



Leicester, Leicestershire  
and Rutland

**BIODIVERSITY**  
**ACTION PLAN**  
**Annual Report**  
**2009/2010**



Leicestershire  
& Rutland  
Wildlife Trust

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In this issue of the Leicestershire and Rutland Biodiversity Action Plan Annual Report we include articles highlighting examples of conservation work to benefit wildlife which has been going on across Leicestershire and Rutland in the past year. These projects range in scope from those covering large areas, such as the River Mease catchment and the Rutland roadside verges, to site specific work on important local habitats. There are examples of collaborative work between statutory bodies, wildlife organisations and land owners, whilst the contribution of farming to wildlife conservation is emphasised in an article on the Campaign for the Farmed Environment.

Looking beyond Leicestershire and Rutland this report also covers international efforts to raise awareness of the importance of wildlife and the continuing loss of species and habitats through the promotion of 2010 as the International Year of Biodiversity. There is also a summary of a recent report by Secretariat of the Convention on Biological on global biodiversity which highlights the failure of world governments to halt the decline in wildlife.



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*Cover picture: The new dam at Rutland Water Naure Reserve, part of the biggest wetland habitat creation project in the UK (Sue James/LRWT)*

*This page: Roadside verge in Rutland (Neill Talbot, LRWT)*



# An introduction to the Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland Biodiversity Action Plan

Biodiversity is the variety of life in all its forms and the habitats where it occurs. In 1992, at the 'Earth Summit' in Rio de Janeiro, the UK Government signed the Biodiversity Convention. This was followed up by the publication of *Biodiversity: The UK Action Plan*, in 1994, with the stated goal 'to conserve and enhance biological diversity in the UK...'. One way this is to be achieved is through Local Biodiversity Action Plans, which aim to focus resources to conserve and enhance biodiversity by means of local partnerships, taking account of national and local priorities.

To this end surveys of the local habitat resource (Bowen & Morris 1996) and key species (Lott 1997) in Leicestershire and Rutland were published. A working group of representatives from 19 organisations, lead by Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust, used this information to draw up the local plan, "Biodiversity Challenge: An Action Plan for Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland", which was produced in 1998.

In essence the Leicestershire and Rutland Biodiversity Action Plan (LLRBAP) was modelled on the UK Action Plan but concentrated on species and habitats of local conservation concern. There were 17 Habitat Action Plans and 14 Species Action Plans. When the plan was revised in 2005 an urban habitat plan and dingy and grizzled skipper species plans were added. In addition, the numerous targets and actions detailed in the original plan were considerably reduced in number and simplified.

More recently it has become clear that by restricting itself to national and local priority habitats the LLRBAP was failing to address concerns about loss of wildlife in the wider countryside. The local resource of priority habitats is limited and they form only a small proportion of the total area available to wildlife in Leicestershire and Rutland. As a result the further revision of the LLRBAP was published in 2010 putting greater emphasis on habitat creation and management in the wider countryside outside of the national priority habitat categories.

Space for Wildlife is the title of this latest version of the LLRBAP and it has three main components:

To promote the restoration, management and creation of BAP priority habitats

To promote the creation of new wildlife habitat in the wider countryside

To survey, monitor and promote favourable management of existing good sites through the Local Wildlife Sites system.

To read the current Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland Biodiversity Action Plan and related documents please visit the Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust website at <http://www.lrwt.org.uk>

*Creating space for wildlife in intensively farmed countryside*

*The two cereal fields divided by the stream in the middle of the picture cover more than 100 ha. Without the labelled newly created habitats such large fields would have little value for wildlife and would represent a considerable barrier to movement of wildlife across the landscape.*

*The value of this land to wildlife has been considerably improved by breaking up the large blocks of cropped land with new plantations and the creation of grass margins. The latter are particularly important where they buffer the stream to create a corridor linking the small fields to the north and south.*



## Biodiversity: the international situation

### The world's wildlife still in decline

The world's wildlife is still in decline – this is the conclusion of a comprehensive review of the state of global biodiversity recently published by The Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity 2010) Global Biodiversity Outlook 3. Montréal, 94 pages; available from <http://gbo3.cbd.int>

The following is an extract from the executive summary:

***The target agreed by the world's Governments in 2002, 'to achieve by 2010 a significant reduction of the current rate of biodiversity loss at the global, regional and national level as a contribution to poverty alleviation and to the benefit of all life on Earth', has not been met.***

