ENGLISH NATURE

ENGLISH NATURE Magazine

Issue 70 November 2003

Managing special sites

Rising to the challenge ahead

A tale of true grit
Aggregate extraction puts something back in

Local voices get heard
Community partnerships driving sustainable land management

Nature does the work
Reclaiming our saltmarsh habitats

Issue 70
November 2003

brief update

ENGLISH NATURE

English Nature is the statutory body which achieves, enables and promotes nature conservation in England.

We do so by working in partnership with individuals and a wide range of organisations including Government, representative bodies, agencies and voluntary organisations.

English Nature Magazine is published six times a year to promote nature conservation in England and make people aware of the latest developments. The views expressed in it by individuals are not necessarily those of English Nature.

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We operate a number of other offices across the country, from where our staff deal with local nature conservation issues.

Details of your nearest office can be obtained by phoning Northminster House, or by requesting a copy of English Nature Facts and Figures Information guide, free from the Enquiry Service at Northminster House, Tel 01733 455100.

You can also learn more about us via the Internet. Our address is:
www.english-nature.org.uk

CHARTER MARK

Awarded for excellence

Cover picture

Cover photographer: Peter Wakely/English Nature

Mosedale, part of an SSSI in favourable condition (foreground) and unfavourable condition (right hand slope).
(see the full article on the pages 6–9)

First for fungi

Carl Borges/English Nature

Pink meadow cap

The garden of a manor house has the first patch of lawn to be named a Site of Special Scientific Interest by English Nature – and it's all thanks to a certain fungus.

The grounds of Roecliffe Manor, a listed 18th century manor house in the heart of Charnwood Forest in Leicestershire, are home to a number of old, unimproved lawns, rich in grassland fungi.

And it is here that an incredible 24 species of waxcaps – fungi named after their shiny or sticky caps – are regularly seen amongst the closely mown grassland turf. The UK Biodiversity Action Plan has highlighted one of them – the pink meadow cap – as a national priority for conservation. Avoiding the use of fertilisers and regular summer mowing allow the colourful fruiting of fungi during the autumn months.

Neil Pike, English Nature's Conservation Officer in Leicestershire, said, "Grasslands rich in fungi are a declining habitat throughout the UK and Europe."

The Fungus Conservation Forum, of which English Nature is a partner, has recently published an advisory leaflet entitled *Grassland gems: managing lawns and pastures for fungi*.

To order a copy, contact Plantlife at 14 Rollestone Street, Salisbury, Wiltshire SP1 1DX or email enquiries@plantlife.org.uk.

Hen harriers hanging on

The endangered hen harrier had to face adversity in its attempt to hold on to its traditional English strongholds, according to English Nature's breeding figures, published in September.

Once a fairly common bird, persecution has put it on the verge of extinction. Only a small population remains and so far this year there have been 22 breeding attempts.

Sadly, only eight of the nesting attempts were successful, resulting in just 26 fledged young. Of the 14 failed nests:

- five were lost to natural factors like poor weather or predation;
- three were burnt out by moorland fires in April; and
- six were lost in circumstances suggesting illegal persecution.

Now in its second year, the English Nature Hen Harrier Recovery Project is monitoring the success of this year's breeding drive, and determining reasons for the breed's low population.

Hen Harrier Recovery Project Officer, Richard Saunders said, "Despite its extreme rarity in England, conserving the hen harrier remains unpopular with some people and it is, unfortunately, still a target for persecution. However, on behalf of English Nature, I would like to extend our thanks to the owners and gamekeepers of grouse moors where we have received support and to the Moorland Association, Game Conservancy Trust and RSPB for their continued co-operation and assistance."

Sir Martin Doughty, Chair of English Nature, spoke of the bird's impressive resilience. "Given the adversities this magnificent bird has to contend with, both natural and man-made, it is truly remarkable that it survives at all."

Opening up people's eyes

Pete Bowler

Visitors to Hatfield Moors had their eyes opened to the glory of these spectacular landscapes at an English Nature-organised fun day in September.

More than 150 people made it to the Humberhead Peatlands National Nature Reserve event, eager to see how English Nature's restoration of the peat workings to bog and wetland is progressing.

Conservation Officer and one of the guides for the day, Tim Kohler (above right) said, "Every group I took out were amazed at the sheer size of the moors, the fantastic views across the wetlands, and the wealth of wildlife we saw."

Say it with pictures

Roger Key/ English Nature

Comb-footed spider

Roger Key/ English Nature

Poplar leaf beetle

Nothing is as powerful as experiencing wildlife in its natural habitat. But a presentation using professionally taken photographs can still help bring the subject to life. With this in mind, the Amateur Entomologists' Society has produced two slide packs jointly with English Nature to aid wildlife interpretation in conservation organisations and schools.

Each pack contains 48 35mm transparencies of the invertebrates commonly found in four different habitats. One pack covers heathland, grassland, woodland and wetland, while the other concentrates on upland, farmland, coast and 'brownfield' sites.

Each transparency is clearly labelled with both the common and Latin names of the species and both packs contain a booklet introducing each habitat, with conservation notes and some anecdotal background detail.

The heathland and grassland, woodland and wetland pack costs £35 while the upland and farmland, coast and brownfield pack is £37. Both prices include postage and packaging.

For a copy of one or both, make a cheque payable for the appropriate amount to the Amateur Entomologists' Society and send it to The Amateur Entomologists' Society, PO Box 8774, London SW7 5ZG.

EDITORIAL

One of the appeals of England's 4,113 Sites of Special Scientific Interest is their variety. The smallest is the roof space of a barn in Gloucestershire, used as a roost by lesser horseshoe bats, and the largest is The Wash – 62,212 hectares of saltmarsh, mudflats and channels of international value.

