A Wilder Suffolk

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Published by Suffolk Wildlife Trust
Designed by Clare Sheehan
Printed by KNP Litho
Front cover photograph: Mellis Common by Steve Aylward
Back cover photographs: Darsham Marshes, Old Broom, Simpson's Saltings by Steve Aylward

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Registered charity no 262777

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A Wilder Suffolk

From nature reserves to a wilder Suffolk –
how we can bring back Suffolk's wildlife

Suffolk
Wildlife Trust

Foreword

As Suffolk Wildlife Trust celebrates 60 years of protecting, campaigning, influencing and action for wildlife in our precious county, we have to acknowledge that for all the successes and achievements (and there have been many), the challenges to the natural world, the environment that sustains us, are as great today as they have ever been.

In 1961, land use change and development were seen as the greatest threat to the natural environment. Woods, hedges and heaths were being destroyed at alarming speed while meadows, marshes and coastal grasslands were being ploughed, drained and 'improved'. Across Suffolk, rivers were being deepened, straightened and embanked while new roads, industrial developments and housing were carving swathes through ancient countryside. The 1960s and 70s were a time of unprecedented loss throughout the county with very little consideration given to the value of nature and the natural world.

Sixty years on, those threats have mostly disappeared, in large part due to the work of the Trust and others championing Suffolk's wildlife heritage and the need to protect what was left, but only to be replaced today by greater and more global threats. While awareness of climate change began to grow from the early 1990s, it is only in the last 10 years that the scale of the threat and the likely impact on the natural world has become fully understood. Coupled with the ever-growing intensification of farming, the impacts of pesticides on insects and multiple other factors, we now face an unprecedented climate and ecological emergency. Wildlife in Suffolk, like that across the planet,

faces a very uncertain future and unless we do much more, the losses will continue.

Despite this bleak prognosis however, there is real hope. We know that restoring the natural environment will not only bring back wildlife but also help address the climate emergency. The climate and natural ecosystems have throughout Earth's history been intimately linked processes, and if we are to safeguard the future for wildlife and ultimately our own future, we must restore that link by creating space for nature to thrive and remove carbon from the atmosphere through locking it in trees, soils, peatlands and saltmarshes. A Wilder Suffolk will do just that.

Suffolk Wildlife Trust shares with the Wildlife Trust movement an ambition for 30% of all land and sea to be in recovery, protected and connected for nature by 2030. This is considered the minimum necessary to ensure that natural habitats can regenerate, and wildlife can rebuild sustainable populations capable of adapting to a changing world. This is a hugely ambitious target given that less than 10% of Suffolk might currently be considered as being in the condition it needs to be, but nonetheless, it is achievable if we collectively work together.

Alongside, the 30/30 vision is an equally ambitious target that one in four of us is taking action for nature – a critical threshold where if enough of us care, we can collectively make a real difference for wildlife and the natural environment. As a Suffolk Wildlife Trust member, you are already part of that one in four ambition helping to create a Wilder Suffolk. Thank you.

Steve Aylward
March 2022

Arger Fen & Spouse's Vale

Suffolk Wildlife Trust

Suffolk Wildlife Trust's nature reserves are all free to visit. You can go any time, but many reserves also have walks and open days as well.

This book is a celebration of the reserves and their wildlife and is intended as a companion to the website which remains the best source of information to help you plan your visit, including maps, directions and our events listing.

The website also has the latest news on land purchases and projects. Buying or enlarging a nature reserve is one of the most powerful ways in which Suffolk Wildlife Trust protects wildlife for the future. Our ability to react quickly to opportunities to buy land reflects the deep commitment of our members and supporters.

Plan your nature reserve visit at **suffolkwildlifetrust.org**

No of reserves
50

Total area
6,660 acres,
2,695 ha

Framlingham Mere

Suffolk Wildlife Trust Nature Reserves

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The volunteer spirit

Action for Suffolk's wildlife, led by local people, has always been Suffolk Wildlife Trust's great strength. When the Trust began in 1961 it was entirely led by volunteers and today, volunteer Trustees continue to steer its development. Sixty years on, our nature reserves are a tribute to that volunteer spirit and the time and effort vested in them.

Across the county, countless individuals have given days, weeks, sometimes years of their time to their local reserve. Volunteers have managed precious habitats, monitored wildlife, welcomed visitors, guided walks, enthused children, checked livestock as well as many other tasks. Collectively, they have made the nature reserves the Trust currently manages the wildlife-richest, best-understood and most cared-for land in Suffolk.

As an organisation, our achievements and successes can be directly measured in terms of the contribution made by volunteers. There is not a single aspect of the work the Trust does that is not enriched and enhanced by volunteers. The reward is the ability to pass on to future generations a county that remains a joy to live in and where wildlife is all around us.

