



Spotlight on SSSIs

Working towards the goals of Biodiversity 2020

Issue 2 – June 2013

It is with great pleasure that I bring you the second issue of Spotlight on SSSIs, the newsletter highlighting the achievements of landowners, managers and our partners in improving the condition of SSSIs. In this issue we showcase interesting work that is taking place across the country and tell you about ongoing improvements we are making in our services to you.

It was over sixty years ago that the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 ensured protection for places that are special for wildlife and people – including SSSIs – and in this issue we hear how voluntary partnerships are using SSSIs and other protected sites, as a focus for large scale environmental initiatives in Nature Improvement Areas.

We also feature a farmer, John Renner, who has used Catchment Sensitive Farming to solve his pollution and flooding problems on his farm and SSSI site in Northumberland.

With the Government's current focus on economic growth it is timely to highlight some areas where owning a SSSI has benefitted the owner economically. Fly fishing in the River Itchen and a holiday let in Staffordshire are just two examples.

Contents

[Economic benefits of SSSIs](#)

[Achieving the Biodiversity 2020 goals – Report on progress](#)

[Feature article – The artist and the meadow](#)

[Nature Improvement Areas](#)

[How Catchment Sensitive Farming reduces pollution](#)

[Addressing ash die-back on SSSIs](#)

[Improving our service to you](#)

We are also fortunate to have a guest article from Granville Danny Clarke, owner of the stunning Pye Flatts meadow SSSI in Yorkshire, featured as our cover picture. Danny tells of how he became the owner of the site and the way the meadow is used both environmentally and educationally.

By 2020 the Government's objective is for 50 per cent of the total area of SSSIs to be in favourable condition. In the last year (April 2012 – March 2013) the area of sites in favourable condition increased by 0.3%, or 3,500 hectares which is the equivalent to 17 Olympic parks. This puts the total area in this category at 37.55%, and it is all down to the hard work of SSSI owners and managers working together with our partners and advisers to protect these precious sites.

Ongoing work to define favourable condition and identify threats to each SSSI represent a significant step forward. Together they are providing important site specific information to guide safeguarding and enhancing of the SSSI network over the long-term.

As I write this, I'm conscious that the next few years present us all with challenges in caring for SSSIs and progressing the goals of Biodiversity 2020, not least through pressure on public spending and uncertainties over the outcomes of the renegotiation of the Common Agricultural Policy. We will keep you informed as these changes play out.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Maddy Jago".

Maddy Jago,
Director, Landscape and Biodiversity

Evaluating the farm business case for SSSIs and Higher Level Stewardship

Malcolm and Marty Handley farm the 980 ha Croasdale Farm in the Forest of Bowland. The farm includes 855 ha of the Bowland Fells SSSI noted for both its moorland vegetation and associated bird life. It lies within the Forest of Bowland Area Of Outstanding Natural Beauty and typifies the breathtaking open landscapes of the area. The Handley's have a tenancy on Croasdale with a water company which owns large tracts of the Bowland Fells. The farm is a wonderful example of the multi functional role that farmers play. High quality food is produced in the form of beef cattle and a sheep enterprise. At the same time farming enhances the special upland landscape and wildlife of the Croasdale valley.

The Handley's are faced with the same problem that all farmers, particularly managers and owners of SSSI encounter: How to make ends meet on the land in a way that makes sense for both the main business of growing food and the essential work of maintaining the land in good health for future generations. To help shed some light on this issue the Handley's have recently volunteered as one of a band of farm businesses to take part in a small study that Natural England has commissioned from The Andersons Centre.

The financial data available for the Croasdale farm business is particularly detailed. Marty is a qualified farm secretary with the Institute of Agricultural Secretaries and manages the farm accounts for several local farm businesses in addition to Croasdale's. The Croasdale farm budget clearly demonstrates the value of the income from Environmental Stewardship to the economic sustainability of the farm contributing 36% of average income over the period 2007 to 2012. "I fully believe that you can farm environmentally at the same time as profitably" said Marty.

"I like to see nature at its best and I am willing to do things to help this but the primary reason for entering Environmental Stewardship was to make our business viable." The sheep enterprise of 900 Swale, Lleyn x Swale and Lleyn ewes brings in a steady income and fits well with the management of the SSSI.