Every site is different. Stretches of the Dorset coast, visited by thousands each year and now part of a Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site because of its cliff-faces and fossils, seem a world away from a small Suffolk meadow full of fritillaries.

Managing this variety can be challenging. While each site will be managed for its wildlife and geological interest, most will have other, often competing, objectives which also need to be taken care of. At Aldermaston Gravel Pits (page 8), the need to resolve a complex minerals planning history with the well-being of the plants and birds living there has long been a struggle. Similarly on farmland, the need to make a living from the land at the same time as looking after farmland wildlife (page 13) is as tough as ever.

This month we publish *The condition of Sites of Special Scientific Interest in England in 2003: England's best wildlife and geological sites*, the results of six years of monitoring, and the first full assessment of SSSIs ever made (page 6-7). It will highlight where the main successes and problems in conserving SSSIs are. In this issue of English Nature, we look at some of the ways in which these very important and diverse sites are being managed.

Please get in touch with any comments, ideas or views.

Amanda Giles

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Although English Nature magazine does not have a regular letters page, I am always interested in receiving feedback about the magazine, or letters on subjects that may be of interest to our readers. If there is a subject that you feel would be relevant to our readership, please write to me or email me, and I will certainly consider publishing your letter in the magazine.

Contact me, Amanda Giles, at English Nature, Northminster House, Peterborough PE1 1UA, or at amanda.giles@english-nature.org.uk

If this copy of English Nature magazine is not your own, and you would like to go on our mailing list to receive the magazine regularly, please contact Alison Eley, IMT, English Nature, Northminster House, Peterborough PE1 1UA.

Or you can email your details to alison.eley@english-nature.org.uk


Bearded tooth

Martyn Ainsworth

What are redleg toughshank, drumstick truffleclub, and rooting poisonpie… No, they're not the lead characters from the latest best-selling work of fantasy fiction. They're fungi.

What's in a name?


Honey waxcap

Simon Williams/ Plantlife International

Mushrooms are getting a makeover in an attempt to make their fascinating world more accessible to those who, quite understandably, switch off when they hear their unpronounceable Latin names.

There are close to 20,000 fungi species in the United Kingdom, but only a handful have English names. The oversight has now been more than rectified with a mammoth naming exercise funded by English Nature, Scottish Natural Heritage, Plantlife International and the British Mycological Society.

"All fungi are fascinating and many species are quite beautiful," said English Nature's Carl Borges. "Unfortunately, they have escaped the attention of most people. Only mycologists and the most dedicated naturalists have had the pleasure of getting to know them. One of the reasons for this has been because, up until now, the lack of a common English name for many of the species has put a lot of people off. Hopefully, this will now all change and many more people will learn to appreciate just how wonderful they are."

The naming project has taken fungus expert Elizabeth Holden on a journey through a number of current field guides, pinpointing inconsistencies in existing nicknames and choosing from them the most suitable new vernacular ones. For the nameless species, guidelines were drawn up by the partners on the allocation of new ones. Happily, Holden was allowed to let her imagination run wild in her quest for names that will not easily be forgotten.

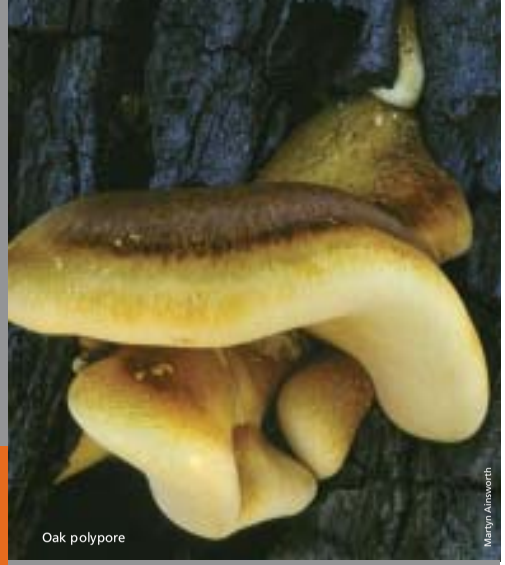
Wildlife author Peter Marren welcomes the new directory after witnessing firsthand would-be fungus fans' eyes glazing-over to the sound of scientific names. And he reckons she's got it just about right. "Most of the new names strike me as well-judged, with a nice balance of usefulness and simplicity. They are also good 'fungussy' names, with an appropriate element of folklore ('dryad', 'candlesnuff', 'elfcup', 'fairy'), and many references to colour, texture and smell ('fibrecap', 'toughshank', 'slimecap'), combined with adjectives like 'blotched', 'blushing' and 'rosy'," he said.

"We hope that now, with official backing, the names will take root and fungi will enjoy the renaissance they so richly deserve."

Some fantastic fungus names to conjure with…

- Strathay strangler
- bearded tooth
- torn fibrecap
- scurfy webber
- bitter bigfoot webber
- smoky bracket
- lemon disco
- cinnamon jellybaby
- mudwort smut
- elder whitewash
- birch brittlegill
- skullcap dapperling
- feather stalkball
- foxy fibrecap
- witch's butter
- wood blewit
- shaggy inkcap
- chicken of the woods


English Nature


Oak polypore

Martyn Ainsworth

Fantastic fungus find

Nothing for 130 years. But in September an endangered species of fungus was spotted by an English Nature Biodiversity Action Plan Fungi Officer – and it was only his second day on the job!

En-route to Kings Lynn station with English Nature's lead contact for fungi, Carl Borges, Dr Martyn Ainsworth suggested a detour to the home of the last west Norfolk sightings of the oak polypore – *Piptoporus (Buglossoporus) quercinus* – at Castle Rising.

It was a fruitful diversion! Armed with only an inaccurate grid reference and the name of the village, the chances of finding this rare species were low. But Martyn's enthusiasm paid off when they stumbled on it in the local woodland.