Thank you

Since its launch in 1995, the National Lottery Heritage Fund has played a vital role helping Suffolk Wildlife Trust acquire land for nature and create and restore valuable habitats for wildlife.

We are especially grateful to NLHF for the support they gave to help buy Knettishall Heath, Captain's Wood, Dingle Marshes, Mickle Mere, Hen Reedbeds and Foxburrow and in 2018, making one of the largest ever awards for the extension of Carlton Marshes and the new visitor centre that opened in 2020.

The key to securing grants from the Heritage Fund is the ability to raise the necessary match funding, and our success is entirely due to the extraordinary generosity of a great many donors and legacy givers. The scale of our ambition to do more for wildlife has been underpinned by the unprecedented support of so many people over decades and that is reflected by the wildlife that thrives in our nature reserves.

As we face the challenges ahead, your support by being members, making donations and leaving legacies is more important than it has ever been. Our aim is simple, to use every penny of support as effectively as possible to create a Wilder Suffolk.

HERITAGE FUND

Mellis Common

1

A wilder **High Suffolk**

The clay plateau landscape that characterises High Suffolk is dominated by modern farming. Large arable fields with dividing hedges together with scattered small woodlands make up much of the area while river valleys with their associated floodplain habitats dissect the monotony of the arable landscape.

The rapid post-war intensification of farming brought with it huge changes in the landscape, most notably the loss of grassland and hedges and the grubbing up of ancient woodlands. The wetland habitats of the river valleys were frequently modified by drainage while water courses were straightened and deepened. Yet despite all this change, there remain pockets of land with great biodiversity. These range in scale from expansive medieval commons rich in wildflowers to individual farm ponds supporting large populations of great crested newts.

Ancient woods that escaped coniferisation or have since been restored still support rich woodland ecosystems, especially where the practice of coppicing is maintained. Spread across High Suffolk are a handful of typically small meadows that have never been fertilised or sprayed and remain botanically diverse. In the valleys, remnants of what were once extensive wetlands remain, some still rich in plants and invertebrates. The Trust's landholding in High Suffolk reflects this pattern with a mix of mostly woodland and grassland reserves. These, however, are often the only places

left that are still rich in wildlife.

Approximately 72% of Suffolk is cultivated land, but across High Suffolk, that figure is in excess of 80%, it has become the most intensively farmed part of the county and consequently the most nature deprived. This is where a Wilder Suffolk could have the greatest impact rebuilding populations of once ubiquitous species of farmland birds, butterflies and other wildlife. Compared to 50-60 years ago, what is really missing is simple abundance; the great majority of species associated with farmland can still be found in High Suffolk, but only in small pockets here and there and in vastly lower numbers.

Creating a wilder High Suffolk would not be difficult. Multiple small and simple changes to the way farmland is managed could do so much for wildlife. If every hedge was kept at least 2m tall and 2m wide and then only cut every 2 or 3 years, and every arable field had a margin that was similarly only cut no more than once in 2 years, the combined impact would be huge. Add in taking awkward field corners out of production and leaving wide margins around ponds and watercourses and the benefits for wildlife would be greater still. Planting more hedgerow trees is another simple but effective action. Suffolk has never fully replaced the elms lost in the 60's and 70's and with the full impact of ash dieback yet to be seen, we need to replace the thousands of lost or soon to be lost hedgerow trees.

More ambitious measures might involve only cultivating large rectangular plots in the middle of each field leaving the margins and hedges to become wilder, or transitioning to regenerative farming where the focus is on soil health and building natural fertility which is both highly beneficial for wildlife and addressing climate change.

The most ambitious actions however involve working at scale. Farm clusters, groups of farms that are collectively making multiple beneficial changes can have a profound impact enriching wildlife across a large area with each farm complementing and enhancing the work of its neighbours.

Each of these changes at every scale would however benefit from a scatter of truly wilded pockets of land. The Trust's Black Bourn Valley nature reserve is demonstrating just how amazingly nature responds when given the space and freedom to regenerate naturally. Black Bourn Valley is developing into a wildlife 'factory' that will quickly produce surplus birds, reptiles, insects, wildflower seeds and other wildlife ready to colonise neighbouring farms and land. Taking just 3% of Suffolk's arable land out of production could create 70 more Black Bourn Valleys that could drive the most remarkable rewilding of High Suffolk and reverse decades of wildlife decline.

Mickfield Meadow

Black Bourn Valley

Established
1995

Reserve size
297 acres, 120 ha

Extended
2015, 2017

Nearest town/ village
Thurston

Black Bourn Valley nature reserve began as Grove Farm, a hugely generous legacy gift to the Trust in 1995 by Laura Cooper, a former Second World War 'land girl' with a great attachment to the farm she worked on. Her wish was for Grove Farm to avoid any further agricultural improvement.