The Handley's switched their beef enterprise to a herd of 25 Pedigree Belted Galloway to help achieve the restoration of the SSSI as specified in their HLS agreement. The Belted Galloways are hardier than many of the currently popular commercial breeds of cattle and are able to be turned out early at Croasdale, they are also excellent converters of rough moorland forage making the vegetation more accessible and palatable to the sheep therefore affording a net increase in yield and benefiting biodiversity.

The beef is sold from the farm and fetches a decent price. The Belted Galloways have helped bring down feed and labour costs for the beef enterprise.

The Handley's are keen to share their experiences and broaden their own knowledge through on-farm demonstration activities with farmers and agricultural colleges. They already host school visits with support from the HLS Educational Access options which has helped them gear up for demonstration events. Malcolm comments "I've now become very involved in hosting and teaching the BTEC course from a local high school, I particularly enjoy passing my farming skills on to the young students and seeing them achieve."

<http://www.beltingoodbeef.co.uk/> - have a look at Malcolm and Marty's website.



The River Itchen

SSSI Fly Fishing

A good example of how one SSSI benefits the local economy is salmon and trout fishing on the River Itchen, where fishery owners can charge several thousands of pounds a day to fish at the birth place of fly fishing.

The SSSI status ensures that there are extra standards placed on water quality, and also funds for restoration of the river, both of which benefit the fish and the local fishermen.



Greater butterfly orchid found in the Churnet Valley SSSI – there were only seven to ten a year when the Worralls first started managing the SSSI. Now each year they have over 100.

Churnet Valley Holiday Cottages

Clive and Alison Worrall own just under a hectare of Churnet Valley SSSI, part of their 11.5 hectare holding along with their small development of holiday cottages. The SSSI is in unfavourable recovering condition and is managed as woodland and unimproved neutral grassland which they graze with Dexter cattle to produce a varied sward that benefits wildflowers and invertebrates.

The land supports dozens of species of wildflowers and birds including greater butterfly orchids, common spotted orchids, cowslips, devil's bit scabious, kingfishers, buzzards, bull finches and woodcock and a wide range of dragon and damsel fly.

The Worralls said they could not put a cash value on the SSSI but do use it as part of their green credentials when marketing the cottages and believe it adds to the feel good factor of the overall holiday cottage package. Alison says, "It's great when people do appreciate the time and effort that goes into looking after a unique place like this. Many of our holiday guests come from large urban areas of the country and it is usually a real thrill to be able to go on a farm walk and see such a wonderful selection of wildlife first hand."

For more information about Foxtwood Cottages visit www.foxtwood.co.uk

Achieving the Biodiversity 2020 Goals

Report on progress

A huge range of monitoring is conducted on England's SSSIs, and progress over the series as a whole is measured by two main indicators: the area of sites assessed to be in 'favourable' and 'recovering' condition. These form an important element of the goals set out in the government's strategy for nature, [Biodiversity 2020](#).

The reporting period from April 2012 to March 2013 has seen only minor fluctuations in the SSSI indicators although they are very close to the stated milestones. The area of sites in favourable condition increased by 0.3%, or 3,500 hectares. This puts the total area in this category at 37.55%. The goal for 2020 is to secure 50% of the area of SSSIs in favourable condition, and meeting this will require a significant increase in the current rate of improvement.

As with the previous year, much of the improvement in condition since April 2012 has been in the New Forest, one of England's largest sites. 106 units were assessed last summer and almost half of these showed an improvement to favourable condition. Two sites in the Kielder Forest in Northumberland also contributed significantly to the increase in the area in favourable condition.

The second goal set out in [Government's Biodiversity 2020 targets](#), is to ensure that sites assessed as 'recovering' maintain progress towards favourable condition. While the overall area of sites in this category remains within the target, there has been a fall of just under 0.9% over the past year. This puts the total area in recovering condition at 58.55%.

Because SSSIs form part of dynamic ecosystems, it can be expected that in any one year some sites will experience a decline in condition. What is important is that we understand the reason for the change and are able to respond. The past year has seen the introduction of a new management mechanism to help do this, by identifying specific threats to site condition.