The rare golden yellow bracket fungus was last recorded at Castle Rising in 1871 and 1873, and nothing has been seen since in the west Norfolk area.

"I am very lucky that I live near Windsor Great Park," said Martyn. "Here there has been a continuity of oaks since Saxon times at least and, not surprisingly, the oak polypore is still very much a part of the local wildlife. I am currently working with English Nature to assess how fungi such as this and the bearded tooth *Hericium erinaceum* can be used as indicators to pinpoint sites of conservation interest."

See page 9 for details of the work being done in Windsor Forest SSSI to conserve the trees on which the fungi depend.

Now is the time for… winter lodgers

Highly active during the summer months, it's about this time of year that many of our winged invertebrates head indoors to avoid the worst of the winter. Roger Key explains:


Lacewing

Roger Key/English Nature

For butterflies, such as the small tortoiseshell, brimstone and peacock, central heating is no answer to the winter chills. Instead, they will head for somewhere cooler – an outhouse or garden shed, for example, and preferably one that's spider-free. Here they will find a quiet spot and settle down to hibernate. Disturb them, however, and they will take to the air in a flurry of colour – the peacock will actually flip open its wings with a loud hiss to deter predators. But such activity quickly depletes their precious energy reserves and should not be encouraged! Imagine how surprised I was then to discover several peacocks happily over-wintering inside a church bell recently – one rung vigorously every Sunday!

Discovering such a lodger is like finding treasure. With a preference for damper spots, the common or herald moth will often be found encrusted with silver droplets of moisture. Lodged under a wooden tile, the lacewing, meanwhile, will appear at first as a burst of bright green wrapped in translucent wings and bearing golden eyes. By the time spring has arrived, however, it will have faded to a dark brown or purple.

And then there is the ladybird. Lift a damp piece of wallpaper in a long neglected room and you may find dozens – even hundreds – nestled quietly beneath. If a ladybird finds a good spot, it will mark it with a pheromone inviting others to come the following year. In this case, chemistry is everything.

Roger Key

Getting the balance right

Malcolm Hart

"Special sites come in a vast range of sizes and locations – there is no one-model-fits-all for their description and management! I was vividly reminded of this in Spain recently while watching over 60 palaeontologists demolish a relatively small exposure of soft shales. I could (partly) share their excitement, having just found an exquisitely preserved 16 million-year-old mosquito.

"There were, however, no signs to tell me that I was on a special site, nor any sign of site management that would assist anyone to enjoy the experience.

"Returning, this week, to Monmouth Beach, near Lyme Regis, I found the tell-tale signs of palaeontological vandalism – thousands of hammer-marks, freshly broken rocks and smashed fossils. There are few signs to inform the visitor that this is a protected site, although I am certain that the culprits were aware. In any case, how does one manage this open-access coastline?

"To get the balance right between protection and public access is difficult. Too much intrusive signage in such beautiful and valued places can turn against us the very people we need as enthusiastic supporters. Issues such as this are, quite rightly, high on the agenda of English Nature.

"Oh, and that fossil mosquito I so carefully placed on a tissue by my rucksack was 'stolen' by an erstwhile colleague while I turned to fight-off a swarm of its more lively relatives. Cést la vie!"

Malcolm Hart
English Nature Council Member

SSSIs
Rising to the challenge ahead

English Nature has completed its first full assessment of the condition of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) in England. On 12 December it will publish the report *The condition of Sites of Special Scientific Interest in England in 2003: England's best wildlife and geological sites*.

This will be available to download from English Nature's website. The findings show that much still needs to be done if we're to protect the best of our natural heritage. Collected over a six-year period, the results form a powerful tool to identify both problems and successes in conserving SSSIs in England.

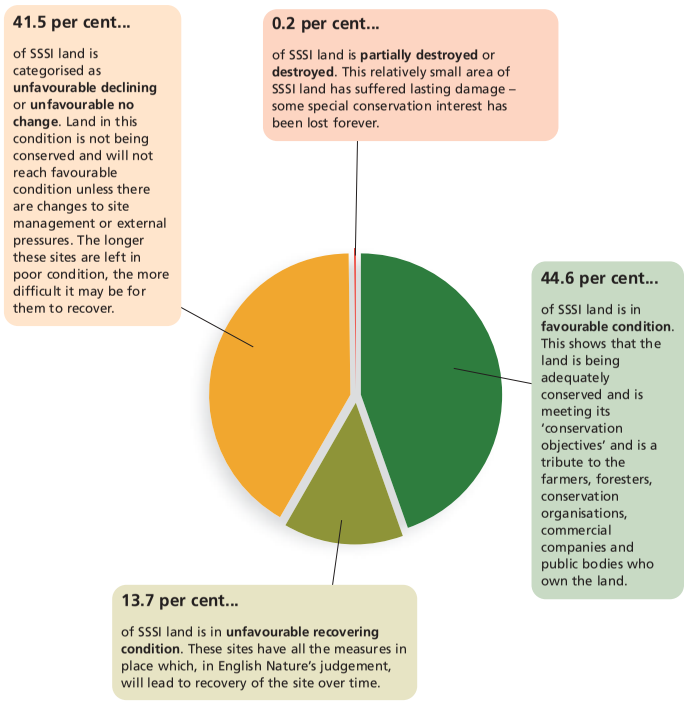
SSSIs contain the very best examples of our wildlife and geology – over half, by area, are internationally important – and often contribute significantly to local cultures and economies. SSSIs have been the subject of close monitoring since 1997 and work will continue to develop reporting systems to provide fuller details on individual species and habitats, together with the factors affecting their condition.

