

Why is landscape-scale conservation important?

The varied geology of the Ridge has created a distinctive mosaic of habitats and land uses. However, this character has been eroded over time by changes in agricultural and forestry practices and the impact of people. Although core biodiversity hotspots still exist, they have become increasingly smaller and more fragmented. Small isolated populations are more vulnerable to local extinction than larger, well-connected ones. If sites are larger or connected to other sites in the vicinity, species extinctions are less likely to occur. The findings from the Lawton Report: *Making Space for Nature* recognise that the required step-change for nature is only possible if wildlife is connected on a landscape scale. Whilst nature reserves and other

core areas for biodiversity are still vital they cannot conserve wildlife into the future. There is a need to enable species to move across the landscape and find new places as the climate changes.

The NIA still has rich wildlife sites with many opportunities to expand, buffer and connect them across the landscape. Its designation as an NIA means that together we can focus on making this happen.

Why is the Greensand Ridge so important?

Wander into one of the Greensand Ridge ancient woodlands on a sunny day in late April and you'll encounter bright blue drifts of bluebells. Listen closely and you might hear the insistent buzz of bees and hoverflies, and the songs of woodland birds freshly arrived from winters spent far to the south. Woodlands are a special feature of the NIA, which also supports an intimate mosaic of flower rich meadows, acid grasslands and heathland. At Woburn the magnificent parkland supports ancient trees, extensive grasslands and some of the only major lakes in the area.



Green tiger beetle

This is one of the few places in Central England where thin, sandy soils support lowland heathland and acid grassland. Visit one of these special places in summer and your eye is sure to be caught by the vibrant colours of sand wasps and green tiger beetles. In recent years major effort has gone into restoring and expanding heathland and if you're lucky you may encounter tree pipits, woodlarks or even nightjars.

The steep scarp slopes to the north of the Ridge contrast with the gently-folded slopes to the south. All along the shallow valleys small seepages and springs feed streams which carry acidic water down to the valley of the River Flit. In the valley the river, lined by pollard willows and small patches of swampy woodland, meanders through Flitwick Moor, a unique peatland of national significance. In summer the wetlands teem with bees and dragonflies, whilst in winter noisy flocks of siskins and redpolls hunt through the tops of the alder trees.

“ Unknown by many, beneath your feet the porous greensand rocks store vital supplies of water which are then extracted for use by people, whilst woodland and farmland management provide essential habitats for wildlife and provide valuable timber and food supplies. Wetlands help clean and filter water, whilst trees reduce the sights and sounds of roads, railways and towns.

To find out more about the NIA, or to join in with this exciting initiative, I encourage you to contact one of the lead partners. ”

Professor Paul Leinster CBE
Chairman, Bedfordshire Local Nature Partnership

The Greensand Ridge Nature Improvement Area

An Introduction



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The RSPB is a registered charity in England and Wales 207076, in Scotland SC037654.



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What is the Greensand Ridge?

“ The historic and biologically distinctive Greensand Ridge ‘Nature Improvement Area’ or NIA is an excellent opportunity for landscape-scale conservation to make a big difference in an area on the doorstep of millions of people. The seeds are being sown for conservation organisations, public authorities, private individuals and companies to work together to protect and enhance this wonderful area for future generations. I wish the partnership every success. ”

Baroness Young of Old Scone

President of the Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire.

The Greensand Ridge is a distinctive “island” of significantly wooded sands and sandstone that rises prominently above the surrounding clay vales. With a toehold in both Buckinghamshire and Cambridgeshire, and stretching over 45 km, the vast majority of the 273 km² of this attractive landscape is in Bedfordshire.

Historically considered “marginal” much of the area was owned by monastic institutions. Following the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the 16th Century the lands became the estates of aristocrats. Their influence remains to the present day, with large country estates preserving parkland landscapes, while significant areas have been planted with conifers in recent centuries. In places, the sand is overlain by large areas of impervious boulder clay, which made farming difficult and large ancient woodlands survive here. Elsewhere, the extensive grazing of heaths had disappeared by the early 20th Century, with just a scattering of core heathland and acid grassland areas now remaining.