Summary of shift in each condition category, April 2011 to present

Condition category	1 April 2011 %	1 April 2012 %	1 April 2013 %	2020 Target %
Favourable	36.6	37.24	37.55	50
Unfavourable recovering	59.9	59.40	58.55	45
Unfavourable no change	2.3	2.20	2.20	(No target)
Unfavourable declining	1.1	1.20	1.67	(No target)
Destroyed/part destroyed	0.1	0.01	0.03	(No target)

The majority of SSSIs have now been assessed for condition threats, and we have increased our effort to work with owners, occupiers and partners to identify future actions that are required to improve or maintain the condition of sites.

SSSIs will also be managed through our [Improvement Programme for England's Natura 2000 sites](#) which is a new strategic approach to managing England's Natura 2000 sites (sites protected under European legislation) enabling Natural England, the Environment Agency and other partners to plan what, how, where and when they will target their efforts on protected sites.

Report on progress

The past year has also seen progress in our work to produce a detailed description for each SSSI of the targets that need to be met for it to reach favourable condition. The resulting documents, referred to as 'favourable condition tables', provide clear and measurable objectives for each site, against which assessments are made. We would be interested in comments from site managers and partners in developing these tables. Please speak to your local adviser or account manager if you have any thoughts. Currently, favourable condition tables have been produced for around a quarter of sites and our aim is to complete the task for all sites over four years.

Recent major gains (April 2012 – April 2013)

Largest areas improved to Favourable Condition		
County	Area	Hectares improved
Hampshire	The New Forest	2,048
Northumberland	Kielder Head and Emblehope Moors	837
Northumberland	Kielder Mires	506
Cumbria/Durham	Moor house and Cross fell	709
Norfolk/Suffolk	Yare Broads and Marshes	432

From a site advisers report

Here is an extract from the Natural England database showing how we record our findings:

SSSI: Kielder Mires	
Unit number	6
Unit name	Humble Hill
Assessment date	26 September 2012
Condition	Favourable
Management Prognosis	Meeting Objectives
Visited by	Heather York North East
Comments	Species diversity is very good on this site with abundant late mature to degenerate heather and a continuous understorey of sphagnum mosses (including <i>S. magellanicum</i>, <i>S. capifolium</i>, <i>S. pappillosum</i>, <i>S. denticulatum</i>, <i>S. fallax</i>, and <i>S. tenellum</i>) . Common and Hares-tail cotton grass, Cross leaved heath, Crowberry, Bog Asphodel, Bilberry, Cranberry, Cloudberry and Cowberry were also recorded. There are no signs of damage or disturbance, and the grips were blocked in 2007 and are holding back water. There is some sitka regeneration but not a lot, less than 1% of the area. A number of eroded areas were looked at (previous reason for condition failure) and all seemed to have stabilised and be infilling with sphagnum. There are some well established bog pools on the top of the site which provide further interest. Overall a large proportion of the site was covered in the assessment and was considered to be in favourable condition.

The artist and the meadow by Granville Danny Clarke F.R.S.A

Yorkshire's renaissance 'man of the arts' Granville 'Danny' Clarke F.R.S.A. is also the owner and custodian of one of Britain's rare wildflower meadows: Pye Flatts meadow in Hoylandswaine, South Yorkshire.

In 1990, with an environmental colleague, he discovered a badly managed seven acre site that had minor traces of old meadow plant indicators such as yellow rattle and tufted vetch. Danny had recently inherited some monies from his aunt - a widow of a farmer from Hainworth Moor near Bronte land - and thought it a good idea to buy the land and traditionally manage the neglected site.



The meadow as an outdoor classroom

After the first year the meadow started to recover. English Nature were contacted and they thought it worthy of SSSI status. The following year the 'cavalier farmers' rented a modified forage harvester from Emorsgate Seeds in Norfolk specially designed to collect seeds without damaging the meadow - a sort of revolving toothbrush! Around 150 kilos of meadow seeds was collected, dried and used to seed land on a nearby site - which germinated well the following year, due to there being the same coal measure soil type.



Meadow and Interpretation gate by moonlight

The seeds were also sold on and the money raised was used to re-build the dry stone walls on Pye Flatts meadow and Danny had an idea to create some unique interpretation gates on the two entrances.

Two local sculptors were commissioned and local school children were invited to come up with ideas that would be incorporated into the design. The gates now create an unusual feature and gained the Henry Ford conservation trust award for an innovative approach to art in the landscape.