*There are multiple indications of continuing decline in biodiversity in all three of its main components - genes, species and ecosystems - including:*

*Species which have been assessed for extinction risk are on average moving closer to extinction.*

*Amphibians face the greatest risk and coral species are deteriorating most rapidly in status. Nearly a quarter of plant species are estimated to be threatened with extinction.*

*The abundance of vertebrate species, based on assessed populations, fell by nearly a third on average between 1970 and 2006, and continues to fall globally, with especially severe declines in the tropics and among freshwater species.*

*Natural habitats in most parts of the world continue to decline in extent and integrity, although there has been significant progress in slowing the rate of loss for tropical forests and mangroves, in some regions. Freshwater wetlands, sea ice habitats, salt marshes, coral reefs, seagrass beds and shellfish reefs are all showing serious declines.*

*Extensive fragmentation and degradation of forests, rivers and other ecosystems have also led to loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services.*

*Crop and livestock genetic diversity continues to decline in agricultural systems.*

*The five principal pressures directly driving biodiversity loss (habitat change, over-exploitation, pollution, invasive alien species and climate change) are either constant or increasing in intensity.*

*The ecological footprint of humanity exceeds the biological capacity of the Earth by a wider margin than at the time the 2010 target was agreed.*

The report concludes that:

*The action taken over the next decade or two, and the direction charted under the Convention on Biological Diversity, will determine whether the relatively stable environmental conditions on which human civilization has depended for the past 10,000 years will continue beyond this century. If we fail to use this opportunity, many ecosystems on the planet will move into new, unprecedented states in which the capacity to provide for the needs of present and future generations is highly uncertain.*





## International Year of Biodiversity

The United Nations General Assembly declared that 2010 will be the International Year of Biodiversity (IYB) to:

- help raise awareness of the importance of biodiversity all over the world
- emphasise the threats to biodiversity
- highlight existing action to halt biodiversity loss
- encourage individuals, organisations and governments to take the immediate steps needed to halt the loss of biodiversity.

For more information on activities related to IYO in the UK and how to get involved visit the Natural History Museum website at <http://www.biodiversityislife.net/?q=what-is-IYB>



*Silver-washed fritillary butterfly at Cloud Wood Nature Reserve (Carl Baggott). Butterflies are very sensitive to their surroundings so are good biodiversity indicators. The Big Butterfly Count, organised by Butterfly Conservation in July was the biggest ever nationwide survey to assess the health of our environment.*

# Action for wildlife in Leicestershire & Rutland

## Working in partnership along the River Mease

by Ruth Walker, Regional SSSI Support Adviser, Natural England

The River Mease is home to nationally significant populations of two freshwater fish with restricted distribution across England. The presence of the spined loach *Cobitis taenia* and bull-head *Cottus gobio* led to the river being designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in 2000 and a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) in 2005. The river was also notified for its physical characteristics (riffles, pools, slacks, vegetated channel margins and bankside tree cover) that support the fish and for the presence of otters *Lutra lutra*, white-clawed crayfish *Austropotamobius pallipes* and water-crowfoot *Ranunculus fluitans*.

Natural England has a legal responsibility to ensure that all designated sites are conserved, protected and managed appropriately and to work with landowners, tenants and other public bodies to restore those sites that are not in good condition. The River Mease is currently in 'unfavourable, no change' condition, which means that its special features are not being adequately conserved, or are being lost. Failure to intervene could result in these features being lost permanently.

Natural England is working with a number of partners in Leicestershire, Staffordshire and Derbyshire to address the issues of pollution, siltation, over abstraction and river modification that are the cause of the river's 'unfavourable' status:

- ▶ independent ecological consultants to carry out surveys and restoration visions for the river
- ▶ the planning department of North West Leicestershire District Council to address development pressures within the River Mease catchment
- ▶ farmers and landowners in the River Mease catchment to bring holdings into stewardship agreements to address diffuse pollution and to re-create the floodplain
- ▶ the Environment Agency to identify and tackle point source pollution, diffuse pollution and to tackle pollution incidences
- ▶ Severn Trent Water to reduce phosphorous levels in the river
- ▶ Staffordshire Wildlife Trust to remove non-native species
- ▶ Staffordshire Wildlife Trust and the Environment Agency to undertake river restoration
- ▶ the Coal Authority to address pollution from mining water
- ▶ students to help carry out research

Natural England will continue to work with these and other partners to bring the river back to 'favourable' status and to preserve the biodiversity value of the county's only SAC.