In many respects, Grove Farm was a typical arable farm of central Suffolk with large fields divided by hedges and a handful of ponds, however it bordered the Black Bourn river and retained several unimproved species-rich wet meadows. Over the years the Trust replanted and 'gapped up' the hedges and took field margins and corners out of production, creating more opportunity and space for wildlife. The scattered ponds were restored and more were dug to encourage the local population of great crested newts to build and spread. In 2001 a small woodland was planted to add further diversity to the habitats found on the farm and named Cooper's Copse as a lasting reminder of Laura Cooper's gift.

Yellowhammer

However, despite all these measures, it still felt as if Grove Farm was not fulfilling its true wildlife potential. One small set-aside field in the middle of the farm that was too small to cultivate had become increasingly 'rough' and scrubby and this little area hinted at an alternative future for the farm. Over a period of 10 years or so, the field became increasingly important for many different species. Birds were nesting in the scrub, the grassy areas were colonised by bee and pyramidal orchids, dragonflies flourished in the ponds and countless butterflies took nectar from the various wildflowers that had just 'appeared'. In this 5 acres or so, there was probably as much wildlife as there was spread across the entire 100 acres of cultivated land. This little field demonstrated perfectly how

given the opportunity wildlife would simply move in, and if it could happen here, surely it could do the same across all the arable land?

In 2016 the Trust acquired 70 acres of riverside land adjoining Grove Farm. This acquisition generously supported by Trust members and legacy gifts prompted a name change for the reserve that reflected the importance of the Black Bourn river flowing through the reserve. This was followed in 2017 by yet another opportunity to further extend the reserve creating one large contiguous landholding. Finally, a small but equally important opportunity was secured through reaching an agreement with Norton Combined Charities who owned two riverside meadows, to integrate their land into the larger reserve.

Wildlife conservation is an ever-evolving field and the concept of 're-wilding' has gained considerable momentum in recent years fuelled by a mix of research, publications by the likes of George Monbiot and real-life examples such as the transformation of the Knepp Estate in West Sussex. The idea that land can be left to its own devices with naturalistic grazing the only management tool has been shown to be highly beneficial for wildlife. The Knepp Estate where this approach is being applied across 3,500 acres of land has resulted in populations of birds like the nightingale and turtle dove thriving while elsewhere in the wider countryside, populations of these birds are in a calamitous decline.

The Black Bourn Valley reserve has all the 'ingredients' necessary to create an extraordinary wildlife oasis including the river that acts as a wildlife corridor, existing areas of species rich grassland to provide seed sources, wonderful old species rich hedges, wildlife rich ponds and patches of woodland. The latest phase in the evolution of the reserve has been to install a perimeter fence to facilitate extensive grazing to drive the development of a habitat mosaic capable of supporting the greatest diversity of species. The coming years will be a fascinating journey of change and no doubt with a few wildlife surprises along the way.

Bonny Wood

Established
1987

Reserve size
48 acres, 19 ha

Nearest town/ village
Barking Tye

Bonny Wood sits on a hill of heavy wet boulder clay overlooking the village of Barking Tye. It is one of a cluster of ancient woods in an area known collectively as Barking Woods. Suffolk Wildlife Trust owns roughly one third of Bonny Wood with the remainder privately owned.

The structure of Bonny Wood is typical of that of an old boulder clay wood, dominated by ancient ash coppice with hazel, field maple and sallow sheltering under a high canopy of mature oak trees. Productive coppice woods such as Bonny were historically highly valued and therefore frequently referred to in old property records. These show that Bonny Wood was once owned by Queen Elizabeth I and that it has the same boundary today as in 1641.

The diversity of plant species found in Bonny Wood is a product of the long history of coppicing. The shade-loving herb-Paris grows in exceptional profusion in the northern part of the wood alongside the fragrant, delicate-flowered sweet woodruff. The rides which lie wet for much of the year are carpeted with violets in early spring. Violets were the food plant for several species of fritillary butterfly that became extinct in Suffolk due to the cessation of coppicing after the Second World War, however, the Trust has reinstated the coppice cycle and a rich and diverse ground flora has since recovered. Remarkably, silver-washed fritillaries have returned to Suffolk re-colonising Bonny Wood and quite unexpectedly, purple emperor butterflies have followed in their wake.

Herb-Paris

Another exciting development has been the colonisation of Bonny Wood by dormice following their release into neighbouring Priestley Wood. Without any assistance, the dormice made their way along linking hedges to establish a small population in Bonny Wood which is now actively monitored by the Trust.

Bradfield Woods

Bradfield Woods is one of the best known and most treasured ancient woodlands in East Anglia, yet not long ago it came very close to being completely destroyed. In the late 1960s there was little legal protection for valuable wildlife habitats beyond the first National Nature Reserves and relatively little was known about the wider countryside and our wildlife heritage. At the same time, agricultural development was rapidly changing the Suffolk countryside as hedgerows and woods were cleared to create larger, more efficient farms.

