

Suffolk Coast & Heaths Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)

Suffolk Coast & Heaths Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is a beautiful place to explore and enjoy. From striking coastal scenery to picturesque rural countryside, it is a diverse landscape with plenty to offer both people and wildlife.

It is one of Britain's finest landscapes and covers 403 km²/155 m² including historic towns and quaint little villages, windswept shingle beaches, ancient heaths and wild-life rich wetlands.

AONBs are part of the UK 'family' of 46 AONBs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and are nationally protected landscapes cared for by locally accountable partnerships that promote and support effective long term management to keep them special.

Further Information
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Natura 2000 - Europe's nature for you. The Suffolk Sandlings heaths are part of the European Natura 2000 Network. They have been designated because they host some of Europe's most threatened species and habitats. All 27 countries of the EU are working together through the Natura 2000 network to safeguard Europe's rich and diverse natural heritage for the benefit of all.



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Enjoying Heathland

In the Suffolk Coast & Heaths AONB



Four heaths to visit...

Westleton and Dunwich Heaths
 Snape Warren
 Tunstall and Blaxhall Commons
 Sutton and Hollesley Commons



The Suffolk Sandlings make up one of our most important landscapes. An area of grassland, gorse, scattered trees and heather, found on some of the poorest, most acidic soils in eastern England, the Sandlings support rare birds and a range of characteristic heathland plants and animals. Open Access legislation now gives us more opportunity than ever before to enjoy these beautiful places, but care is needed if their wonderful wildlife is to be saved for future generations to enjoy.

The Sandlings take their name from a narrow band of light, sandy soils that run roughly north-south from Southwold to the eastern fringe of Ipswich. The soil was formed from material washed out from the ice sheet during the last ice age, between 10,000 - 70,000 years ago. As the ice retreated and the climate slowly warmed, the Sandlings landscape would have become wooded. Over thousands of years people gradually cleared the trees and grazed their animals on the land, preventing the regrowth of the forest and leading to a more open landscape, not unlike the countryside we see today.

The sandy soils are very light, so easy to cultivate compared to the clay-dominated soils to the west, but also acidic and relatively infertile. Farmers were able to grow crops on the land, but the nutrients in the ground were quickly exhausted, forcing people to move to new areas. Plants that we think of today as heathland species gradually colonised these areas, thriving in the more open landscape. Perhaps as long as 4,000 years ago, large expanses of heathland had already developed in this area, a patchwork of grassland, gorse, scattered trees and heather.

Grazing intensified with the introduction of sheep, around 1,000 years ago, and dominated farming in the Sandlings until comparatively recently. Apart from the river valleys that cut through the area, much of this land had become a virtually continuous area of heath through which huge flocks of sheep roamed, under the care of skilled shepherds. This means that although the Sandlings heaths may seem like a natural landscape, they are really created by people.

Tree and woodland clearance continued until the 17th Century. Human settlements were usually on areas of more fertile ground, adjacent to heaths. The heathland was used for a range of purposes: gorse tops were cut for fodder for animals, while the older parts provided fuel. Trees were also cut for fuel, while bracken was gathered for animal bedding, fuel and also to provide potash for industries such as glass and soapmaking.

Domestic animals were grazed on the heath and turf and peat were cut for fuel, a practice known as 'turbary'. All these activities maintained the open nature of the heath and prevented it reverting back to woodland. In the last century, the Sandlings have changed dramatically through modern intensive farming methods, commercial forestry, military use and urban development. Over 90% of the once continuous area of Sandlings' heath of medieval times has been lost. Heathlands have become one of the rarest and most threatened habitats in the world. Britain today has 58,000 hectares of lowland heathland, which is about 20% of the total world resource. Fortunately, the importance of the heaths is now well understood and all significant remaining fragments of the Sandlings are protected and under some form of conservation management. Heathland restoration started in the 1980s. Today many organisations work in partnership to keep, manage and re-create the Sandlings' heaths for you and future generations to enjoy.

Look inside to find out how to enjoy these beautiful places without harming their vulnerable vegetation and sensitive inhabitants.

Enjoying heathland in the Suffolk Coast & Heaths AONB



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The Heathland Visitor's Code

Do your bit for heathland by following these simple suggestions:

Plan ahead and follow any signs

Open Access has allowed more opportunities to visit heaths but there are still restrictions and some areas are closed March–October. Make sure you have the latest information about when and where to go.

Help your dog be a 'Good Dog'!

National research shows that between a third and a half of countryside visitors have a dog with them. However, there are concerns about problems caused by a small minority of irresponsible owners to other people, sensitive wildlife and protected landscapes, including on the heaths. Uncontrolled dogs often (inadvertently) threaten wildlife or upset recreation for other people. **TOP TIPS** – look out for 'on the lead' or other official signs – there is probably wildlife around that needs some 'quiet time', especially during nesting time from March to July. Rare birds such as nightjar, woodlark and stone curlew rely on the Sandlings heaths to breed – they are well camouflaged and nest on the ground. It is best not to let your dog roam unsupervised, and always 'Bag and Bin' after your dog.

Prevent heathland fires

Lowland heaths can be dry places, especially in spring and summer. Fires started by careless behaviour may kill animals and plants and ruin a beautiful landscape. It only needs one discarded cigarette to spell disaster, so please take special care – do not light open fires or BBQs and obey any restrictions.