The meadow was harvested for a further five years but is now just subject to traditional management of a late hay cut when the seeds are 'hay rattling', six to nine weeks of sheep grazing giving a further 'haircut' and light nutrient. The meadow now has over 100 species of flowers and grasses including common spotted orchid and the unusual adder's tongue fern.

Danny hosts walks, talks and presentations on the meadow to groups and teaches the value of wildflower meadows with the 'outdoor classroom' to local school children, inspiring poetry and environmental education.

For further information on the meadow and information on walks, talks and presentations contact:

Email: granvilledclarke@talktalk.net
Website: www.granvilledclarke.co.uk
Mobile: 07966 507 626

Event on the SSSI! 'Wildflower Meadow Sundaze' on Sunday 30 June from 10.30 till 4.30. Walks, talks, poetry, folklore, herblore, photography, trees and bees and more. Call Danny on 07966 507 626 for more information.

Nature Improvement Areas, SSSI's and Ecological Networks

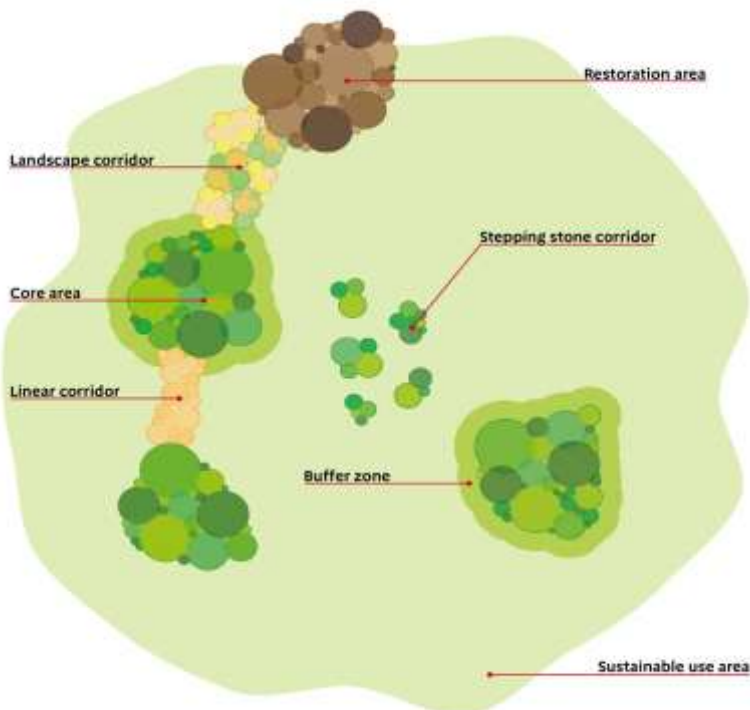
Over 60 years ago the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 laid the foundations for designating places that are special for **wildlife** (notably National Nature Reserves and Sites of Special Scientific Interest) and **people** (National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty). Subsequent legislation has improved first the protection, and more recently the management, of wildlife sites, in particular Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs).

One of the founding principles of Natural England is to work to reduce the separation of people from nature. Despite the important contribution designated sites have made, England's wildlife habitats have become increasingly fragmented and isolated, leading to declines in the provision of some ecosystem services, and losses to species populations.

The [Natural Environment White Paper](#) recognised the importance of the services and benefits we obtain from the natural world, and the need for working at a landscape scale.

Government committed £7.5million identified in the Natural Environment White paper to establish 12 Nature Improvement Areas through a competitive process. These 12 NIAs were to be around 10,000 to 50,000 hectares in size: "to enhance and reconnect nature on a significant scale, where the opportunities and benefits justify such action. Local partnerships will come together to form NIAs¹". Learning and sharing best practise is a key part of the ambition, for further details please see www.naturalengland.org.uk/nia

This move to working at a landscape scale is an exciting and timely development, with the challenge to secure benefits across an entire ecological network, including SSSIs. The core areas of an ecological network and its relationship to the other key components (restoration areas, buffer zones etc) is illustrated in the diagram below.



SSSIs are regarded as Tier 1 or core areas in an ecological network. It is critical that the quality and condition of these achieve a more favourable status.

Areas considered in need of restoration will add to the assembly of core areas following the actions that NIAs can provide.

There are 249 SSSIs which intersect NIAs - 178 are completely within the NIA boundary and 71 are partly within (total area of SSSI on NIA is 78,632 ha). Total land cover of NIAs is just over 500,000 ha.