River Mease (Ruth Walker)



*A wildlife-friendly pond on a farm near Melton Mowbray (Katie Field/LRWT)*

## The Campaign for the Farmed Environment

Set-aside, whereby arable land is taken out of production, was originally introduced to counter surplus food production. However it also provided considerable benefits for wildlife. With the recent withdrawal of subsidies for set-aside much of the un-cropped land returned to cultivation with the loss of wildlife habitat.

The Campaign for the Farmed Environment (CFE) is the farming industry's preferred approach to re-capturing the environmental benefits that were provided by set-aside. It unites key industry stakeholders – National Farmers Union (NFU), Country Landowners Association (CLA), Linking Environment and Farming (LEAF), Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG), Agricultural Industries Association (AIC) and the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) – who will work in partnership with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and its agencies, Natural England (NE) and the Environment Agency (EA). The Campaign partners deliver advice to farmers on how they might best retain and increase the environmental benefits provided by their farmland in a targeted and agronomically sensible way.

Essentially, the benefits that used to be provided by set-aside can be broken down into three themes:

- Resource protection, i.e. protection of water courses through margins/ buffer strips
- Farmland bird habitats (nesting area and winter/ spring food sources)
- Wider biodiversity/ wildlife habitats

The Campaign has agreed to meet a number of national targets over a three-year period (to June 2012).

These include:

- Doubling the take-up of key in-field Options within Environmental Stewardship Schemes (ESS).
- Retaining a certain level of un-cropped land.
- Increasing the level of voluntary environmental management undertaken by farmers by at least 30,000 hectares nationally.

To contribute to the CFE and help to prevent future regulation, the Campaign is encouraging farmers to:

- Renew ESS agreements at the end of the five-year period. Choose some of the key in-field options, where these suit their farming system and offer the greatest benefit for the environment.
- Enter ESS for the first time if they are not yet in the scheme.
- Farmers who do not wish to enter ESS to undertake some form of environmental management from the list of Voluntary Options in the CFE handbook.
- Where old agri-environment agreements (eg Countryside Stewardship Scheme etc), are coming to an end, to renew into an ESS agreement or retain some or all of the measures voluntarily.
- Retain un-cropped land.

A Local Liaison Group has been established in Leicestershire and Rutland, with Alex Butler as co-ordinator.

For further information on how you can contribute to the Campaign, please contact Alex on 01572 718763 or Stuart Holm (FWAG) on 01664 434033.

## Bringing life and colour back to Rutland's roadside verges

by Craig Howat, Rutland County Council

Rutland County Council, as a highway authority, manages an extensive area of roadside verge containing some of the finest wildflower sites in the county.

Wildflower-rich grassland has suffered a high degree of loss and fragmentation since the Second World War and old roadside verges are often the only remnants left and can provide important links between remaining areas of good grassland habitat.

In 2008 a change to the verge mowing contract enabled Rutland County Council to alter the cutting regime on a number of designated roadside verge sites with the aim of restoring the limestone grassland. The sites were signed and a new cutting regime agreed between the Highways Department and Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust, allowing the verges to flower and seed before being cut with the cuttings or arisings then being removed.

In 2009, the verges were visited during the flowering season and autumn to verify the cutting regime was being adhered to. The verification process allowed greater confidence that the positive management was being implemented.

There is 45,206m or over 28 miles of roadside verge in Rutland now in positive management and the public have responded very positively to seeing a 'come-back' of our native flora.

## The Life on the Verge Project

by Mark Schofield, Life on the Verge Project Manager

The Life on the Verge Project managed by the Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust, with support from the Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust, aims to survey extensive parts of the 1,300 miles of limestone grassland roadside verge that fall within the Lincolnshire and Rutland Limestone Natural Area. In addition, the project will raise local awareness of importance of limestone grassland plus restore and link fragments of this scarce habitat.

In 2009 over 70 volunteers surveyed nearly 250 miles of verge and nearly a quarter of the verges surveyed contained enough indicator species to warrant Local Wildlife Site designation. The end result will be a map of valuable verges deserving sympathetic management, which in turn will enable the Wildlife Trusts of Lincolnshire and Leicestershire & Rutland, and the respective highways authorities, to target resources effectively.