Felsham Hall Wood and Monks Park Wood (collectively known as Bradfield Woods) were caught in this push to modernise farming and as a consequence Monks Park Wood was almost entirely grubbed up. Further destruction was prevented by a bold and concerted response led by local people and eminent naturalists. An Emergency Tree Preservation Order stopped any further loss and efforts were then made to bring Bradfield Woods into protective ownership. The value that local people placed on the woods can be measured by the extraordinary fact that it took only seven weeks to raise the necessary funds, allowing The Royal Society for Nature Conservation to purchase the woods. Suffolk Wildlife Trust took over the management of the woods in 1984 and subsequently became the freehold owners.

There are few places where it is possible to walk for a mile or so through continuous broad-leaved woodland and even fewer that combine a cultural history as fascinating as that at Bradfield Woods. The evidence of centuries of woodland management is all around. Great wood banks and ditches mark the boundaries and huge coppice stools up to four metres in diameter record a history of coppicing extending back nearly a thousand years. There is evidence of a time when part was managed as a medieval deer park and complex earthworks occur throughout the woods.

There is a botanical richness that is unrivalled with 350 or so plants including almost every tree species native to East Anglia together

Established
1984

Extended
2010

Reserve size
173 acres, 70 ha

Nearest town/ village
Felsham

Postcode
IP30 0AQ

Bradfield Woods centre

with many rare plants. Bradfield Woods remains the most extensive woodland in lowland Britain that is still coppiced on a large scale, which together with a great variety of soil types explains why it is so unique.

In recent years Bradfield Woods has been at the centre of a long-term research study investigating the decline of migratory woodland birds. Even seemingly static and robust habitats such as woodland are not immune from changes in the wider countryside. The ever increasing deer population is altering the structure of woodlands and climate change will most likely result in further ecological change. One recent success, however, has been the reintroduction of dormice into the wood which have established a strong population.

In 2010 the Trust was presented with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to buy the 16 acres of Bradfield Woods that were still in private ownership. Securing this woodland was again only possible because of Trust members and supporters, not least Peter Mitchell, whose legacy was the foundation for a successful campaign.

There is no doubt, the grubbing-up of much of Monks Park Wood was a huge loss, erasing a unique and irreplaceable part of our heritage, but thankfully the majority of Bradfield Woods has been saved for future generations. The National Nature Reserve status of Bradfield Woods at last recognises the fact that this is one of the most important woods in the country. In almost every respect Bradfield Woods is quite exceptional.

White admiral

Woodcraft area

The National Nature Reserve status of Bradfield Woods recognises the fact that this is one of the most important woods in the country.

Bull's Wood

Tucked away along a farm track, Bull's Wood is the last survivor of the 'many woods of Cockfield', the majority of which were cleared in the 18th and 19th centuries. Bull's Wood didn't escape completely, with almost half the wood destroyed between 1783 and 1884, but what remains still has the structure and feel of a medieval wood with large coppice stools and impressive wood banks marking the oldest boundaries.

Established
1981

Reserve size
30 acres, 12 ha

Nearest town/ village
Cockfield

Bull's Wood was for many years famed for its oxlips and in a good year the rides would be tinted yellow as hundreds of plants flowered together. Sadly, the displays are now tempered by the browsing of increased numbers of deer which preferentially eat the oxlip flowers in spring. However, Bull's Wood still remains one of the best places to see oxlips which flower in April before the trees come fully into leaf.

Although it is not a large wood, it is home to a great variety of woodland plants and birds. Areas continue to be regularly coppiced for firewood by local volunteers, initially creating clearings that encourage orchids and violets. The dense new coppice growth that follows creates ideal habitat in which nightingale, willow warbler and blackcap nest.

Bull's Wood might be the only surviving wood of that lost medieval landscape but its wildlife has changed little in the intervening centuries.

Early-purple orchid

Combs Wood

Combs Wood is a typical medieval Suffolk wood, located on a hilltop close to the town of Stowmarket. It has a remarkable recorded history dating back over 600 years which tells us much about the way the wood was managed. The ancient ditches and banks that enclose the wood characterise this medieval past while others suggest old trackways and ownership boundaries.

Combs Wood has an outstandingly rich flora with a great variety of woodland species including pignut, nettle-leaved bell flower and moschatel together with oxlip growing at its northern limit. There are several species of orchid ranging from the relatively common early-purple orchid to the nationally scarce and well-hidden birds-nest orchid, as well as greater butterfly-orchid, a Suffolk rarity.

The dense thicket of the regularly coppiced areas contrasts with the open, high forest structure of the east side of the wood which is dominated by tall majestic stems of hornbeam and ash. Beneath the canopy a patchwork quilt of wood anemone, dog's mercury, bluebells and wild garlic covers the woodland floor.