To underline the importance of such sites, the Government has set a target that 95 per cent of SSSI land should be in 'favourable' or 'recovering' condition by 2010, a target that English Nature fully supports. The latest figures suggest that 58.3 per cent is meeting this target now.

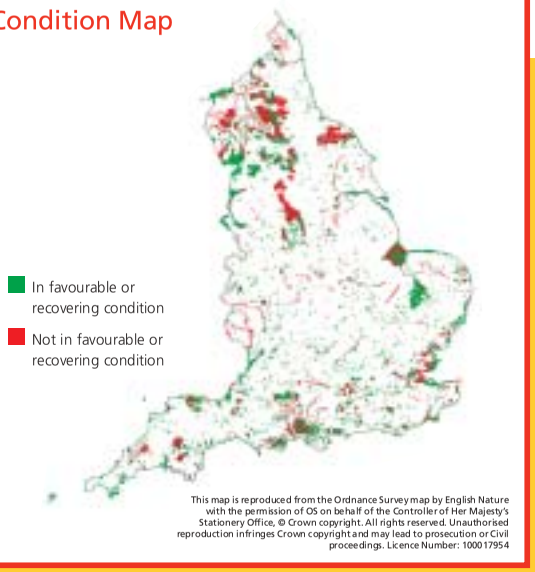
About 60 per cent of SSSI land is in the uplands, much in poor condition due to heavy livestock grazing and inappropriate burning management

English Nature

The condition of SSSI land in England



Condition Map



SSSIs account for 7 per cent of England's total area, more than 1,000,000 hectares in all, or about, the size of Norfolk and Suffolk combined. These sites also vary hugely in size according to the nature of their conservation interest. For instance, the smallest, Sylvan House Barn in Gloucestershire, covers a mere 7 metres square, consisting of the roof space of a barn used for roosting by lesser horseshoe bats.

The largest, meanwhile, is The Wash – 62,212 hectares of saltmarsh, mudflats and channels of international value, due to the birds that inhabit them and the coastal and marine habitats they provide.

The condition of all is assessed by English Nature according to categories agreed across the UK through the Joint Nature Conservation Committee.

The causes of adverse conditions

In summary, the condition of upland habitats is generally poorer than lowland habitats. Most lowland habitats are in better condition than the national average. The causes of adverse condition on SSSI land include overgrazing, inappropriate moor burning, freshwater drainage, undergrazing and neglect, coastal erosion, coastal flood defence, diffuse pollution and fisheries harvesting, to name but a few.

In this edition of English Nature Magazine, we look at some examples of how these very diverse, yet very important, sites are being managed for the future. More details of how English Nature is working with others to remedy the causes of unfavourable condition can be found in the full report.

Nick Cawsthorn/Golders

Freshwater

Nature for people

Aldermaston silt ponds

Gravel extraction has been both friend and foe to wildlife at Aldermaston Gravel Pits SSSI in West Berkshire. Now, with funding from the Nature for People scheme, partner organisations are seeking to improve the condition of this SSSI, currently in "unfavourable condition", at the same time as turning it into a thriving reserve for public use.

Aldermaston silt ponds

Sam King/English Nature

Kingfisher

Geoff Higginbotham/English Nature

"We will actually see signs of improvement in the coming months, although a complete recovery will take much longer. The site should be open to the public from next summer, so everyone can enjoy its special wildlife."

Exploitation of the site began in 1949, creating a mosaic of mature flooded gravel workings surrounded by dense wet woodland, marsh and scrub. It is a habitat that has attracted over 60 different species of breeding and overwintering birds, from teal and shoveler, to kingfisher, heron, nightingale and nine species of warbler, enough to earn the site SSSI status in 1955.

Since then, extraction has been intermittent, but gravel processing has begun to have a dramatic impact on the habitat and its value to wildlife. Water from the pits is used to wash the gravel before being returned along with a heavy dose of silt. This muddies the open water and prevents sunlight from reaching many of the plants on which water birds feed. The continual build-up of silt is also destroying the valuable 'shallows' habitat and is causing flooding of the surrounding land. The result is the gradual loss of many bird species, including the nightingale.

"The site has a very old and complex minerals planning history with few environmental restrictions," said Jeremy Davy, Principal Ecologist of West Berkshire District Council. "As such, there have been long-standing attempts by the planning authority to safeguard the SSSI from further mineral operations, but without success."

S Grundon (Ewelme), which works the site, was well aware of the situation. However, the option of halting gravel processing altogether would have left it with an unviable business, and would also have led to job losses.

"We had reached the end of the line," said Sam King, Conservation Officer with English Nature's Thames and Chilterns team, "so we turned to the Nature for People scheme. It's there to help find alternative solutions to long-standing issues such as this so that sites can then be made accessible and enjoyable to the public."

The grant of £925,000 has enabled English Nature to buy the mineral rights to the site, while West Berkshire District Council has agreed an alternative location from which the business can continue to operate.

Based in an industrial estate, the new site has minimal conservation value and processing is unlikely to impact on the local community.

A plan to restore the old site and improve public access has been agreed and is already being undertaken by Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT), which will manage the site as a nature reserve. S Grundon will continue to work on a small pocket of land here until 2008 when this too will become part of the reserve.

"Key to the project is the isolation of the processing plant area from the rest of the water system," added Sam. "With the cause of flooding and siltation gone, the lakes and surrounding habitats can begin to recover, and the diversity of birds should improve."

Woodland

Protecting our veteran trees

Steve Sasarle

Windsor Forest SSSI's large collection of ancient oak and beeches is one of northern Europe's most important habitats for invertebrates and fungi. Now a framework is in place to protect these trees and ensure veterans for the future.

