

London Borough of Croydon

Habitat Action Plan

Heathland



'We are not asking for a new pleasure ground, we only plead that what we have enjoyed for all our lifetime shall not now be taken from us'
(extract from a campaign letter dated 1899 to protect Croham Hurst from development)

1. Aims

- To protect, create and restore heathland within Croydon.
- To promote the value of heathland and secure the community involvement in its conservation.

2. Introduction

Classic heathland is covered mainly by low-growing shrubs such as heather (or 'ling'), which turn it a rich purple in late summer and autumn. This habitat could once be seen on large areas of common land around London, where local people grazed animals and drovers stationed their stock on the way to market. Such grazing helped to keep scrub and trees from invading the open landscape. Heathlands also played a vital role in local communities, as gorse and peat yielded a valued source of fuel and the open nature of heaths presented a perfect setting for village celebrations.

On a global scale the habitat has declined drastically, the UK is responsible for looking after 20% of all that now remains. This decline has been acute in London too, where today heathland is limited to a few surviving fragments. Action is needed to save these remnants, restore degraded areas and create new heathlands wherever it may be appropriate.

The heathland left in London is still a significant habitat type; important as the last refuge of a distinctive group of plants and animals. These include heather, dwarf gorse, the linnet, the green hairstreak butterfly and the adder, which is now a very rare and threatened species within the Capital.

Heathland is found on free-draining acid soils that are low in nutrients. It consists characteristically of an intimate mosaic of tussocky grasses and dwarf shrubs, with associated stands of common gorse, broom and hawthorn. Areas of bare ground may also be present, as well as boggy areas and small pools where the ground is locally wetter. Typical marginal habitats include acid grassland, bracken stands and young birch woodland.

Throughout this habitat action plan the term heathland will be used to represent both the heather dominated areas as well as associated acid mire communities.

3. Existing Resources

3.1 Historical background

Heathland began to develop as a semi-natural habitat with the prehistoric clearance of climax woodland for grazing and cultivation. The solid and drift strata producing soils that support heathland under historic management regimes, account for the greater proportion of London's surface geology. These strata include amongst others the Blackheath and Woolwich beds, Plateau gravels and Thanet sands in Croydon.

From the widespread distribution of these strata it may be assumed that very extensive areas of heathland habitat existed throughout the modern area of greater London in former times. This area would have peaked towards the end of the 18th century, when extensive grazing on communal land was at its socio-cultural zenith.

Massive residential development and the construction of transport infrastructure, as well as the widespread winning of aggregates, have together accounted for the destruction and fragmentation of most of London's heathland, while the preserved heaths and commons have been steadily altered by increasingly formalized management regimes in response to visitor pressure.

The myriad of street names and place names across Greater London, and within Croydon containing the words 'heath', 'common' and 'furze' illustrates the broad spread of heath in times gone by and perhaps indicates areas for future re-establishment. For example ; Littleheath Wood, Heathfield, Thornton Heath.

3.2 Current Status

Lowland heathland is listed as a priority habitat for conservation in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (DOE, 1995). London's surviving fragments make up about 80 hectares in total, with the largest single area being found at Wimbledon Common and Putney Heath. Other boroughs containing significant areas include Bromley, Croydon, Harrow, Hillingdon and Hounslow.

Many of London's remaining heathland sites have suffered neglect and mismanagement and are fast losing their characteristic plants to coarse grasses, bracken and developing woodland. Gauges of habitat quality on heaths include the age-range of heather and kindred plants, the extent of important associated habitat components such as scrub and bare ground and, of course, their comparative species diversity.

Because of their limited extent and degraded quality, London's heaths no longer support the nationally rare birds and reptiles associated with the habitat elsewhere in southern England, although the Dartford warbler, a highly specialised songbird of heathland habitat, might well be encouraged to make a comeback.

Table 1: Heathland/acid grassland sites in Croydon

Site	Heathland Area (ha)	Comments	Status
Croham Hurst	0.3	plus 1.8 ha of 'potential' heathland	SSSI, SMI
Addington Golf Course & Shirley Heath	3.7		SMI
Addington Hills	6.4	plus 3 ha of 'potential' heathland	SMI
Shirley Park Golf Course	0.2	plus potential of a further 0.5ha	
Spring Park & Threehalfpenny Wood	0.2		SMI
Hall Grange	0.1		SMI
Coulsdon Common	Present		CrBI
Bramley Bank	Present		CrBI
Total	8.5	11 % of London's resource	

4. Specific Factors Affecting the Habitat

4.1 Amenity use

All of Croydon's remaining heathland occurs either within public open spaces or within municipal and private golf courses. The habitat is managed as a separate management parcel within the framework of a wider management plan, with habitat maintenance and restoration as clear priorities.

The varied expectations of different site users put considerable pressure on site managers, who must attempt to accommodate competing recreational demands and people's perception of management actions, such as tree felling. Croydon's heathland sites are popular and well used by the public. Due to the underlying substrates erosion and trampling are the major threats to the habitat.

Heathland habitat continues to be lost through a combination of intensive management imposed to provide formal recreation areas, inappropriate recreational uses and the mismanagement or passive neglect of heathland which allows scrub and woodland to develop.

4.2 Management constraints

The management required to limit succession on heathland is highly labour intensive. In the past when tracts of heathland were much larger, controlled burning of alternate portions was often used as a valuable management technique. This is now impossible, as the remaining heathland fragments are too small for partitioning to be feasible. Today, fires caused either by accident or arson can be very damaging, especially to invertebrates.

