

Date notified: 24th April 1986

COUNTY: Norfolk

SITE NAME: BARNHAMCROSS COMMON

DISTRICT: Breckland

Status: Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) notified under Section 28 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981

Local Planning Authority: Breckland District Council

National Grid Reference: TL 865813                      Area: 67.27 (ha) 166.23 (ac)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 144                      1:10,000: TL 88 SE

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1959                      Date of Last Revision: –

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1986                      Date of Last Revision: –

Other Information:

This site is owned by Thetford Town Council and is a Registered Common. It was identified as part of a key site in the Nature Conservation Review.

**Reasons for Notification:**

Barnhamcross Common is a sizeable area of public open space on the southern edge of Thetford. The Common supports well-developed areas of calcareous and acidic Breckland grassland heath and some tall neutral grassland. Lack of grazing and frequent fires have led to the development of areas of scrub and woodland. The site has a rich flora, including several nationally rare plants and the considerable diversity of habitat attracts a corresponding diversity of birds.

Calcareous grass heath is best developed in the north-western part of the site where the turf is dominated by Red Fescue *Festuca rubra*, Sweet Vernal Grass *Anthoxanthum odoratum* and False Oat Grass *Arrhenatherum elatius*. This turf contains a great variety of small flowering plants including Stemless Thistle *Cirsium acaule*, Bird'sfoot Trefoil *Lotus corniculatus*, Purging Flax *Linum catharticum*, Quaking Grass *Briza media*, Restharrow *Ononis repens* and Kidney Vetch *Anthyllis vulneraria*.

Acidic grass heath is well-developed on the eastern half of the Common. Sand Sedge *Carex arenaria* a plant of stabilised sand-dunes is the main dominant, especially on the uneven terrain left by small scale gravel workings in the past. Sand sedge produces a dense, tall grassland, but a number of other plants co-exist with it. These include Cat's Ear *Hypochoeris radicata*, Harebell *Campanula rotundifolia*, Sheep's Sorrel *Rumex acetosella* and Common Hemp Nettle *Galeopsis tetrahit*. Sheep's Fescue *Festuca ovina* replaces sand sedge as the main dominant in some areas, particularly the flatter, south-eastern part of the Common. The range of associated species is similar but there are also a few Heather *Calluna vulgaris* bushes in this area.

As well as the heath grasslands there are quite large areas dominated by tall grasses such as false oat grass, Cock'sfoot *Dactylis glomerata* and Yorkshire Fog *Holcus lanatus*. This type of grassland has a number of species associated with it including Field Scabious *Knautia arvensis*, Ladies Bedstraw *Galium verum* and the locally rare Sickie Medick *Medicago falcata*. At one point this type of grassland grades into relict fen with species such as Wild Angelica *Angelica sylvestris* and Hemlock *Conium maculatum*.

Gorse *Ulex europaeus* is the most abundant scrub species on the site. It is found both as isolated bushes and as dense thickets with little other vegetation. The latter are particularly

susceptible to fires and quite a rich grassland flora can sometimes appear in the aftermath of such fires. However, without management intervention such areas tend to be invaded by Rosebay Willowherb *Chamaenerion angustifolium* and re-colonised by gorse.

Mixed scrub dominated by Hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna* and naturally re-generated Oak *Quercus robur* occupies a considerable part of the south-western corner of the Common. A fairly rich chalky grassland survives between the bushes. Scots Pine *Pinus sylvestris* has also invaded one area of the Common and there are some sizeable Blackthorn *Prunus spinosa* thickets.

Barnhamcross Common has long been known as a locality for a number of the rare plant species associated with the Breckland and several of these survive today. The Purple-stemmed Cat's Tail *Phleum phleoides* and the Spanish Catchfly *Silene otites* are the most abundant.

The variety of habitats on the Common is reflected in the fact that 93 species of birds were recorded on the Common in 1982, including over 60 breeding species. The Common also supports a good range of butterflies, moths and other invertebrates.