By today's standards the past management of the wood was quite drastic. The entire wood was felled every 10-15 years to produce hop poles, thatching spars, hurdles and firewood. Today the practice of coppicing continues, although much smaller areas are felled and all the timber is sold for firewood.

Established
1982

Extended
1988

Reserve size
41 acres, 16 ha

Nearest town/ village
Stowmarket

Foxburrow

Foxburrow is a place that has inspired many people. Its previous owners Tim and Robin Miller believed passionately that the farm that inspired their love of wildlife and the countryside could do the same for others.

Set just outside Woodbridge, Foxburrow was a typical mosaic of farmland habitats comprising a mix of arable fields, pasture, woodland, two old orchards, scrub and ponds together with a collection of traditional farm buildings. Individually there is nothing remarkable about any of these features yet collectively they illustrate a distinctive local landscape created during centuries of farming. As with so many farms, modern farming 'nibbled away' at the old structure, a few hedges and ponds were lost, and land drains improved the arable fields. Dutch elm disease also took its toll on hedgerow trees and the 1987 storm bashed the woods – yet by and large the farm has remained remarkably intact. The red-brick farm buildings with their stables and yards point to a time when cattle and horses were an integral part of the farm, but they are now long gone. The sounds of farm animals echoing around the buildings have been replaced by the sounds of excited children and Foxburrow is now a busy environmental learning centre, visited by over 4,000 children each year.

After generations of conventional arable farming, most recently by the neighbouring Rolph family, the decision was made to change tack at Foxburrow and take the land in a different wilder direction. 2021 saw the last cereal crop harvested and over the coming years

Established
1985

Extended
2006

Reserve size
166 acres, 67 ha

Nearest town/ village
Melton

Postcode
IP12 1NA

Barn garden

nature will be allowed to move into the former arable fields. Instead of producing wheat or barley, Foxburrow will become a producer of great crested newts, yellowhammers and peacock butterflies, just some of the many species that are expected to flourish and in time help repopulate the wider countryside.

As with Black Bourn Valley, the aim is to allow a mosaic of grassland, scrub and in time, copses of woodland to develop within large lightly grazed enclosures. The land will become a small nature 'factory', a place not necessarily for the rare and beautiful species we typically treasure the most, but for the common-or-garden species that were once so abundant in Suffolk and have suffered the greatest losses.

Tim and Robin Millers' memory of Foxburrow being a place that inspired a love of nature was rooted in the past when wildlife was much more abundant than it is today. If we are to inspire the next generation, Foxburrow again needs to be both a place where wildlife thrives as it once did, and a place to develop a passion for the natural world.

Foxburrow is a place to develop a passion for the natural world.

Fox Fritillary Meadow

Established
1977

Reserve size
6 acres, 2 ha

Nearest town/ village
Framsden

Quite simply, the spectacle of thousands of snake's head fritillary flowers in full bloom at Fox Fritillary Meadow is unrivalled in East Anglia. It is one of the foremost botanical highlights of the region. The setting of the meadow in a shallow valley, dissected by a tributary of the River Deben, is not unique yet the circumstances surrounding the survival of the meadow and the fritillaries are quite exceptional.

In 1957 the meadow was sprayed with a broad-leaved selective herbicide with the well-meaning intention to benefit the fritillaries. This it did, but at the expense of the majority of other wildflowers, the fritillaries only surviving because they are members of the narrow-leaved lily family. Species such as cowslips, cuckooflower and ragged-Robin are slowly returning, but compared with other Trust meadows where fritillaries are found, the meadow is noticeably less diverse.

The Trust acquired the meadow in 1977 when the farm was sold and the owner, Queenie Fox, wanted to be sure the fritillaries were safeguarded. The snake's head fritillaries still flower in a most spectacular fashion in April, creating a low-level purple haze of flowers, broken only by the occasional white-flowered albino form of the species. Questions remain regarding the true native status of the fritillaries, which are only found growing in four semi-natural meadows in Suffolk, however there is no disputing their ability to impress and put on a show.

Framlingham Mere

Established
1988

Reserve size
31 acres, 13 ha

Nearest town/ village
Framlingham

With Framlingham Castle providing the backdrop, the Mere has to be one of Suffolk's most recognisable wetland nature reserves. The spectacular setting together with a great diversity of wetland wildlife creates a reserve that is virtually unique in the county, and being so close to the town centre, this remarkably tranquil natural place is greatly enjoyed by the local community.

Fed by the River Ore, the Mere is a natural feature albeit somewhat modified over the centuries, and an old shoreline suggests it was historically almost twice the size it is today. Having almost dried up in the 1990s, The Mere was extensively restored through a Trust-led project to remove thousands of tonnes of silt. As a result, the open water of The Mere now attracts good numbers of wildfowl and other wetland birds such as great crested grebes, while the surrounding marshes and sedge swamps provide winter feeding areas for snipe. The cattle-grazed marshes are botanically interesting, with good numbers of southern marsh-orchids indicating their value.

