

EC Directive 92/43 on the Conservation of Natural Habitats and of Wild Fauna and Flora

Citation for Special Area of Conservation (SAC)

Name:	Breckland
Unitary Authority/County:	Norfolk, Suffolk
SAC status:	Designated on 1 April 2005
Grid reference:	TL862948
SAC EU code:	UK0019865
Area (ha):	7548.06
Component SSSI:	Barnhamcross Common SSSI, Berner's Heath, Icklingham SSSI, Bridgham and Brettenham Heaths SSSI, Cavenham - Icklingham Heaths SSSI, Cranwich Camp SSSI, Deadman's Grave, Icklingham SSSI, East Wretham Heath SSSI, Field Barn Heaths, Hilborough SSSI, Foxhole Heath, Eriswell SSSI, Gooderstone Warren SSSI, Grime's Graves SSSI, Lakenheath Warren SSSI, RAF Lakenheath SSSI, Stanford Training Area SSSI, Thetford Golf Course and Marsh SSSI, Thetford Heaths SSSI, Wangford Warren and Carr SSSI, Weather and Horn Heaths, Eriswell SSSI, Weeting Heath SSSI

Site description:

Breckland in the heart of East Anglia is a gently undulating plateau underlain by bedrock of Cretaceous Chalk, covered by thin deposits of sand and flint. The conditions during the last glaciation have given rise to the patterned ground features and ice depressions (pingos) that we see today and that are of high geological and biological importance. The continental climate, with low rainfall and free-draining soils, has led to the development of dry heath and grassland communities. Relatively lush river valleys provide a gentle contrast to the drier harsher surroundings. Occasional woods with alder *Alnus glutinosa* and willow *Salix* sp. the most dominant trees occur beside rivers and streams in the floodplains. These woods rely on high water levels and sometimes surface flooding as both river flooding or spring flows can be very important.

The dry heaths of Breckland are of the *Calluna vulgaris* – *Festuca ovina* (heather – sheep's-fescue) community. The sand sedge-dominated *Carex arenaria* sub-community is typical of areas of blown sand – a very unusual feature of this location. The highly variable soils of Breckland, with underlying chalk being largely covered with wind-blown sands, have resulted in mosaics of heather-dominated heathland, acidic grassland and calcareous grassland that are unlike those of any other site. In many places there is a linear or patterned distribution of heath and grassland, arising from fossilised soil patterns that formed under peri-glacial conditions.

Breckland is the most extensive surviving area of the rare *Festuca ovina* – *Hieracium pilosella* – *Thymus praecox* (sheep's-fescue – mouse-ear-hawkweed – wild thyme) grassland type. The grassland is rich in rare species typical of dry, winter-cold, continental areas, and approaches the features of grassland types in central Europe more than almost any other semi-natural dry grassland found in the UK.

Wangford Warren and adjoining parts of RAF Lakenheath have one of the best-preserved systems of active inland sand dunes in the UK. The habitat type, which is in part characterised

by the nationally rare grey hair-grass *Corynephorus canescens* occurring here at its only inland station, is associated with open conditions with active sand movement. The site shows the colonisation sequence from open sand to acidic grass-heath.

The Breckland meres are examples of hollows within glacial outwash deposits and are fed by water from the underlying chalk aquifer. Natural fluctuations in groundwater tables mean that these lakes occasionally dry out. The flora is dominated by stonewort – pondweed *Characeae* – *Potamogetonaceae* associations. A number of the water bodies within the site support populations of amphibians, including great crested newts *Triturus cristatus*.

Qualifying habitats: The site is designated under **article 4(4)** of the Directive (92/43/EEC) as it hosts the following habitats listed in Annex I:

- Alluvial forests with *Alnus glutinosa* and *Fraxinus excelsior* (*Alno-Padion*, *Alnion incanae*, *Salicion albae*). (Alder woodland on floodplains)*
- European dry heaths
- Inland dunes with open *Corynephorus* and *Agrostis* grasslands. (Open grassland with grey-hair grass and common bent grass of inland dunes)
- Natural eutrophic lakes with *Magnopotamion* or *Hydrocharition*-type vegetation. (Naturally nutrient-rich lakes or lochs which are often dominated by pondweed)
- Semi-natural dry grasslands and scrubland facies: on calcareous substrates (*Festuco-Brometalia*). (Dry grasslands and scrublands on chalk or limestone)

Qualifying species: The site is designated under **article 4(4)** of the Directive (92/43/EEC) as it hosts the following species listed in Annex II:

- Great crested newt *Triturus cristatus*

Annex I priority habitats are denoted by an asterisk (*).

This citation relates to a site entered in the Register of European Sites for Great Britain.
Register reference number: UK0019865
Date of registration: 14 June 2005

Signed: *Trew Salmon*

On behalf of the Secretary of State for Environment,
Food and Rural Affairs