Roadside verge in Rutland (above) and wild marjoram in a verge at Empingham, Rutland (above, right)  
(Neill Talbot/LRWT)



Verges are particularly important in areas with a calcareous or limestone soil such as east Leicestershire and Rutland. These grasslands can support as many as 40 plant species per square metre, which attracts a rich diversity of invertebrates and in turn supports a food web of songbirds, small mammals and their predators.

Managing species rich grassland usually involves a mixture of grazing and cutting. However, grazing is not a practical option along busy modern roadsides so getting the right cutting regime is vital. The timing of the cut is important and traditionally hay was cut from the middle of July onwards thereby allowing most flowering species to propagate by seed. Later-flowering species such as clustered bellflower, greater knapweed and small scabious, can benefit from a cut taken as late as September. Having carefully timed the cutting the cuttings or arisings must then be removed – usually by baling. If left in situ the thatch of cuttings can obstruct the growth of all but the most vigorous of plants. Also, as the cuttings rot down, they return nutrients to the soil, increasing its fertility and allowing aggressive nettle, thistle, cow parley and dock to smother the less vigorous wild flowers.



## A haven for wildlife Ketton Quarry Nature Reserve

Active quarries are often thought to be detrimental to wildlife but this is not necessarily the case. Surveys of Ketton Quarry, a large limestone quarry owned by Hanson Cement, have revealed the presence of at least seven species of bat feeding or roosting in the quarry – barbastelle, brown long-eared, Daubenton's, common and soprano pipistrelle, Nathusius' pipistrelle, Natterer's, whiskered/Brandt's and noctule.

Open water bodies within the quarry were found to harbour both common and great-crested newts.

The birds recorded include red kite, peregrine falcon, little ringed plover, barn owl, tawny owl and little owl. Badgers and hares are also active within the quarry.



*Marbled white butterfly at Ketton Quarry Nature Reserve (Chris Hill, LRWT); Little owl (Thomas Judd); Ketton Quarry Nature Reserve (Beverley Heath, LRWT).*

## Managing Misterton Marshes

by Sadie Hobson, Natural England

Misterton Marshes a Site of Special Scientific Interest covering 6.9ha and owned by Leicestershire County Council, is now being managed thanks to collaboration between Leicestershire County Council, Natural England and the Environment Agency. The aim is to restore this important wetland site, which has been in decline because of lack of management and drying out.

The Marshes are important because they support a rich assemblage of breeding birds and invertebrates and contain a rare mosaic of different types of threatened grassland habitat such as flood plain grassland (MG4), species rich neutral grassland (MG5), fen meadow (M22) and tall fen (S26 and S28).

Natural England has been working closely with the County Council and their ranger to ensure the site's recovery. Funding has been provided through a long term Higher Level Scheme agreement, enabling sensitive conservation grazing for the first time in many years, using a flock of native sheep.

The Environment Agency has provided funding to re-wet the marshes. A conifer plantation which borders the site has had a significant effect on water levels so Leicestershire County Council have agreed to clear fell this area, replacing it with native woodland which will grade to parkland then marsh, creating valuable new habitats.

Leicestershire and Rutland Ornithological Society will undertake breeding bird surveys and the success of the new management regime will be monitored by a local ecology group who will undertake yearly surveys.



*Marsh thistles (above)  
and sheep grazing on Misterton Marshes  
(James Forman/Natural England)*



*Sheep grazing on Misterton  
Marshes (James  
Forman/Natural England)*



## Restoring heath grassland in the Charnwood Forest

*LRWT's herd of longhorn cattle (Ben Vivian/Bardon Aggregates) and bracken rolling at Charnwood Lodge National Nature Reserve (Danvers).*



Heathland is characterised by the presence of ericaceous shrubs (heather, cross-leaved heath and bilberry). There is virtually no true heathland in Leicestershire and Rutland and no evidence of extensive areas in the past.

Most of the areas called 'heathland' in Leicestershire (mainly confined to the Charnwood Forest and North West Leicestershire) are in fact dry acid grassland characterised by the presence of acid loving species such as tormentil, heath bedstraw and sheep's sorrel or acid marshy grassland dominated by purple moor grass with patches of sphagnum moss in the wetter hollows.