Once a vast medieval Royal hunting forest, there now remains 3,100 hectares of woodland, part of the Windsor Estate owned and managed by The Crown Estate. Over the centuries, the forest has played a vital role in providing timber to build ships and houses. Now, it is managed in a way that meets a range of objectives – wildlife, timber, public access, landscape and the conservation of 900 hectares that comprise Windsor Forest SSSI.

The Crown Estate has just drawn up a 20-year Forest Plan to help it fulfil these many responsibilities effectively.

Roger Key/English Nature

For Windsor, the Forest Plan will be bringing back 535 hectares into recovering condition. Rare invertebrates and fungi include the violet click beetle (see above), stag beetle, oak polypore and hedgehog fungus.

"The plan is based on the Forestry Commission's long-term forest planning methodology and, as a Certificated Estate, also fulfils our obligations to the Forestry Stewardship Council," says Derick Stickler, Chief Forester. "Nature conservation is very much at the heart of it so we are working closely with English Nature."

The forest holds more than 900 oak and beech trees over 500 years old. While majestic in themselves, the dead and dying wood these provide forms an important habitat for over 2,000 species of invertebrates and 1,000 species of fungi. Successive replanting, however, has meant that many of these trees are being 'crowded out', often by conifers.

In response, The Crown Estate has begun a two-year process to remove the surrounding competition – 'haloing' – as just part of a package of steps to bring the whole SSSI back into favourable condition. With the support of English Nature, other projects include selecting successor trees to ensure a continual supply of veterans for the future and creating a database of their location and condition.

Partner projects

Joined-up working has made English Nature, The Countryside Agency and English Heritage highly effective in their drive to minimise the environmental impact of the aggregate industry. Right across the country, projects are extracting the benefits…

The Countryside Agency and English Heritage

Poole's Cavern for All
Buxton and District Civic Association Ltd

The Poole Cavern 'show cave' lies in an area heavily impacted by aggregates extraction. It will be a flagship project, using interactive technology to provide access for all. Physical access for wheelchair users and less able users is provided by a ramp; four remote-controlled cameras in the caves will enable users in the visitor centre to view the caves on computer screen and to follow the progress of their family and friends on the guided tour. Audio interpretation allows hearing impaired visitors to experience the guided tour and sounds of the cave.

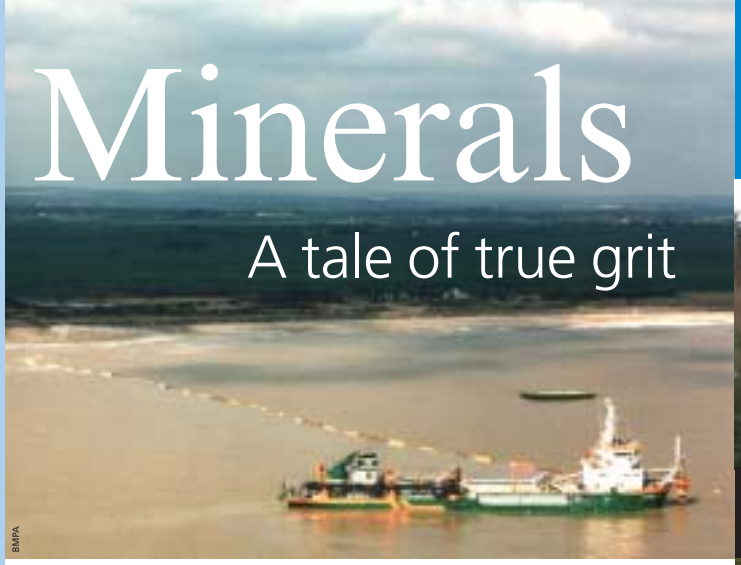
English Heritage

Alderley Sandhills Project
The Victoria University of Manchester

Subjected to large-scale quarrying of sand in the 1960s and 1970s, Alderley Edge is an area of landscape and ecological importance.The Sandhills Project is studying the lives of people who worked in the industries that were crucial to the development of Manchester as an industrial powerhouse. The last surviving occupants of these cottages have been traced and their memories recorded as part of an oral history archive.

Minerals

A tale of true grit


BMPA

The Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund (ALSF) has seen excellent successes since its introduction 18 months ago. These were the focus of its Milestone Event at the Museum of London, organised by The Countryside Agency, English Heritage and English Nature in October…

Since Spring 2002, every tonne of sand, gravel and crushed rock extracted for use as an aggregate has triggered a levy from the Treasury. Part of this levy has been used to promote more sustainable extraction practices – both during the procedure and in the better use of recycled aggregate.

Defra has funded the ALSF to the tune of £29m and projects have been queuing up to benefit from it. English Nature has so far awarded 106 grants towards projects that have clear links – past or current – with extraction, and meet its aims to enhance and benefit biodiversity and geodiversity, as well as benefiting local communities.

The three main Government distributing bodies organised this landmark event to bring together all the people that have made the pilot scheme work for so many projects around the country, before its scheduled finish in March 2004. The invited audience included representatives from Government, the extraction industry, the fields of archaeology, geology, biodiversity and community groups, from local authorities, the Wildlife Trusts, and applicants themselves.

Key guest speaker Tom Levitt MP, Chair of the All Party Minerals Group, was joined by Simon van der Byl, Director General of the Quarry Products Association (the umbrella body for the main extraction industry companies), highlighting the very real need for collaboration between the different interests.

"The event not only demonstrated what can be achieved for wildlife, people and the historic environment through a relatively small amount of money, in a short time, but it also illustrated how Government agencies can work together, as well as drawing attention to the very clear need for continuation of the ALSF grants scheme," said Sally Allen of English Nature's ASLF Grants Management Team.

More than £6.9 million has been awarded by English Nature to projects through its Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund since Spring 2002. Here are just three examples of the types of projects supported:


BMPA


Kay Paterson/English Nature

Case study: Coversands

North Lincolnshire Council/ Forest Enterprise/English Nature


Kay Paterson/English Nature

The project is restoring 250 hectares of lowland heath in an area affected by aggregate extraction, and will provide local communities with the opportunity to enjoy heathland with incredibly diverse plant life.

