

The Suffolk Coast and Heaths Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

The Suffolk Coast and Heaths Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is one of Britain's finest landscapes. It covers 150 square miles of countryside, including lowland coastal scenery, wildlife-rich wetlands and the historic Sandlings heaths.

A Partnership of 26 organisations cares for the AONB, coordinated by the Suffolk Coast and Heaths Unit. The Unit acts as a champion for the AONB, promoting its conservation and working with others to achieve sustainable, sympathetic use.

AONBs are part of the UK's 'family' of protected areas that includes our National Parks and Heritage Coasts. All receive special protection because of their unique qualities and national importance.

Find out more

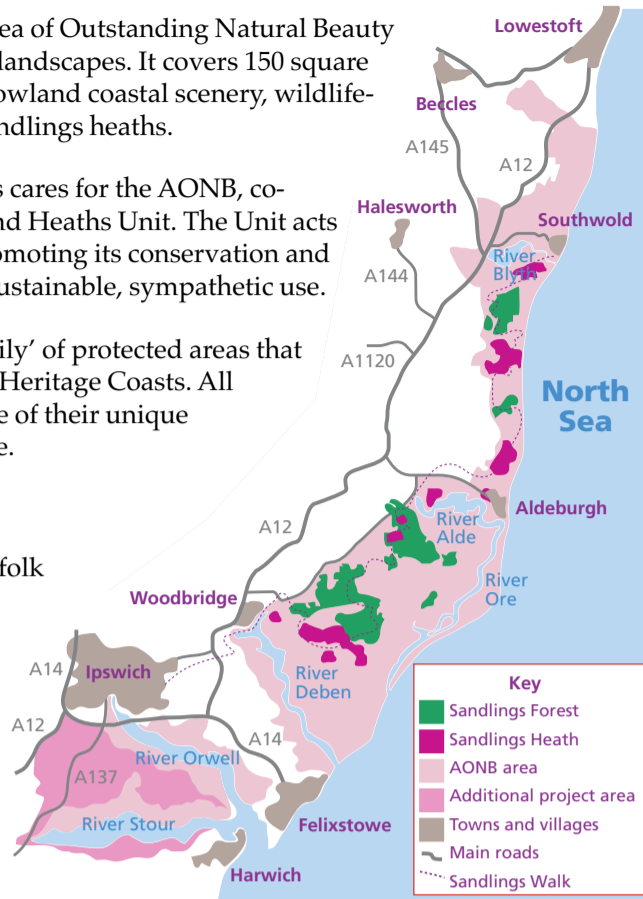
Find out more by visiting the Suffolk Coast and Heaths website:
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This leaflet has been funded by Thorpeness and Aldeburgh Hotels Group, a member of Connect.



Connect funds a wide range of projects using money raised by businesses who support conservation in the Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB.

Enjoying heathland in the Suffolk Coast and Heaths



Suffolk Coast and Heaths Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

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The Suffolk Sandlings make up one of our most important landscapes. An area of grassland, gorse, scattered trees and heather, found on some of the poorest, most acidic soils in eastern England, the Sandlings support rare birds and a range of characteristic heathland plants and animals. Open Access legislation now gives us more opportunity than ever before to enjoy these beautiful places, but care is needed if their wonderful wildlife is to be saved for future generations to enjoy.

The Sandlings take their name from a narrow band of light, sandy soils that run roughly north-south from Southwold to the eastern fringe of Ipswich. The soil was formed from material washed out from the ice sheet during the last ice age, between 10,000 - 70,000 years ago. As the ice retreated and the climate slowly warmed, the Sandlings landscape would have become wooded. Over thousands of years people gradually cleared the trees and grazed their animals on the land, preventing the regrowth of the forest and leading to a more open landscape, not unlike the countryside we see today.

The sandy soils are very light, so easy to cultivate compared to the clay-dominated soils to the west, but also acidic and relatively infertile. Farmers were able to grow crops on the land, but the nutrients in the ground were quickly exhausted, forcing people to move to new areas. Plants that we think of today as heathland species gradually colonised these areas, thriving in the more open landscape. Perhaps as long as 4,000 years ago, large expanses of heathland had already developed in this area, a patchwork of grassland, gorse, scattered trees and heather.

Crazing intensified with the introduction of sheep, around 1,000 years ago, and dominated farming in the Sandlings until comparatively recently. Apart from the river valleys that cut through the area, much of this land had become a virtually continuous area of heath through which huge flocks of sheep roamed, under the care of skilled shepherds. This means that although the Sandlings heaths may seem like a natural landscape, they are really created by people.

Nationally, there are 58,000 hectares (about 143,000 acres) of lowland heathland in Britain today. This is about 20% of the total world resource. Over 80% of Britain's lowland heathland has been lost since 1800 - 17% in the last 50 years. Today outside Suffolk, lowland heathland is found in Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Hampshire, Surrey, Norfolk, Essex, Staffordshire, Pembrokeshire, west Glamorgan and west Gwynedd. Look inside to find out how to enjoy these beautiful places without harming them.

In the last century, the Sandlings heaths have changed dramatically. Modern intensive farming methods, commercial forestry, military use and urban development have all brought change to the Sandlings and much of the area's heaths have been lost. Fortunately, the importance of the heaths is now well understood and all the significant remaining fragments of the Sandlings are now protected and under some form of conservation management.

Tree and woodland clearance continued until the 17th Century. Human settlements were usually on areas of more fertile ground, adjacent to heaths. The heathland was used for a range of purposes: gorse tops were cut for fodder for animals, while the older parts provided fuel. Trees were also cut for fuel, while bracken was gathered for animal bedding, fuel and also to provide potash for industries such as glass and soap-making. Domestic animals were grazed on the heath and turf and peat were cut for fuel, a practice known as 'turbary'. All these activities maintained the open nature of the heath and prevented it reverting back to woodland.