For this reason the LLRBAP refers to this habitat as heath grassland. There was once an extensive area of heath grassland in the Charnwood Forest. Much has now disappeared following agricultural 'improvement' or conversion to plantation forestry.

In the second half of the twentieth century many of the surviving fragments suffered from the cessation of traditional management of grazing and cutting resulting in scrub and bracken encroachment. However in the past few years restoration work by a number of different organisations has started to return some of the most important heath grassland sites in Leicestershire to their former state.

At Beacon Hill Country Park Leicestershire County Council has been continuing management and restoration work on the 35 ha site with support from Natural England.

On the heath grassland areas of their Charnwood Lodge and Ulverscroft nature reserves the Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust has been carrying out extensive restoration work, including extensive areas of bracken control and scrub removal backed up with conservation grazing using Longhorn cattle.

In addition, the extensive bracken rolling at Bradgate Park by the Bradgate Park Trust has resulted in a reduction in the vigour of the bracken and an expansion of good quality acid grassland in areas once covered by bracken litter.

At Bardon Hill, Aggregate Industries has been reducing tree cover and managing existing heath grassland by grazing with Hebridean sheep. They have also been trying to expand a small existing area of heathland by spreading heather litter on adjoining land.



## Ancient Woodlands - an irreplaceable natural resource

Ancient woodlands are defined as having existed continuously on their sites since before 1600. Many are much older than this and may contain areas which have never been under cultivation. However, they are not remnants of the original 'wildwood' which covered the country after the retreat of the glaciers at the end of the last ice age, because for many hundreds, if not thousands of years, these woodlands have been modified by very intensive management.

Many of the species found within ancient woodlands are adapted to a woodland habitat subject to relatively short management cycles of coppicing and felling associated with harvesting of the trees and shrubs. Until the middle of the 19th century woodland products had a wide variety of different uses. However, as new materials came into use the demand for woodland products dropped so that many woods fell out of management, threatening the wide range of wildlife found within them.

This was exacerbated in the twentieth century by the fashion for replanting ancient woodlands with fast growing conifers to the detriment of everything growing beneath them. In recent years removal of conifers and other exotic species from ancient woodland sites has been the focus of a number of successful woodland restoration projects in Leicestershire and Rutland.

Of particular note in the past year has been work by the Forestry Commission to remove the final large blocks of conifers from Owston Woods (the largest ancient woodland in Leicestershire) and completion of conifer removal at Launde Park Wood by the Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust. Charnwood Borough Council has also been carrying out similar work removing sycamore and conifers from the Outwoods Site of Special Scientific Interest near Loughborough.

The big challenge now for ancient woodlands in our area is to initiate long term sustainable management (either coppicing or felling for firewood or timber). This is beset with difficulties including low timber prices, few local outlets for woodland products and the increase in deer numbers, with browsing representing a significant threat to regeneration of tree species following felling. However funding is available from the Forestry Commission for woodland management and in particular, in the East Midlands, there is a specific Woodland Improvement Grant to fund management of woods to benefit woodland birds.



*Bluebells at Priors Coppice Nature Reserve (LRWT); Wood anemone at Priors Coppice Nature Reserve (Tim Caldicott)*



## Wildlife in the City

Within the City of Leicester there are a number of different wildlife habitats including species rich grassland (for example Goss Meadows), woodland (Knighton Spinney) and wetlands (Watermead Ecology Park, Aylestone Meadows).

Many of these are managed for their wildlife interest by Groundwork Leicester and Leicestershire, who have also helped to create new wildlife habitat including planting an orchard and hazel coppice at the Rancliffe Gardens Allotment site.

In addition to being an important resource for wildlife within the city, these sites also serve to improve the urban environment and peoples' quality of life. They are also a significant educational resource.

However, because of their location they can be threatened by development pressures. For instance Aylestone Meadows is probably one of the richest sites for wildlife in the city. It is a very good example of the species rich floodplain grassland once found throughout the Soar valley and is important for a number of locally uncommon plants including tubular water-dropwort and marsh arrowgrass.

Unfortunately part of Aylestone Meadows is threatened with being turned into a football training pitch and in the past year local people and organisations such as Ground Leicester and Leicestershire and the Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust have been campaigning to save the site and its rich wildlife.



*Victoria Park pond with University of Leicester in background; cornfield annuals on Beaumont Leys Lane, Leicester (Gavin Fletcher, GWLL)*

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Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust is the lead agency for the LLRBAP.

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