Protect wildlife and take your litter home

We all have a responsibility to protect heathland for future generations to enjoy. Please do not damage, destroy or remove animals or plants. Wherever possible, please keep to existing paths and remember that dropping litter and dumping rubbish is a criminal offence.

Consider other people

Heathland is a working landscape and your actions can affect other people's livelihoods. Avoid blocking gates, drives or other entrances when you park your vehicle. Use stiles and other access points provided and leave gates as you find them. Please leave livestock and machinery alone.

Four heaths to visit...

Westleton and Dunwich Heaths include some of the finest lowland heath to be found in the UK. Westleton Heath, part of which is a National Nature Reserve, is managed by Natural England and the RSPB. Nearby Dunwich Heath is a unique coastal heathland site, owned and managed by the National Trust. Free Access: Westleton Heath car park lies to the north of the B1125 at TM455695, between Westleton and Dunwich. For Dunwich Heath, continue eastwards along the B1125 before taking the well signposted right turn. There is a charge for parking at this site.

Snape Warren, an area of recently restored Sandlings heathland managed by the RSPB. It provides a home for many rare heathland species, such as adder, tiger beetle or nightjar. This heathland is a blaze of purple in summer and its higher ground offers fine views across the wide Alde estuary. To maintain the open heath for wildlife and people to enjoy, birch, pine and gorse scrub is kept low by regular grazing with Exmoor ponies. Free Access: Snape Warren – Car park is off Priory Road at Snape. TM401584.

Tunstall and Blaxhall Commons are fine examples of Sandlings heaths with characteristic wildlife and plant communities. Free Access: Tunstall Common – Car park off the B1078. Blaxhall Common – Car park off the B1069 and off the Iken to Tunstall road. Sandgalls Picnic Site is off the B1069 between Tunstall and Snape. Footpaths to Blaxhall Heath and Tunstall Forest nearby. TM381559.

Sutton and Hollesley Commons, near Woodbridge, make up one of the largest remaining continuous areas of Sandlings heath. They are managed by the Suffolk Wildlife Trust and Suffolk Coastal District Council. Free Access: Car parks are off B1083 and the Hollesley to Woodbridge road, picnic areas and nature trails. Sutton Heath Picnic Site is off the B1083 Melton to Bawdsey road. TM306476. Upper Hollesley Picnic Site is off the Woodbridge to Hollesley road. TM335472.

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Heathland wildlife

You may come across a wide range of plants and wildlife if you visit the Sandlings heaths, especially during the summer. Look out for:

Dartford warbler (1) A small, secretive, long tailed bird that is most likely to be seen perching on top of heather or gorse. Recent mild winters have enabled numbers to increase dramatically.

Red deer (2) One of five species of deer to occur in Suffolk. These shy creatures are native to Britain and the largest wild mammals to be found here.

Bell heather (3) A spectacular sight when in flower. It blooms from June until August, slightly earlier than the more common **ling heather (7)**, and takes its name from its colourful bell-shaped flowers.

Fly agaric mushroom (4) One of many species of fungi to be found in the Sandlings. Although beautiful to look at, they are poisonous.

Silver-studded blue (5) One of the UK's rarest butterflies. A heathland specialist, the Sandlings is the Suffolk stronghold for this tiny butterfly, which lives in small colonies and flies in June and July.

Adder (6) A shy, secretive animal, belying its dangerous reputation. An adder's bite is unlikely to be fatal but these snakes are best avoided and are a good reason to keep dogs on a lead.

Woodlark (8) Secretive, ground nesting birds, often found close to the more wooded heathland areas. The Sandlings is an important home for this rare species, which is resident throughout the year.

Nightjar (9) Mysterious, nocturnal birds with an extraordinary "churring" song, most likely to be heard at dusk. They return in May from Africa to breed on the Sandlings heaths. Nightjars nest on the ground and are very vulnerable to disturbance.

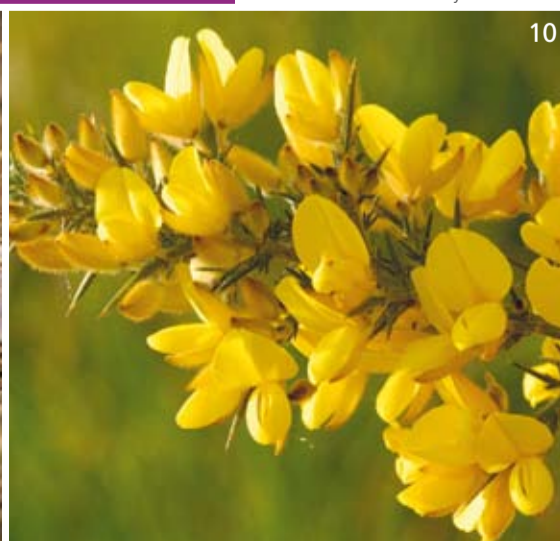
Gorse (10) It is said that when gorse is in flower, kissing is in season. Fortunately, it flowers virtually throughout the year, bringing colour to the heaths!

Green tiger beetle (11) An unmistakable heathland resident and one of the UK's most striking insects.

Hobby (12) A summer visitor to the Sandlings. The agile flight of this dashing falcon makes it a spectacular sight.



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