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in the Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB



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The Heathland Visitor's Code

Do your bit for heathland by following these simple suggestions:

Plan ahead and follow any signs:

Open access has allowed more opportunities to visit heaths but there are still restrictions and some areas are closed March - October. Make sure you have the latest information about when and where to go.

Keep dogs under close control:

Dogs are a real danger to heathland wildlife, farm animals and even people. They pose a particular threat to rare birds such as nightjar, woodlark and stone curlew that rely on the Sandlings heaths to breed. All are well camouflaged, making it difficult to know if they are present and, as they nest on the ground, it only needs one dog out of control to completely ruin a nesting attempt. From March to July inclusive, dogs **must** be kept on a short fixed lead on access land and 'under close supervision' on Public Rights of Way. On some heathlands, this restriction is extended to the end of August. Dogs must be on a lead at all times when close to grazing animals.

Prevent heathland fires:

Lowland heaths can be dry places, especially in spring and summer. Fires started by careless behaviour may kill animals and plants and ruin a beautiful landscape. It only needs one discarded cigarette to spell disaster, so please take special care - do not light open fires or BBQs and obey any restrictions.

Protect wildlife and take your litter home:

We all have a responsibility to protect heathland for future generations to enjoy. Please do not damage, destroy or remove animals or plants. Wherever possible, please keep to existing paths and remember that dropping litter and dumping rubbish is a criminal offence.

Consider other people:

Heathland is a working landscape and your actions can affect other people's livelihoods. Avoid blocking gates, drives or other entrances when you park your vehicle. Use stiles and other access points provided and leave gates as you find them. Please leave livestock and machinery alone.

Three heaths to visit...

Sutton and Hollesley Commons, near Woodbridge, make up one of the largest continuous areas of Sandlings heath. They are managed by Suffolk Wildlife Trust and Suffolk Coastal District Council.

Free Access: Car parks (off B1083 and the Hollesley to Woodbridge road), picnic areas and nature trails. Sutton Heath Picnic Site is off the B1083 Melton to Bawdsey road. TM306476. Upper Hollesley Picnic Site is off the Woodbridge to Hollesley road. TM335472.

Facilities: The nearest toilet and refreshment facilities are in local towns and villages. Leaflets and signs are available on-site for visitor information.

Tunstall and Blaxhall Commons are fine examples of Sandlings heaths with characteristic wildlife and plant communities. Free Access: Tunstall Common - car park off the B1078. Blaxhall Common - Car park off the B1069 and off the Iken to Tunstall road. Sandgalls Picnic Site is off the B1069 between Tunstall and Snape. Footpaths to Blaxhall Heath and Tunstall Forest nearby. TM381559.

Facilities: The nearest toilet and refreshment facilities are at Snape Maltings and local villages. Leaflets and signs are available for visitor information.

Westleton and Dunwich Heaths include some of the finest lowland heath to be found in the UK. Westleton Heath, part of which is a National Nature Reserve, is managed by Natural England and the RSPB. Nearby Dunwich Heath is a unique coastal heathland site, owned and managed by the National Trust.

Location: Westleton Heath car park lies to the north of the B1125 at TM455695, between Westleton and Dunwich. For Dunwich Heath, continue eastwards along the B1125 before taking the well signposted right turn. There is a charge for parking at this site.

Photographs:
Cover: Westleton National Nature Reserve by Malcolm Farrow
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Facilities: Westleton Heath circular walks leaflet is available from both Westleton Heath car park and from RSPB Minsmere Visitor Centre. Cafe, toilets and shop are located at both Dunwich Heath and Minsmere.

Heathland wildlife

You may come across a wide range of plants and wildlife if you visit the Sandlings heaths, especially during the summer. Look out for:

Dartford Warbler (1). A small, secretive, long tailed bird that is most likely to be seen perching on top of heather or gorse. Recent mild winters have enabled numbers to increase dramatically.

Red deer (2). One of five species of deer to occur in Suffolk. These shy creatures are native to Britain and the largest wild mammals to be found here.

Bell heather (3). A spectacular sight when in flower. It blooms from June until August, slightly earlier than the more common **ling heather (7)**, and takes its name from its colourful bell-shaped flowers.

Fly Agaric mushroom (4). One of many species of fungi to be found in the Sandlings. Although beautiful to look at, they are poisonous and should not be eaten.

Silver-studded blue (5). One of the UK's rarest butterflies. A heathland specialist, the Sandlings is the Suffolk stronghold for this tiny butterfly, which lives in small colonies and flies in June and July.

Adder (6). A shy, secretive animal, belying its dangerous reputation. An adder's bite is unlikely to be fatal but these snakes are best avoided and are a good reason to keep dogs on a lead.

Woodlark (8). Secretive, ground nesting birds, often found close to the more wooded heathland areas. Although resident throughout the year, they are a rare species and the Sandlings is an important site for them.

Nightjar (9). Mysterious, nocturnal birds with an extraordinary "churring" song, most likely to be heard at dusk. They return in May from Africa each year to breed on the Sandlings heaths. Nightjars nest on the ground and are very vulnerable to disturbance.

Gorse (10). It is said that when gorse is in flower, kissing is in season. Fortunately, it flowers virtually throughout the year, bringing colour to the heaths!

Green tiger beetle (11). An unmistakable heathland resident and one of the UK's most striking insects.

Hobby (12). A summer visitor to the Sandlings. The agile flight of this dashing falcon makes it a spectacular sight.



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12