

COUNTY: Norfolk

SITE NAME: EAST WRETHAM HEATH

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 910882                      Area: 141.07 (ha) 348.59 (ac)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 144                      1:10,000: TL 98 NW

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1954                      Date of Last Revision: 1971

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1983                      Date of Last Revision: –

Other Information:

The boundary is unchanged. Owned and managed as a nature reserve by the Norfolk Naturalists' Trust.

### **Reasons for Notification:**

East Wretham Heath is the oldest established Breckland nature reserve. Its principal scientific interest lies in the two fluctuating meres, Ringmere and Langmere, and in the areas of Breckland grassland. Additional interest is provided by permanent pools, areas of mature, secondary semi-natural woodland, scrub and an artificial arable weed reserve.

Ringmere and Langmere are part of a unique series of water bodies found only on this site and the nearby Stanford Training Area SSSI. They are supplied from and directly influenced by the chalk ground water and with water levels fluctuating in a cyclical but irregular fashion, conditions have been created for the development of an unusual series of aquatic and periodically inundated plant and animal communities. Plants tolerant of alternate flooding and drying such as Reed Canary-Grass *Phalaris arundinacea* and Amphibious Bistort *Polygonum amphibium* are abundant. The seasonally exposed shores support a number of rare and unusual plants, including the moss *Physcomitrium erystomum* at its only known British locality, while the aquatic species recorded include the nationally rare Grass-leaved Water Plantain *Alisma gramineum*, and a number of Pondweeds *Potamogeton* spp. and invertebrates characteristic of unpolluted base-rich waters.

The Breckland grasslands span a range of soil types. On the acid soils the grassland is dominated by Wave Hair-Grass *Deschampsia flexuosa* with few associated species, though plants such as Heath Bedstraw *Galium saxatile*, Harebell *Campanula rotundifolia* and Sheep's Sorrel *Rumex acetosella* are increasing as the thick litter layer is gradually dispersed by recently re-introduced sheep grazing.

There is a large area of neutral grassland dominated by a number of grasses, including Sweet Vernal-Grass *Anthoxanthum odoratum*, False Oat-Grass *Arrhenatherum elatius*, Crested Dog's Tail *Cynosurus cristata*, Red Fescue *Festuca rubra* and Meadow-Grass *Poa pratensis*. Most of this is now closely grazed. Associated species include Lesser Stitchwort *Stellaria graminea*. Anthills have developed and have helped to increase the diversity of the sward. Wheatears nest in old rabbit burrows.

Calcareous grassland is more localised, and occurs mainly in the south eastern part of the site. Sheep's Fescue *Festuca ovina* is the dominant grass and the characteristic chalk herbs include Larger Wild Thyme *Thymus pulegioides* and Rue-leaved Saxifrage *Saxifraga tridactylites*.

In addition to the fluctuating meres, the site contains several smaller water bodies whose water levels remain more constant, the largest being Fenmere. They contrast markedly with the other meres and have a dense marginal vegetation dominated by Greater Pond Sedge *Carex riparia* and rushes.

The wide range of woodland and scrub types adds greatly to the general interest of the reserve and helps sustain a great variety of birdlife. There is a very old stand of Scots Pine, which although originally planted now possesses a structure similar to that of a mature, natural pine wood. Crossbills and Red Squirrels are amongst the species that use this area. There are also areas of mixed deciduous woodland, the older parts contain Hornbeam *Carpinus betulus* which has, for many years, supported a small breeding population of Hawfinches. The rest of the wood is dominated by Birch *Betula pendula* with a bracken understorey. The scrub is mostly Hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna* and has invaded areas left ungrazed in post-war years.

A small area is managed to maintain bare ground conditions in order to conserve a population of Three Fingered Speedwell *Veronica triphyllos* and other rare Breckland annuals which were introduced following the destruction of their original habitat by housing development at Thetford.

Ringmere is of geomorphological importance as a small, compact mere of probable periglacial origin.