Grazing is currently considered to be one of the best ways of managing heathland, but again because of the fragmentation of Croydon's sites is not feasible.

Restoration of heathland sometimes calls for tree felling. This is often extremely unpopular when members of the public are unaware of the overriding need for it. Respect for public opinion can therefore further constrain necessary action.

4.3 Eutrophication

It is feared that the nutrient enrichment of heathland soils from the polluted atmosphere, particularly nitrogen washed from the air by rain, plus the deposition of dog faeces, is an insidious but important cause of habitat degradation. Car exhaust fumes are a major contributor. The vigour with which grasses such as purple moor-grass can invade dwarf shrub stands is thought to be evidence of this worrying process.

5. Current Action

5.1 Legal status

All of the heathland sites identified in the London Biodiversity Audit are included within Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC).

Some sites receive statutory protection, such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), like Croham Hurst. All the other heathland sites within Croydon are Sites of Metropolitan Importance for Nature Conservation.

Specially protected species associated with London's heathland sites include common lizard, slow-worm, adder and possibly great crested newt and hobby.

Species audits of Croydon's heaths will identify presence or absence of such species and help influence future management .

5.2 Mechanisms targeting the habitat

5.2.1 Management and restoration

Croham Hurst, Addington Hills, Shirley Heath, Bramley Bank and Coulsdon Common have management plans and sites like Croham Hurst and Addington Hills have benefited from grant aid schemes, financing scrub clearance projects, survey work, fencing and consultation..

Management prescriptions are being implemented to arrest habitat succession. Methods employed include a combination of hand and mechanical scrub control. The problems of erosion and trampling have been addressed through temporary exclusion fencing, such as on Addington Hills and Croham Hurst.

Heathland restoration and re-creation is being attempted at several sites, involving a number of techniques. Topsoil removal, heather seeding and propagation have been successful on Addington Heath. BTCV Croydon collected heather seeds and cuttings from site and propagated them in nursery conditions for future use in local restoration projects.

Both Croydon and Corporation of London staff are part of the London Heathland Forum, which meets annually to share best practice and learn about new aspect of heathland management.

5.2.2. London Heathland Recovery Strategy

London's Habitat Action Plan for Heathland included a pivotal action to produce a regional strategy for habitat restoration and re-creation. The GLA produced a strategy, which looks at the feasibility and costs of such works for sites across London. Although heathland is neither the most reliable nor cheapest habitat to recreate, an ever widening body of experience in this field does now exist. Compared with the budgets and technology invested in the restoration of contaminated land for example, heathland restoration costs are not at all prohibitive.

Findings of the strategy are used by site managers for relevant funding applications.

6. Flagship Species

These special plants and animals are characteristic of heathland in London. They have been chosen because they are easier to identify and monitor by the general public.

Common Name	Latin	Brief Description
Heather/ cross-leaved heath/ bell heather/ dwarf gorse/	<i>Calluna vulgaris</i> / <i>Erica tetralix</i> / <i>Erica cinerea</i> / <i>Ulex minor</i> / <i>Ulex europaeus</i>	The heathers are responsible for heathland's distinctive purple blaze, juxtaposed with the yellow gorse. This collection of plants is largely

common gorse		responsible for the strikingly colourful image of heathland and gorse provides an exotic coconut smell on warm days.
Bumblebees	<i>Bombus spp</i>	Many species of bumblebee forage over heathland, where they play an important role in pollinating heathland plants. One species, the small heath bumblebee, <i>Bombus jonellus</i> is particularly associated with heaths.

7. Objectives, Actions and Targets

Objective 1

Identify full extent of heathland through audit of floral and faunal composition of Croydon's heathland

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
1.1 Desktop study of existing data, records	12 months	NCCM	CNHSS GIGL
1.2 Survey those sites, where little or no data exists, by means of a quality audit	24 months	NCCM	LHH
1.3 Detailed species investigation (reptiles, invertebrates)	30 months	NCCM	LHH

Objective 2

To secure appropriate and practical management for heathland in conjunction with community and other stakeholders

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
2.1 Distribute best practice habitat management guidelines for community and stakeholders	12 months	NCCM	LHH
2.2 Create or restore 0.2 hectares of heathland per annum	annual	NCCM	LWT. BTCV, DCMP
2.3 Prioritise and co-ordinate practical management efforts with regards to findings of 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3, Heathland works programme in place and published	24 months	NCCM	

Objective 3

Encourage the appreciation of heathland landscapes and secure community support for their management

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
3.1 Provide information/interpretation boards at two publicly accessible heathland locations	12 months	NCCM	LHH
3.2 Provide three walks & talks per year on heathland that explain site history, habitat value and management	annual	NCCM	DCMP
3.3 Promote heathland conservation opportunities through Friends Groups, BTCV and Downlands Countryside Management Project	annual	NCCM	DCMP, BTCV, FoG

Abbreviations

ACCS	Association of Croydon Conservation Societies
BTCV	British Trust for Conservation Volunteers
CrBI	Site of Borough Importance for Nature Conservation Grade 1
DCMP	Downlands Countryside Management Project
GIGL	Greenspace Information for Greater London
NCCM	Nature Conservation and Countryside Management
LWT	London Wildlife Trust
FoG	Friends of Groups
LHH	Londons Heathland Heritage
SMI	Site of Metropolitan Importance for Nature Conservation