Owned by Framlingham College, the Mere has been managed in partnership with the Trust for over 30 years. There are only a handful of places in Suffolk where human history and natural history sit so comfortably together and undoubtedly The Mere is one of these.

Martins' Meadows

Established
1971

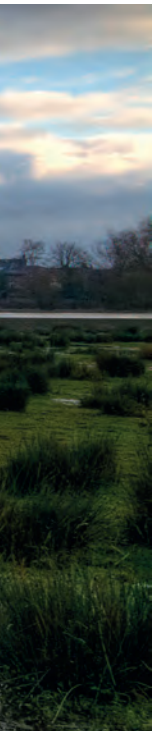
Reserve size
10 acres, 4 ha

Nearest town/ village
Otley

Martins' Meadows is an original remnant of 17th century Suffolk. A collection of three small meadows and two orchards enclosed by old hedges laid out just as they were mapped in 1656 by Nathaniel Fuller. Two of the meadows are probably as botanically rich as they were 400 years ago, having been maintained by an ages-old tradition of hay cutting and autumn grazing while the third is slowly recovering from the effects of free-ranging chickens kept by a previous owner.

To describe the meadows as exceptional is no overstatement as drifts of cowslips dotted with early-purple orchids and twayblade are followed by fritillaries and green-winged orchids. In June, the fields turn yellow with meadow buttercups and yellow-rattle, only to be followed by the purple flowers of knapweed and spikes of pyramidal orchids. After the meadows have been cut for hay, and quite unlike any other meadows in Suffolk, just as autumn is about to arrive and as if from nowhere, the meadows produce their grand finale, a spectacular display of pink and white meadow saffron flowers.

The two orchards are equally diverse, containing a great variety of species ranging from apples, pears and medlar to cobnuts and a walnut tree. Although badly damaged by the 1987 storm, new planting of traditional Suffolk varieties of apple such as Lady Henniker and Clopton Red has begun to recreate the structure and feel of the original orchards. Varieties that would have been familiar in any Suffolk market of years gone by, yet would never be found in any supermarket today.



To describe the meadows as exceptional is no overstatement.

Mellis Common

One of the great surprises at Mellis is the sheer scale of the common, a huge expanse of grassland with small farmsteads and cottages dotted around the margins. This is a substantial medieval common that has changed little over hundreds of years, and Hodskinson's 1783 map of Suffolk shows the common drawn just as it is found today. Many great commons were enclosed and lost forever but Mellis somehow escaped this fate. It illustrates wonderfully what this part of Suffolk must have looked like in the past.

Cowslip

The common still has grazing rights which allow local people to keep cattle on it. Gates on the roads used to prevent the cattle from straying and local children would earn pennies opening them for passing traffic. Today only the western part of the common is still grazed and much of the remainder is now cut for hay.

While the western end of the common was ploughed as part of the war effort and then reseeded with grass, much is still outstanding species-rich grassland. In June the common is awash with oxeye daisies and buttercups, making Mellis one of the prettiest places in Suffolk. Recognising this importance for wildlife, Mellis Common was generously gifted to the Trust in 1989 by Lord Henniker, owner of Thornham Estate.

Established
1989

Reserve size
144 acres, 58 ha

Nearest town/ village
Mellis

Mellis is one of the prettiest places in Suffolk.

Mickfield Meadow

Established
1966

Reserve size
5 acres, 2 ha

Nearest town/ village
Mickfield

Mickfield Meadow's place in Suffolk's natural history is secure by virtue of the fact that it was Suffolk's very first nature reserve, originally established in 1938, long before the Trust's involvement. At that time, it was the last of a cluster of damp species-rich meadows where snake's head fritillaries grew in profusion. Local naturalists led by Frances Simpson, concerned at the increasing loss of old meadows to agricultural 'improvement', managed to save Mickfield from a similar fate.

Mr Favell, the neighbouring farmer made the hay at Mickfield for over 50 years, stopping only a few years before he died aged 88. Farmers of his generation watched and in many cases instigated the changes that so radically altered the Suffolk farm landscape, and consequently had mixed views, knowing they did their job as farmers well, but recognising now it was at a cost to the countryside.

Today Mickfield Meadow sits isolated and vulnerable in a vast arable landscape, yet standing in the meadow surrounded by wildflowers there is no sense of this fragility. Each year in early spring, and quite unusually for a meadow, wood anemones carpet the ground with their delicate white flowers, while under the scattered oak trees there are clumps of goldilocks buttercups, another plant more commonly associated with woodlands. Snake's head fritillaries flower in their hundreds in April and meadowsweet grows abundantly together with ragged-Robin and cuckooflower, a measure of just how wet the meadow lies even in summer.