"There are more Biodiversity Action Plan species here than in any other habitat in the UK," said English Nature Project Manager Craig Thomas.

Restoration and management has involved scrub clearance and controlled grazing, using a flying-flock of more than 200 Hebridean sheep. The close involvement of local communities will ensure the sustainable management of the heathlands for future generations.

"This grant has enabled us to employ Kay Paterson as Access and Interpretation Officer, specifically to explain the area's worth and its historical and cultural context," said Craig.

Case study: Marine biodiversity and aggregates

Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust


BMPA

This forward-thinking project is working with the marine aggregates industry to reduce the impacts of extraction on the wildlife of sand and gravel habitats

Thanks to the levy fund, there has been a packed programme of conferences, seminars, awareness and community participation events on the subject.

"The project has also given us the opportunity to work with a very diverse group of organisations to deliver projects that raise awareness of the biodiversity of these habitats and promote public involvement in conservation," said Marine Conservation Officer Lisa Browning. "These projects include surveys of sharks, mantis shrimps and worm reefs."

Case study: Whitemoor Haye Woolly Rhino

Birmingham Archaeology/Lafarge Aggregates


University of Birmingham

The woolly rhino and the man who found it, Ray Davies

The discovery of a partial skeleton of an Ice Age woolly rhino by an excavator driver in the Lafarge Aggregates quarry at Whitemoor Haye, Staffordshire, was a landmark event.

"England's river valleys are not only a valuable source of aggregate for the nation's construction industry, but a treasure house of knowledge about the Ice Age past," said Simon Buteux, Divisional Leader for Archaeology and Heritage Management at the University of Birmingham. "We're working to raise the profile and generally enthuse everyone so that these discoveries aren't missed.

"In a very real sense, sand and gravel quarries are the key which has opened the window on the Ice Age – how else can remains, often hidden metres beneath the ground and with no surface clue to their existence, be uncovered?"

Ensuring that SSSIs are in favourable condition often requires more than isolated measures. In the Somerset Levels and Moors, an inclusive approach to sustainable land management is helping wildlife.

Fran Walker

A local voice on big issues

The largest area of lowland wet grassland and wetland habitat in Britain, the Somerset Levels and Moors, is a habitat of national and international importance. It supports an immense population of waterfowl in the winter and extensive numbers of breeding birds, particularly waders, during the warmer months. It is scattered with protected areas such as West Sedgemoor SSSI and West Moor SSSI.

But it is also has great agricultural value and a particular reputation for beef cattle. Indeed, the social, as well as economic, ties between local communities and this cultural landscape are very strong.

"There was a call from rural communities for new ways to work with local authorities and Government agencies on issues affecting local people and the stewardship of the area. That was the catalyst for the Levels & Moors Partnership (LAMP), formed in 1995 to ensure a sustainable future for the land, its people and wildlife," said Richard Bradford, Project Manager of LAMP and spokesperson for Somerset Pride (see left).

LAMP's Steering Group includes parish, district and county council representatives as well as those acting on behalf of farmers and landowners. This, in turn, works with Full Partnership members, such as English Nature, the Environment Agency and Defra.

This joint approach is well illustrated by one of LAMP's key projects – the Avalon Marshes. Stretching west from Glastonbury Tor, much of this wetland habitat has been changed through peat extraction. Now LAMP is supporting efforts to reclaim the peat workings by creating lakes and reedbeds whose management will be funded through sustainable tourism and recreation.

"Local people will also have the opportunity to learn more about the history of the Vale of Avalon," added Richard, "and will be encouraged to get involved in traditional and new wetland industries, such as growing reed for thatching."

Background image: Somerset County Council

SOMERSET PRIDE

While farmers in the area have largely embraced the principles of sustainable land management, a number have gone one step further by using sustainable farming to promote their goods.

"Somerset Pride is a non-profit making co-operative of small livestock farmers, set up to gain special recognition for the area and the farm products that come from it," said Richard Bradford, a spokesperson for Somerset Pride and the Levels & Moors Partnership.

"I think that, over the years, people have forgotten where beef and milk come from. Everything we're trying to do fits in with English Nature's principles of managing farms in a way that looks after wildlife and the countryside. It creates a link in people's minds between the food they like and the countryside they enjoy. It also produces a better-quality, better-tasting product."

Somerset Pride has produced a range of promotional literature part-funded by English Nature.

"We're also helping individual producers achieve much more in the market than they would alone. By combining their resources, we're able to cut out many of the middlemen. In our system there is a farmer, an abattoir, a processor and a consumer. That's it. As such we're able to give a premium to the producer."

To find out more about Somerset Pride telephone 01458 253344 or email enquiries@somersetpride.co.uk

Fran Walker

CAP reform

what it means for the environment

The historic deal to reform the CAP, agreed by EU agriculture ministers on 26 June, will have significant implications for wildlife, and not just for farmers.

The most important aspect of the reform is an end to the link between support to farmers and the crops and livestock they produce, a process called 'decoupling'. This link to production has encouraged over-intensive farming in England, most noticeably in the uplands – where overstocking has been a serious environmental problem – and in arable areas.

The break between subsidy and production should, therefore, bring benefits to wildlife, as well as giving farmers the freedom to become more market-orientated. However, it isn't an altogether rosy picture. While it might mean less overgrazing in the uplands and less intensive arable production on marginal land elsewhere, the changes could put financial pressure on extensive and mixed farming systems in the lowlands. Mixed farming, where animals and crops are found on the same farm, provides the intimate mixtures of feeding and nesting sites required by species such as lapwing, skylark and other birds as well as the brown hare and many insects like bumblebees and butterflies. These farming systems are already under financial pressure, and may not be viable when headage payments (a subsidy per livestock head) are removed.

