

COUNTY: Norfolk SITE NAME: EAT HARLING 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: TM 000879 Area: 14.9 (ha) 37.0 (ac)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 144 1:10,000: TL 98 NE & TM 08 NW

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): N/A Date of Last Revision: N/A

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1989 Date of Last Revision: N/A

Other Information:

Description and Reasons for Notification:

East Harling Common, situated on chalk on the eastern edge of the Norfolk Breckland, is of great importance for its system of periglacial ground ice depressions (pingos) retaining a relict community of aquatic beetles which, together with that of a few other Norfolk pingo systems, is unique in Britain. This includes many species which are nationally scarce or rare. Floristically rich fen, a declining habitat, has developed in and around many of the depressions, and surrounding chalk grassland supports a diversity of plants, several of which are uncommon locally.

The site takes in a system of some 20 depressions thought to date from the last glacial advance, the largest of which is a deep permanent mere. This is fringed by Alder *Alnus glutinosa* carr and fen vegetation, and a number of aquatic plants such as Amphibious Bistort *Polygonum amphibium*, Marestail *Hippuris vulgaris* and large quantities of Water Violet *Hottonia palustris* are present. The mere is outstanding for its community of aquatic beetles, and of the 24 species considered to be important as indicators of undisturbed fens in and around Breckland 18 have been recorded from this site, most notably *Hydraena palustris*, *Hygroporus glabruisculus*, *Dryops griseus* and *Enochrus isotae*. Large numbers of common toads breed.

Many of the other depressions are interconnected by a series of overgrown drains, and are dominated by fen vegetation. In the shallower hollows and around the edges of deeper hollows Blunt-flowered Rush *Juncus subnodulosus* is predominant. Associated species include Saw Sedge *Cladium mariscus*, Southern Marsh Orchid *Dactylorhiza praetermissa*, Marsh Helleborine *Epipactis palustris*, Brown Sedge *Carex disticha* and small amounts of Black Bog-rush *Schoenus nigricans*, with deeper areas supporting extensive Tufted Sedge *Carex elata*. Towards the centre of deeper hollows where water persists further into the summer, stagnation has created acid conditions and an acid fen vegetation has developed, including Common Cotton Grass *Eriophorum angustifolium*, Marsh Cinquefoil *Potentilla palustris*, Marsh Stitchwort *Stellaria palustris* and stands of Bottle Sedge *Carex rostrata*.

On high ground between the depressions rabbit-grazed chalk grassland is extensive. This supports a large variety of calcicole plants with both species of Oat Grass *Avenula pubescens* and *A. pratense* frequent. Salad Burnet *Sanguisorba minor* and Dropwort *Filipendula vulgaris* are particularly abundant, and there is a large population of Common Twayblade *Listera ovata*. Other species include Dwarf Thistle *Cirsium acaule*, Pepper Saxifrage *Silvaum silaus*, Common Quaking Grass *Briza media* Spiny Rest-harrow *Ononis spinosa* and Hoary Plantain *Plantago media*, whilst anthills have a distinctive flora

including Yellow Oat-grass *Trisetum flavescens*, Wild Thyme *Thymus drucei*, Harebell *Campanula rotundifolia*, Crested Hair-grass *Koeleria macrantha* and Dwarf Mouse-ear *Cerastium pumilum* at its only Norfolk locality. Gorse *Ulex europaeus* occurs over much of the grassland but is controlled by burning. Bare ground created by this is colonized by ruderal species and calcicoles such as Hairy Rock-cress *Arabis hirsuta* and Common Gromwell *Lithospermum officinale*.

Secondary birchwood occurs around the edges of the common, and to the west extensive areas of alder and alder-ash neglected coppice are present. This is important for its ditch system which drains from the Common to the nearby River Wittle. Near the river remnants of fen-pasture fields occur, dominated by Reed *Phragmites australis*, Reed Canary Grass *Phalaris arundinacea* or Lesser Pond Sedge *Carex acutiformis*. There is also a small reedbed on the open part of the Common.

Part of the Common is ploughed for gamebird cover crops.