¹ [Natural Environment White Paper](#)

For further info see www.naturalengland.org.uk/nia

Brian McDonald/NIA Project Manager March 2013

How Catchment Sensitive Farming reduces pollution

John Renner owns North Bellshill Farm in Northumberland. It is 136 hectares of traditional mixed farmland with areas of permanent or rotational grassland in the Tweed, Aln, Coquet and Coastal Streams Catchment. The farm sits above Budle Bay in the beautiful Lindisfarne Site of Special Scientific Interest, world-famous for its geology and wildlife.

John says, “One of the main drains on the farm was blocked as it went under a small local road. This led to water flowing across the ground surface and then onto the road allowing the road verges to become soft and muddy. This sediment then drained into the road gullies.”

“I wanted to reduce the sediment loss and flooding problems,” says John, “as part of the local Natural England Wetland Visions ponds project, Stuart Moss, Catchment Sensitive Farming (CSF) Officer, worked with me to develop a plan to create a series of ponds and a wetland to slow and filter the flow of dirty water.”

With Stuart’s help, John followed the CSF model for water-friendly farming across the farm: *source – pathway – receptor*. This involves identifying the source of the pollution and breaking its pathway to the receptor, which, in this instance, logically ends in Budle Bay. John used the following techniques:

- Maintaining or improving organic matter and cultivating to the land contours helps to keep the soil in place; thereby saving money by safeguarding precious soil and helping with crop yields.
- John uses beetle banks to break slopes to interrupt soil and water runoff. Improvements to farm tracks have reduced the amount of muddy water generated. Placing a sediment trap in the field corner and moving the gateway has helped too; and improving drain maintenance has reduced the amount of surface water.
- The pond and wetland features created interrupt the flow of surface water and act as sediment traps for the drain. Fencing was put up to protect the pond and wetland, creating a buffer to the watercourse and a wildlife rich habitat. Another benefit is the reduced flood risk and stopping the water getting onto the road.



Pond acting as a sediment trap at North Bellshill Farm

The farmer’s changes have been good for business. The environmental improvements have resulted in savings on vets’ bills, as mud-related disease is minimised, improved crop yields and reduction in the use of fertiliser as the soil remains on the farm. The environmental improvements also attract more visitors to the farm.

North Bellshill Farm grows oil seed rape and barley and rears lamb and beef. It is a show case for environmentally-friendly farming; telling a good story of the link between the environment, agriculture and food we eat.

There is a thriving education centre, *The Hedgerow*, to inspire future generations by raising environmental awareness as young people see for themselves the farm’s healthy bird population, beetle banks, woodland, blue bells, owl boxes and a fertilizer-free area, laid to grass.

Creating a pond and wetland solves the pollution and flooding problems, plays its part in helping to draw wildlife and visitors to North Bellshill Farm, and safe-guards the precious Lindisfarne Site of Special Scientific Interest.

For more information about Catchment Sensitive Farming, please visit:
<http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/farming/csf/default.aspx>

For information about Lindisfarne SSSI :
<http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/conservation/geodiversity/englands/sites/localID67.aspx>

Addressing ash dieback on SSSIs: a long term strategy for resilient woodlands

In October 2012 the fungal pathogen causing ash dieback (*Chalara*) was found in woods along the eastern side of the country. The fungal spores are windborne, so it is likely that this infection has blown in from northern Europe. It has also been found in new tree plantings across the country where it has been brought in with infected nursery stock. The disease was only scientifically identified in 2006 – so we are all on a learning curve, finding out together what we can do.

This disease has potential to have significant impacts on our woods, wood-pastures and hedgerows. There are at least 665 SSSIs where ash is a significant tree. Young trees are vulnerable to being killed by the disease, while mature trees can survive the infection for years, but may succumb to other diseases.

What can you do ?

For SSSIs with significant amounts of ash, we will be seeking to help you protect the special features of the site. This may seem impossible – if we're going to lose our ash trees, how can we maintain the special interest across the site? However, ash woods and wood-pastures involve a whole collection of flowering plants, shrub and tree species and animals. There is much that we can do to promote this diversity, even where ash itself may be diminished.

There are two key messages for you: don't fell ash trees because you are worried your wood might get *Chalara*, and do everything you can to reduce existing stresses on your woodlands.