"Longer term, we are still working for a major shift of resources away from farm support and into rural development and 'green farming' schemes, paying farmers directly for their environmental management work. We need to secure better funding for the English Rural Development Plan at the next review in 2006," said English Nature's Head of Agriculture, Alastair Rutherford.

Important new policy tools that can be used when the CAP changes come into operation to help protect the environment include:

- payments being made conditional on meeting certain minimum environmental standards – "cross-compliance";
- the use of national envelopes – using a proportion of the CAP to support farming systems or marketing initiatives that deliver environmental benefits; and
- the better use of set-aside – if land is prevented from growing crops, it could be managed for wildlife.

"While we welcome the end to the damaging link between subsidy and production, we will be working hard to ensure the reforms won't result in an abandonment of grazing on valuable lowland grassland. We will also need to make sure that any intensification and specialisation on the more productive land does not lead to environmental damage," said Alastair.

Reducing environmental damage

Sustainable land management begins with discussion and agreement among local partners. The next step is to introduce techniques that will minimise environmental damage.

Such was the focus of a conference in September organised by the Forum for the Application of Conservation Techniques, a body co-ordinated by English Nature, and the Grazing Animals Project.

According to speaker Chris Mainstone, English Nature's Senior Freshwater Ecologist, freshwater pollution is a major product of unsustainable land management. This can either be traced to an isolated leak or spill or a more diffuse source, such as when rain carries soil and associated nutrients from farmed fields into watercourses via 'run-off'.

Common causes of diffuse water pollution include:

- soil compaction, causing poor infiltration and increased run-off;
- over-application of manures and fertilisers, which make their way into watercourses through run-off and filter down into groundwater; and
- leaving soils bare and vunerable at times of heavy rainfall and run-off.

His advice to land managers was to actively avoid these conditions by being mindful of crop and soil requirements, the ways in which pollution can enter watercourses and the habitats that can be harmed.

Bob Dicker of the National Trust concentrated on identifying specific point sources. Typical examples include muck heaps, silage and slurry stores, defective septic tank systems, leaking oil tanks, roads and tracks – even dead farm animals. Care and forethought were his overriding messages of how to manage the problem.

The benefits of wide-area management were also a hot topic. Dutch speakers explained how a 6,000 hectare area called the Oostvaardersplassen had been left to nature with minimal human interference. The results to date were impressive gains for biodiversity. The area now also forms part of a multi-national north European network of giant wildlife sites.

Other case studies included the 2,450 hectares of Epping Forest being managed for wildlife, and plans to create a huge wetland linking Wicken Fen National Nature Reserve with Cambridge, by acquiring and re-wetting land presently drained for arable production.

The conference was the launch pad for two important new publications on conservation land management techniques. The *Scrub Management Handbook: Guidance on the management of scrub on nature conservation sites* is a one-stop reference for managers and advisers involved in scrub and shrub management for wildlife. *The Herbicide Handbook: Guidance on the use of herbicides on nature conservation sites* is available as a separate title, but is also incorporated in the back of the *Scrub Management Handbook*. Copies of the handbook can be downloaded from the English Nature website.

WHEN NATURE CALLS

Running an enquiries desk for English Nature this blistering summer has been an experience leading to strange fantasies and imaginings, prompted by some of our calls.

The sort where one imagines our trusty 'customers' fighting their way into their dustbowl gardens, lawns ravaged underfoot by starving badgers, through a positive hail of hummingbird hawkmoths, red admirals, painted ladies and silvery moths. "Where are my fuchsia plants?" they cry plaintively to the brown and parched acres. Oh dear, they have all been eaten by hordes of elephant hawkmoth caterpillars. Pausing briefly at the dried-up pond (the badgers or water voles have punctured the liner), they scan the pitiless blue sky for signs of rain, only to realise that the forecast was wrong yet again (I write from an eastern perspective where we had one rainy day in three months!). Back in their house they notice frogs hopping about, refugees from the waterless ponds. Perhaps they have come in via the loos, as one caller suggested?

Perhaps I had sunstroke? Now it's November, the fag-end of the year, and we must put such fantasies aside. The drought led to premature leaf fall, blackberries seemed to swell then shrink and the heat went on and on. A farmer phoned me about a grey squirrel problem – he has a lovely walnut tree, but has only had one nut from it.

We had very few herring gull problem queries. Why I wonder? We had so many last year.

Here's to a cold and snowy winter, a robin in your garden and a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to all our enquirers.

By **Dick Seamons**
English Nature's Enquiry Service

WHAT'S ON? GUIDE

NOVEMBER

NOV 27 — **A Year on the Mosses – Slide Show**
7.30pm–9pm, Fenn's, Whixall and Bettisfield Mosses NNR, Shropshire.
A look at the rare wildlife of the NNR through the seasons and the work to restore the bog over the last 12 years.
Contact: Joan Daniels on 01948 880362

NOV 29 — **Take part in National Tree Week on the National Nature Reserve**
9.30am–4pm, Moor House-Upper Teesdale NNR, Durham.
Help to plant the native broad-leaved tree species of the Pennines and check the progress of saplings.
Contact: Heather McCarty on 01833 622374

DECEMBER

DEC 6 — **Guided walk around an Ancient Yew Grove**
10am, Kingley Vale NNR, West Sussex.
Join English Nature for a short walk around the ancient yew grove at Kingley Vale National Nature Reserve and discover the history and legends of these magnificent trees.
Contact: Simon Nobes on 01252 790115