Reydon Wood

Established
1985

Reserve size
41 acres, 17 ha

Nearest town/ village
Wangford

Reydon Wood demonstrates just how resilient some habitats are despite the best human endeavours to change them. At one time, the central ride was a dark tunnel created by closely planted conifers, the ground sterilised by a deep layer of pine needles. Today in spring and early summer, the same ride is awash with primroses, common-spotted orchids and fleabane.

Like so many old coppice woods in Suffolk, Reydon was clear felled in the 1950s and replanted with conifers, as the demand for coppice wood declined and landowners sought a more profitable return from their woods. When the Trust purchased Reydon, much of the wood and all of the rides were dominated by conifers, shading out the native woodland plants. Thankfully, and unlike many other woods, the coppice stools had been left in situ and had re-grown amongst the conifers.

The restoration of Reydon Wood has revealed remarkable old coppice stools of ash and hornbeam, and nightingales have returned to sing from the dense new growth of young coppice. Local people working together, in return for a share of the firewood, have made a significant contribution to the rejuvenation of this ancient wood, reinstating a 20-year cycle of coppicing. The response has been expanses of bluebells, yellow archangel and greater stitchwort to rival any Suffolk wood.

Winks Meadow

Situated on the edge of what was once a Second World War airfield, Winks Meadow near Metfield is another remnant of a more extensive grassland landscape since lost to the post-war effort to increase food production. The meadow survived largely by chance because it was a favourite of the then owner Mrs Godbold who gave the Trust the opportunity to buy it.

Thick hedges enclose a meadow of great diversity, a legacy of traditional farming methods stretching back into history. Plants only found on chalky boulder clay grow in profusion, including the pale yellow-flowered sulphur clover, quaking grass and spiny restharrow with its pink pea-like flowers.

Winks Meadow boasts more species of orchid than possibly any other meadow in Suffolk. The list includes early-purple, twayblade and green-winged, together with common spotted, bee and pyramidal orchids. In addition, it is the only site in Suffolk where frog orchid can be found, a species thought to be extinct in Suffolk until it was discovered here in 1990. Although never abundant and incredibly hard to find, the frog orchids flower every year while the bee orchid for example can be far fickler, appearing only occasionally. Despite its isolation in the arable heartland of north Suffolk, Winks Meadow remains a botanical oasis of extraordinary delight.

Established
1989

Reserve size
3 acres, 1 ha

Nearest town/ village
Mickfield

Winks Meadow boasts more species of orchid than possibly any other meadow in Suffolk.

2

A wilder **Breckland**

The term Brecks or Breckland is derived from the historic pattern of cultivation in this part of East Anglia. The characteristically poor sandy and chalky soils would be briefly cultivated every few years before the soil was exhausted and would revert to heath or grass allowing a little fertility to recover. This was a dry landscape defined by repeated disturbance created by the wind, cultivation or rabbits that dominated the Brecks for thousands of years. Over that time, wildlife adapted to this rare set of circumstances creating one of the most unique and unstable wild landscapes in Britain.

Today little more than 10% of the Brecks that existed in the 1930s remains, and much is highly fragmented and isolated. Despite those losses, there is much nationally important wildlife in the Brecks. A study in 2010 showed that there are over 12,500 different species found in the Brecks and of these, almost 30% are nationally rare. Some can only be found here, and this part of the UK has more endemic species than anywhere else in the country.

Breckland today is almost unrecognisable, a largely stabilised landscape dominated by the vast conifer plantations of Thetford and Kings Forests, but pockets of land do survive that reveal the true character of the Brecks; a landscape of expansive heaths that stretched for miles, broken only by occasional cultivation.

Knettishall Heath

From the 15th century, rabbits, ideally suited to the climate and soils were farmed in Breckland on an almost industrial scale, each year producing hundreds of thousands of animals for meat and fur, but the demand for rabbits declined and land fell into disuse. Viewed as land of little agricultural value, huge areas were subsequently planted with pine trees in the early 20th century by the newly formed Forestry Commission. While many areas of privately owned Breck heath survived this initial onslaught, the development of farm irrigation in the 1950s and '60s resulted in more land being ploughed at scale and brought into permanent cultivation.

Wilding the Brecks means a return to frequent disturbance. Modern farming however cannot fulfil this function creating a near 'clinical' environment unsuited to most wildlife. What is needed are multiple patches of land around the edges that can be 'roughed up' and left every few years creating the bare ground that's so essential to the unique plants and insects of this part of East Anglia. The Forestry Commission has made a start in their plantations, but this approach needs to be scaled up across the Brecks. Again, it is the awkward field corners and field margins that could play a vital role collectively creating thousands of hectares of valuable disturbed ground habitat if just 2% or 3% of cultivated land were to be treated in this way. Individual patch size is less important, it is scale that matters ensuring that across the Brecks, wildlife can thrive.