Why not fell ash trees? Ash trees may have some resistance to the disease; the disease might not reach your woods for years; the more time we have for research to take place, the stronger position you'll be in for taking positive action. Having said that, normal forest operations, thinning or taking out ash at economic maturity, can go ahead as usual, although we may discuss with you whether it is possible to retain a small proportion of mature trees on SSSIs from the area you want to clear. In pure ash woods, it might be sensible to have a long-term objective to slowly diversify the species mix.



Ash seedlings

Reducing existing stresses is important because a healthy wood is likely to be able to withstand disease better than a stressed wood. Reducing browse pressure from deer or stock is the most obvious stress here, because regeneration of both ash that may be disease-resistant, and of other replacement species, will be critical. Other stresses may include spray drift from agriculture, compaction from heavy machinery, importing soils and lack of management leading to overshadowing. Climate change is an additional stress to be aware of.

What is the Government doing?

Defra, the Forestry Commission and Natural England are working closely with plant health colleagues. Together we have published a [management plan](#) to give a steer on how to best manage our woods and trees with this disease. It outlines the research into the disease that is currently going on. We are also working with colleagues in Europe to learn from their experience of the disease.

A lot of useful advice and practical information for woodland managers can be found on Forestry Commission's website, www.forestry.gov.uk

Natural England is developing guidance for our advisors and for land owners, to ensure long-term management plans continue to keep our woodlands special.

Improving our service to you

Natural England continually seeks to improve how we do our work and at the heart of this is ensuring that we maintain the often very good working relationship with the 26,000 owners and occupiers of SSSIs. In the last edition of '*Spotlight on SSSIs*' we announced the publication of the handbook [SSSIs: A guide for land owners and occupiers](#) and a comprehensive training program. Since then we have been working on a range of other measures designed to improve our service.

- We now aim to provide a response to a valid notice for consent within 28 calendar days even though the statutory deadline is 4 months. There will be a few cases which take longer due to their complexity but the vast majority should be processed within 28 days;
- We are producing a Welcome Pack for new SSSI owners containing their Natural England Adviser contact details, the handbook that was published last year and information about their statutory obligations as a new SSSI owner;
- We have established a centralised mailroom to ensure your letters reach our staff as quickly as possible;
- This year, 13,000 paper files have been scanned and are available electronically to staff wherever they work, meaning they can access information quickly and work more efficiently for you;
- We are continuing to develop a suite of seven SSSI training modules and, this year, have run 36 training events attended by over 400 staff, ensuring your Adviser is trained to the required level and can provide you with the best possible advice.

Improved Environment Information: Have Your Say

Natural England is working with Defra and other regulators to review **environment guidance** and all the **environmental information** required from businesses to make sure it is really needed and used. The review includes all information **farmers** need to provide to Defra and its regulators. This work is responding to recommendations made by the **Farming Regulation Task Force** which asked government to ensure all information obligations are necessary, and to avoid duplicated information requests wherever possible.

To have your say, go to Defra's interactive website guidanceanddata.defra.gov.uk where businesses, stakeholders and the public are asked to give their views on how guidance and information obligations can be made more straightforward.

The closing date for feedback is 5 July 2013.

Lastly, we would welcome feedback from you, whether it is about this statement or the service you receive from us. We are constantly looking for ways to improve our service to you and hearing your thoughts is one of the best ways of finding out whether we are getting it right or not.

Please send any feedback to sssi@naturalengland.org.uk

We have a statutory duty to keep up-to-date contact details for our SSSI owners / occupiers. Please can we have the following details to ensure our records are correct:

- **Your name**
- **Name of SSSI**
- **Postal Address**
- **Email Address you would like correspondence sent to**



Please also let us know if you would like to receive future copies of the SSSI Annual Statement and newsletter. You can email us on sssi@naturalengland.org.uk or call 0845 600 3078

Photo credits

Front cover: Brian Parkhurst

Page 2: Natural England / Charlotte Rose

Page 5: Brian Parkhurst

Page 7: Natural England / JM Moss

Page 8: Matthew Haines / Purplemattfish

Natural England is here to conserve and enhance the natural environment, for its intrinsic value, the wellbeing and enjoyment of people and the economic prosperity that it brings.
© Natural England 2010

www.naturalengland.org.uk