DEC 7 — **A Green Christmas**
Children's session: 10am–12pm, adult session: 1–3pm, Castle Eden Dene NNR, Durham.
Craftswoman Maid Marion will show how to make natural decorations as well as more traditional cards and baubles.
Contact: Nick Haigh on 01915 860004

DEC 7 — **Christmas Tree Task**
10.30am–1pm, Fenn's, Whixall and Bettisfield Mosses NNR, Shropshire.
Come and help clear pine seedlings from the Moss as well as being introduced to its internationally rare wildlife.
Contact: Joan Daniels on 01948 880362

DEC 14 — **Guided Walk on Thorne Moor**
10.30am–1.30pm, Humberhead Peatlands NNR, South Yorkshire.
Contact: Darren Whitaker on 01405 818819

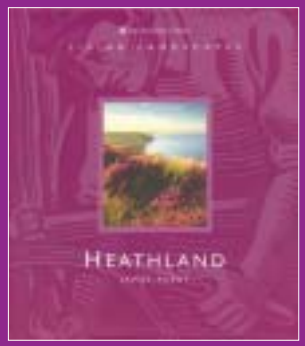
JANUARY

JAN 11 — **Guided Walk around Eccup Reservoir**
10am, Eccup Reservoir, West Yorkshire.
A great opportunity to see red kites and other wildlife on the walk around this designated Site of Special Scientific Interest.
Contact: Marie Bowness on 0113 218 1040

JAN 18 — **Feeding Station Drop in Day – Wildlife Watch**
10am–3pm, Castle Eden Dene NNR, Durham.
An ideal opportunity to get close up views of many of the birds that give only fleeting glimpses out on the reserve.
Contact: Nick Haigh on 01915 860004

For more information on these and other events, visit:
www.english-nature.org.uk/events.asp

Book review



'Heathland' by James Parry
Published by the National Trust in their Living landscapes series
£18.99 (ISBN 0707803489)
Tel: 0207 222 9251

This very informative and easy-to-read book focuses on the cultural aspects of lowland heathlands. In a land where almost nothing of the primeval natural landscapes survives after thousands of years of human intervention, lowland heathlands still provide a sense of wilderness, despite being created, maintained and dependent on human activities. The book includes relevant descriptions of the habitat and its wildlife, its geographical distribution and management issues. However, from my point of view, the most interesting chapters are the historical review on how the heathland industries have changed with time, and how this, in turn, has impacted on the appearance of the landscape. The reader is also given an account of the richness of resources that have been obtained from heathlands over the centuries: plants (heather, gorse, bracken), food (honey, rabbits, sheep) and minerals (gravels, sands).

The last chapter analyses the present situation, where some remaining heathlands are still in sub-optimal conditions due to decades of neglect. The author then takes an optimistic look to the future based on a renewed interest by the public, the help of the funding bodies, such as the Heritage Lottery Fund, and changes in legislation, which will hopefully secure the future of this habitat.

The book is profusely illustrated with beautiful photographs, many of them from the early 20th century and delightful watercolours by artist John Davis.

Reviewed by **Isabel Alonso**,
Heathland Ecologist, English Nature

Harnessing nature has unleashed a wave of good fortune at the Freiston Shore RSPB nature reserve in Lincolnshire. Man-made sea walls have been breached, allowing saltwater to reclaim agricultural land and reform the area's indigenous saltmarsh habitat. The results are overwhelming…

Letting nature do the work

Since Roman times, man-made sea walls have been used on the low-lying Lincolnshire Wash coast to protect the surrounding area from flood damage and to reclaim saltmarsh for agricultural use.

More recently, the inmates and staff of Her Majesty's Prison North Sea Camp took over the maintenance of the walls and used the land there for grazing sheep. They were fighting a losing battle. Without protection from saltmarsh, the outer sea walls in the flood defence system were subjected to severe erosion.

Step in the Boston Wash Banks Project. This innovative project – jointly managed by the Environment Agency, RSPB, English Nature and Her Majesty's Prison North Sea Camp – is the largest example of managed realignment in the United Kingdom.

Fact file

In 2002 Freiston Shore RSPB nature reserve received 51,142 visits, putting it inside the top 10 most visited RSPB reserves.

Saltmarshes are one of the rarest habitats in the United Kingdom, with just 44,500 hectares, compared to three quarters of a million hectares of woodland.

Background image: RSPB

The benefits of the English Nature/ RSPB-managed realignment of the coastline are immeasurable. Eighteen months since allowing the site to return to its natural state, birds are flocking back, plantlife typical of saltmarsh is re-rooting and people are visiting in their droves.

The RSPB-managed site now boasts at least seven newly colonised species of plant, including sampire, sea lavender and sea purslane. And close to 10,000 birds were recorded roosting there during the winter of 2002/03 alone – mostly golden plovers and lapwings. Feeding birds have included nearing 100 shelducks.

> "A lagoon was created from the need to win material to upgrade the sea banks"

"The lagoon has become an important feature," said RSPB Site Manager, John Badley. "It was landscaped using the EU funds and, during 2003, 30 pairs of waders nested. It is also becoming a valuable place for roosting and feeding birds and has already attracted nationally important numbers of roosting redshanks and feeding dark-bellied brent geese, more than one per cent of the UK population."

How it was done

In 2000, a new supporting 'cross' bank was constructed at Freiston Shore. Then, after a period of stabilisation, the final phase of breaching of the outer sea bank got the go-ahead in 2002.

Three breaches (50 metre cuts through the outer sea bank) were made and a creek system was excavated enabling tides to enter 78 hectares of land.

The area is now gradually reverting to saltmarsh and an intertidal mudflat – an essential sea defence as well as a valuable intertidal habitat in the Wash.

For more information on Freiston Shore nature reserve and any environmental issues surrounding the scheme, visit the Boston Wash Banks website at: **www.thebostonwashbanks.com**