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Challenges and Opportunities

Ensuring growth and development have a net beneficial effect

The geographical location of the NIA, with Milton Keynes, Bedford and Luton within a few miles, means there will always be growth and development pressure. It is important that developers, planners and other key decision makers are aware of how important and fragile the Ridge and its habitats are. Development should not prejudice either current or future ecological networks, but should contribute to their future.

Integrating recreation and nature conservation

The well-wooded, mature and attractive landscape of the NIA contains a network of places to visit, such as Rushmere Country Park, the RSPB’s nature reserve at The Lodge near Sandy, and the popular Greensand Ridge Walk running right through it. Events programmes offer a range of walks, visits and activities for all the family. Giving people the opportunity to experience wildlife in “their own back yard” is vital to ensuring it is valued and protected. But the recreational pressures experienced within the NIA mean that small and isolated wildlife populations are placed under additional pressure. It is vital that those managing recreation work closely with those seeking to conserve and enhance the natural environment.

Creating habitat networks within thriving agriculture and forestry

Forestry and agriculture remain significant and important land uses, and only by working closely with foresters and farmers collectively at a landscape scale, identifying and creating opportunities to link up and enhance important habitats, will we be successful in achieving a true step-change in nature conservation within the NIA.



Natterjack toad

Protecting farmland birds

Towards the centre and eastern end of the NIA productive arable farming dominates the rolling countryside. The area still supports populations of skylarks, grey partridges and corn buntings, joined in summer by yellow wagtails. Yellowhammers and linnets can still be found in hedges and field margins and all benefit from a range of measures introduced by landowners and farmers to ensure food, shelter and safe breeding sites remain for these iconic farmland species.

Life after minerals

Quarrying continues to significantly impact the landscape of the NIA, particularly at its eastern and western extremities. There are some exciting opportunities to enhance the network of important wildlife sites in collaboration with both local planning authorities and aggregate companies. With careful planning and design of after-use, important new habitats can be created and linked to existing networks.

Green economy

With renewable energy becoming increasingly important, there may be opportunities to enhance the natural environment. More woodland could be planted to provide woodfuel and materials, while solar farms potentially offer the opportunity to create and link areas of habitat, such as acid grassland.

Climate change adaptation

The process of climate change will pose challenges for a range of species and habitats across the NIA. As the climate changes the need to consider nature on a larger scale becomes ever more important. Individual sites may alter dramatically and there is a need to allow species to move across the landscape so that they can find new places where there are the correct conditions for them to flourish. Increasing and linking up fragile and fragmented habitats, such as heathland, across the NIA will create larger areas for nature and will provide benefits to people, from increased access to a richer countryside.

Taking the NIA forward

There are many opportunities for the lead NIA partners, along with the local authorities, businesses, companies and others across the area – to co-ordinate promotion and develop better public awareness of the wonderful places across the NIA.

The lead partners have committed to working together with others to achieve a real and lasting difference to the habitats, species and landscape of the NIA. Our main objectives are to:

- Strengthen the ecological networks of the NIA in line with Biodiversity Action Plans for the key habitats through improving, enhancing and buffering existing sites and working with landowners and managers to “join the dots” in the wider countryside;
- Bring invasive and non-native species populations under control where these pose a threat to important species or habitats;
- Achieve “Good” ecological status for the rivers and streams within the NIA, working with the Environment Agency and others through Catchment Partnerships;
- Enhance public awareness of the NIA, its biodiversity and the wider benefits it brings;
- Provide opportunities for people to access and experience the best the NIA has to offer in terms of its wildlife, habitats and landscape, in a sympathetic and sustainable way;
- Ensure that growth and development in and around the NIA makes a real and lasting contribution, supporting, valuing and benefiting the natural environment and achieving a net gain in biodiversity by 2020.



Bloody nosed beetle



Marsh woundwort



Common darter