

# LOWLAND HEATHLAND HABITAT ACTION PLAN



## Introduction



Lowland heath at Pilmoor: English Nature

'Lowland heathland' is a UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) Priority Habitat.

Lowland heathland has declined by 80% nationally over the last 200 years. In southern England much has been developed for housing. In Yorkshire most losses have been to forestry and agriculture.

This is a habitat of low altitudes, dominated by heather, but with gorse (*Ulex europaeus*), scrub, bogs, wet pools and bare patches. Heathland may be sandy or peaty. It is uncultivated, but may be grazed. It has a rich diversity of species especially invertebrates and reptiles.

## Status

### National

The national resource covers 58,000 hectares in the UK, with most found in southern England. This is 20% of the World resource, all of which is found in Europe.

### Regional

This is a characteristic habitat of the southern portion of the Vales of York and Mowbray Natural Area and the regional resource is 1,109ha.

### Local

Only 45 hectares of Lowland heathland occurs in Hambleton. At Pilmoor Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), near Thirsk, the habitat is a mosaic of heath, fen and wet woodland. An area of 15 hectares of *Sphagnum* dominated mire is being invaded with willow, and silver birch (*Betula pendula*) is also colonising. The Lowland heathland origins of Yearsley Moor in the Howardian Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty are still in evidence, largely beneath conifer plantation.

## Hambleton Priority Species

- Argent and sable moth (UK BAP)

## Other Species

- Round-leaved sundew (*Drosera rotundifolia*)
- Adder
- Slow worm
- Common lizard
- Dragonflies

## Status of Priority Species

The argent and sable moth is a UK BAP priority species and is rare in the UK. It has been recorded from only six sites in the region, including Pilmoor, where it was last noted in 1984. It was unsuccessfully searched for on one date in June 2001. This is a species of birch

woodland on bogs. The larvae feed on birch and bog myrtle (*Myrica gale*) (the latter not occurring at Pilmoor).

If argent and sable moth is found to still occur at Pilmoor (target 3) then targets and actions will be prepared and added to the BAP.

## Requirements

Lowland heathland benefits from the following:

- No habitat loss.
  - Appropriate management.
  - Restoration of afforested sites.
  - Ride widening in afforested sites to maintain heathland interest for the duration of tree cover.
  - **Heather management:** Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) lives for 30 years and each age stage should be represented, to give structural diversity.
  - A range of micro-habitats within the heathland including bare ground, scrub, bogs and open water.
  - **Fire control:** Fire is an effective management tool. Uncontrolled fires are damaging.
  - **Control of invasive plants:** Plants such as bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*), tor grass (*Bracypodium sylvaticum*), gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) and silver birch (*Betula pendula*) can quickly become dominant.
- These need to be reduced but not eradicated. Rhododendron (*Rhododendron ponticum*) is best eradicated.
- **Light grazing:** This traditional form of management is ideal on heathland as it controls invasive species and produces a range of vegetation heights, adding to structural variety.
  - **Areas of open ground:** Bare patches are excellent for some animals, especially insects and reptiles that need to bask in sunshine.
  - **Heathland ponds:** Open water is good for specialist invertebrates, with different species living in different zones of the pond.
  - Seasonally wet areas and bogs are good for certain insects and plants. These have adapted to the particular ground conditions and are often rare.
  - **Wildlife corridors:** These link heathland sites and aid colonisation.

## Current Action

- Forestry Commission must be party to the removal of conifers from heathland under the Forestry Act 1967.
- Pilmoor is legally protected by being a designated SSSI.
- This is a key Countryside Stewardship (CS) target habitat – allowing for enhanced management and re-creation on adjacent land.
- English Nature run the National Lowland Heathland Programme.
- Research is being undertaken by agencies such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and English Nature.
- The following Hambleton District-Wide Local Plan policies are relevant:
  - i NCI: General nature conservation considerations,
  - ii NC2: Statutory Sites of Nature Conservation Interest,
  - iii NC4: Non-statutory sites of nature conservation interest,
  - iv NC5: Species protected by law,
  - v NC6: Semi-natural habitat protection and
  - vi NC7: Wildlife corridors.
- Butterfly Conservation action plan for argent and sable moth produced in 2000.
- One area of Pilmoor is grazed.



Argent and sable moth: Peter Waterton

## Threats

- Direct threats from clearance and conversion to other land-uses, notably afforestation.
- Fragmentation and isolation.
- A lack of appropriate management, leading to encroachment of rhododendron (*Rhododendron ponticum*) bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*), tor grass (*Brachypodium sylvaticum*) or scrub.
- Recreational pressures, but not at Pilmoor.
- Vandalism (arson).

## Other Possible Partners

- Butterfly Conservation
- BTCV (formerly British Trust for Conservation Volunteers)
- Landowners

## Objective

To conserve, restore, enhance and manage lowland heathland in Hambleton.

## Targets

1. Return all lowland heathland on Pilmoor SSSI to a favourable condition for nature conservation, by securing appropriate management.
2. Restore 2.5 hectares of lowland heathland on Yearsley Moor to a favourable condition.
3. Ascertain whether a population of argent and sable moth survives at Pilmoor.

## Actions

	Partner	Target No.
<b>Policy and Legislation</b>		
No action.		
<b>Site Safeguard and Management</b>		
Agree and implement appropriate long term (Five year) management plans with all 3 owners of Pilmoor.	EN	1
Pilmoor - assess site and write management prescriptions.	EN	1
Pilmoor - open up 5-10 ha of sphagnum-rich ground, by clearing willow scrub.	EN	1
Pilmoor - establish grazing in a second area.	EN	1
<b>Research and Monitoring</b>		
Pilmoor - survey fauna and flora.	EN, NEYEDC	1
Pilmoor - survey for the argent and sable moth.	EN, NEYEDC	3
<b>Advisory</b>		
All landowners at Pilmoor SSSI given relevant advice.	EN	1
<b>Communications and Publicity</b>		
All landowners at Pilmoor SSSI given copies of relevant section of the HBAP.	HDC	1
Contact landowners of Yearsley Moor and FC, to discuss potential for restoration.	HH-AONB FC	2
<i>FWAG have indicated that they are prepared to be a willing partner for this Action Plan.</i>		