

COUNTY: Norfolk

SITE NAME: WEETING HEATH

DISTRICT: Breckland

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

This site is in part a National Nature Reserve (NNR)

Local Planning Authority: Breckland District Council

National Grid Reference: TL 757884

Area: 140.8 (ha) 348 (ac)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 143

1:10,000: TL 78 NE, TL 79 SE

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1958

Date of Last Revision: 1971

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1987

Date of Last Revision: –

Other Information:

Most of the site is a National Nature Reserve owned by the Norfolk Naturalists' Trust and managed jointly with the NCC.

#### **Reasons for Notification:**

Weeting Heath is a classic example of open, rabbit-grazed, Breckland grass-heath. Most of the site is covered by calcareous grassland and lichen-dominated heath, and a number of rare plants characteristic of Breckland are present. A small arable weed reserve is included within the site and many of the rare Breckland annuals have been introduced into it. The site is of considerable ornithological importance supporting a high breeding density and variety of heathland birds.

Rabbit-grazing maintains the open heath and prevents the encroachment of scrub, and enclosures have been constructed to encourage a high rabbit population. Dry lichen heath is present on the poorest soils, dominated by mosses, (mostly *Dicranium scoparium*) and Lichens *Cladonia* spp. with frequent Sand Sedge *Carex arenaria*, Sheep's Fescue *Festuca ovina*, Field Woodrush *Luzula campestris* and Early Hair-Grass *Aira praecox*.

A chalk grassland flora has developed on the dry calcareous sands. The dominant grasses in the sward are Sheep's Fescue, Crested Hair-Grass *Koeleria cristata* and Common Bent *Agrostis tenuis*. Many species of herb are present and include Yarrow *Achillea millefolium*, Birdsfoot Trefoil *Lotus corniculatus*, Thyme *Thymus drucei*, Wild Mignonette *Reseda lutea* and Lady's Bedstraw *Galium verum*. A number of rare plants are present, the rarest being Spiked Speedwell *Veronica spicata*, with Maiden Pink *Dianthus deltoides* and Purple-Stem Cat's Tail *Phleum phleoides*. Self-regenerating Scots Pine *Pinus sylvestris* is scattered over the grassland and there is also an area of Bracken *Pteridium aquilinum*.

At the southern end of the site there is an area of neutral grassland on low-lying land. The sward is chiefly Red Fescue *Festuca rubra*, Yorkshire Fog *Holcus lanatus* and Tufted Hair-Grass *Deschampsia caespitosa*. This community grades into an area of Reed Sweet-Grass *Glyceria maxima* and Nettles *Urtica dioica* alongside the river Little Ouse. A small area of fen vegetation also occurs with Reed *Phragmites australis*, Angelica *Angelica sylvestris* and Yellow Iris *Iris pseudacorus*.

An arable field is managed as a reserve for rare Breckland plants and introductions to the site include Spring Speedwell *Veronica verna*, Breckland Speedwell *V. praecox*, Fingered Speedwell *V. triphyllos*, Field Wormwood *Artemisia campestris*, and Spanish Catchfly *Silene otites*.

The heath is a noted breeding site for the Stone-Curlew with up to nine pairs nesting annually, and hides have been provided to enable visitors to view the birds. Wheatears are common breeding birds in old rabbit burrows.