENGLISH NATURE

Government nature conservation organisation
Suffolk Office, Norman Tower House, 1-2 Crown Street,
Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk IP33 1QX. Tel: 01284-762 218
Norfolk Office, 60 Bracondale, Norwich NR1 2BE.
Tel: 01603-620 558

FOREST ENTERPRISE

East Anglia Forest District Office, Santon Downham,
Brandon, Suffolk IP27 0TJ. Tel: 01842-810 271

MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Breckland Environmentally Sensitive Area Project Office,
Southgate Street, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk IP33 2BD.
Tel: 01284-750102

NORFOLK WILDLIFE TRUST

72 Cathedral Close, Norwich NR1 4DF.
Tel: 01603-625 540

ROYAL SOCIETY FOR THE PROTECTION OF BIRDS

East Anglia Office, Stalham House, 65 Thorpe Road,
Norwich NR1 1UD. Tel: 01603-660 066

SUFFOLK WILDLIFE TRUST

Brooke House, The Green, Ashbocking, Ipswich IP6 9JY.
Tel: 01473-890 089

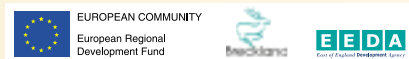
TOURIST INFORMATION

You can pick up further information about the Brecks from local Tourist Information Centres:

Brandon: 31 High Street; Tel. 01842-814 955
Bury St Edmunds: 6 Angel Hill; Tel. 01284-764 667
Newmarket: Palace Street; Tel. 01638-667 200
Swaffham: Market Place; Tel. 01760-722 255
Watton: High Street; Tel. 01953-882 058
or Ancient House Museum, Thetford; Tel. 01842-752 599

DISCOVERING THE BRECKS

Find out more about the natural and cultural heritage of the Brecks with leaflets and booklets published by the Brecks Countryside Project. Contact the Tourist Information Centres listed above, or visit the Brecks website www.brecks.org.



WILD PLACES IN THE BRECKS



Designed by Ark Design Co. Cover photographs © David Mason and Forest Life Picture Library.

The Brecks



HISTORY

Only scattered woodlands grew on the impoverished soils of the Brecks after the last Ice Age, and this allowed early settlers to clear wooded areas and create open pasture-land. These first clearances, from about 3,000 BC, were the beginning of human influence on the Brecks landscape.



Sheep were present by Roman times and until recently were fundamental to the economy of the area. Rabbits were introduced by the Normans and farmed in embanked warrens for their fur and meat. Escaped rabbits became established in the wild in the 18th century and were soon abundant.

In time, overgrazed heaths were denuded of vegetation, resulting in widespread soil erosion and mobile sand dunes. The first pine shelter-belts and hedges were planted two hundred years ago to help stabilise the soil.

DECLINE OF THE HEATHS

72% of British heaths (75% in the Brecks) have been destroyed during the last 100 years, making lowland heath one of Europe's rarest and most threatened habitats.

Grazing by sheep and rabbits kept the heaths open in the past, but with the decline of sheep farming and the virtual elimination of rabbits by myxomatosis in the 1950s, much of the heath became invaded by birch and pine trees. The quality of the grass heaths also deteriorated as gorse, bracken and coarser grasses took over from the more diverse plant community.



© Forest Life Picture Library

Along with the loss of grazing there was an agricultural depression, making much cheap land available. This coincided with the purchase and planting of land by the Forestry

Commission in response to a shortage of home-grown timber after the First World War.

MAKING THE DECISION

Positive management of heathland is now being undertaken by conservation organisations. This involves clearing invasive trees and scrub along with bracken cutting. The Brecks is now designated an Environmentally Sensitive Area, a Ministry of Agriculture scheme which encourages the continuation and reintroduction of traditional management of the remaining heaths and valley grasslands by offering financial support to landowners.

Despite fragmentation and loss of heathland, the Brecks still remains one of the most important areas of lowland heathland in Britain. It is essential that the remaining heaths are maintained if many rare species of plants, birds and insects are to survive.



© Nick Gibbons

FORESTRY



© Forest Life Picture Library

Thetford Forest is now Britain's largest lowland forest. Planting started in 1922 predominantly with Scots pine. Planting continues in rotation as mature trees are felled, often with Corsican pine which produces bigger

trees. In places remnants of the heaths can still be found, and many of the rides are managed for their special Brecks plants. Clear-felled areas and very young plantations are attractive to woodlarks, and nightjars can be heard 'churring' there on warm summer evenings. Other wildlife living in the forest include a small population of red squirrels as well as red, roe, fallow and muntjac deer.



© Chris Knights

OTHER HABITATS



© Chris Knights

Disturbed land, such as at the edge of arable fields, is home to a special group of plants known as arable weeds. These plants thrive in the conditions created by light cultivation on land where herbicides and fertilizers have not been

used. The vivid blue vipers' bugloss is typical of such disturbed areas.

The Brecks also has important wetlands. Pingo ponds at Thompson are home to threatened invertebrate species; some water beetles here may be survivals from the last Ice Age. The gravel pits and fluctuating Brecks meres are good places for ducks, notably gadwall, shoveler and tufted duck, as well as passing migrant waders in spring and autumn. Lackford Lakes and East Wretham Mere are good sites to visit at these times.



© Countryside Agency
Simon Warner

LOWLAND HEATHS AND THEIR WILDLIFE

A close look at the heathland reveals a wide range of habitat types. There are heather heaths (dominated by *Calluna* or ling), dry grass-heaths more typical of the European steppe grasslands, and bare stony heaths, where so few nutrients are available that little more than lichens can survive. Furthermore, differences in soil types over quite small distances may create a mosaic of different plant types, often within a metre or so. The result is a diverse wildlife.



Plants typical of the coast, such as sand sedge, are found on sandy soils. On open, stony ground woodlarks can be found. Where a short turf survives, heavily cropped and disturbed by rabbits, wheatears and the rare stone curlew will feed and nest. On grass heaths look out

for the white-flowered meadow saxifrage during May, and the crimson flowers of maiden pink in July. Chalky soils favour Breckland thyme and wall bedstraw, while acidic soils are home to heather and *Cladonia* lichen.

© Bev Nichols

© Chris Knights