On the western margin of the Brecks is the 'fen edge', a quite unique and distinctive interface between the once expansive dry-lands of the Brecks and the equally expansive wetlands of the fens. These 'edge-lands' have probably suffered greater losses than any other part of the county with virtually all trace of the past largely destroyed by drainage and the plough. Restoring wildlife to the fen edge will be hugely challenging requiring whole-scale restoration of the water table enabling chalk springs to flow once again and feed pockets of fen.

The Brecks was once an extraordinary and unique landscape with its own special wildlife. While landscape restoration at scale might remain an aspiration, we could be creating much more wild space for the wildlife that depends on instability and disturbance.

Grey partridge

Knettishall Heath

Established
2012

Reserve size
417 acres, 169 ha

Nearest town/ village
Knettishall

Postcode
IP22 2TQ

The landscape of Knettishall Heath tells a story dating back over 10,000 years, reflecting enormous ecological and cultural change, most notably over the last 70 years. Like our great buildings, Knettishall Heath is a significant part of Suffolk's heritage, a natural landmark that deserves protection.

The Little Ouse river that forms the northern margin of the reserve is the legacy of an even earlier time, the Anglian Glaciation around 450,000 years ago, which formed the ancestral valley the river flows through today. As across much of East Anglia, the ice ages have left their mark at Knettishall Heath in a variety of ways, the most obvious and spectacular being the periglacial vegetation stripes that are visible at the western end of the heath. Cycles of freezing and thawing at the end of the last ice age brought bands of chalk lying below thin layers of sand, closer to the surface. This is expressed today as contrasting plant communities that reflect the underlying geology, forming parallel stripes that run north-south across the heath.

As the climate warmed and stabilised following the end of the last ice age, so humans began to make their mark on the landscape clearing trees and bringing land into agricultural use. The evidence for early habitation is most clearly exhibited by the Bronze Age round barrow at Hut Hill, on what was once a prominent position overlooking the Little Ouse valley. More recently two further potential barrows have been discovered along with many other fascinating archaeological features ranging from ancient plough lines to 19th century

Grazing will underpin the long-term future of the heath with the Trust's Exmoor ponies ideally suited to the task.

brickworks and the trenches and gun emplacements dug by soldiers training on the heath during the Second World War.

Geographically, Knettishall Heath sits right on the eastern margin of the Brecks and while it shares many distinctive characteristics of the area, there are some subtle differences. There is evidence of past cultivation that typically defines many Breckland heaths, but the only living memories of how Knettishall was managed are those recalling the heath being occasionally burnt after the war to keep it open. The collapse in rabbit numbers following the introduction of myxomatosis in the 1950s led to the most profound change, allowing woodland to become established across much of the heath and as a consequence, many open habitat species were lost.

The open heath and grassland at Knettishall still supports a great variety of species including some that are found only in the Brecks. Areas of calcareous grassland are especially rich in plants with species such as dropwort, rock rose and purple milk-vetch. The more acidic heather heath supports fewer plants but is the favoured habitat for nightjar. These night feeding birds with their distinctive churring call were once a common summer visitor here and efforts are being made to ensure they once again breed on the heath.

Small copper

Grazing will underpin the long-term future of Knettishall Heath with the Trust's Exmoor ponies ideally suited

to the task. Installing cattle grids on the roads has enabled fences to be removed, creating a large heathland grazing enclosure within which areas of birch and pine have been cleared to extend and link the heathland habitats.

Buying the reserve in 2012 was at the time the most ambitious land purchase ever by the Trust, and it was the gift in the Will of William and Mary McAtamney, coupled with the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund, that provided the ambition to press ahead. What has been saved at Knettishall is a landscape that still retains multiple layers of geological, ecological and human history. Having largely completed the restoration work, grazing will over time, maintain a landscape that continues to engage and enthuse visitors while securing the future for the unique Breckland wildlife that is so dependent on this place.

Purple milk-vetch

Buying the reserve in 2012 was at the time, the most ambitious land purchase in the Trust's history.

Lackford Lakes

The teeth and bones of woolly mammoths found at Lackford help explain the origins of this part of Suffolk. 30,000 years ago the Lark Valley was a very different place when, during an interglacial period, the climate warmed enough to allow mammoths and reindeer to roam the land. In this cold tundra environment, vast quantities of sand and gravel were deposited by rivers which also preserved the remains of the animals living at that time. Twentieth-century exploitation of this huge natural resource subsequently uncovered remarkable evidence of this 'arctic' world and its long-lost species.

Over a period of 30 years from the 1970s, the deposits of sand and gravel were extracted by RMC (later to become CEMEX), creating a series of lakes along the valley. What had formerly been grazing marshes alongside the River Lark were rapidly becoming a complex wetland as each of the exhausted gravel pits flooded. Neighbouring landowner Bernard Tickner was amongst the first to realise the potential of this developing landscape. In 1987, Bernard purchased an area that had been excavated, creating the first part of the new Lackford Lakes nature reserve.

Large inland wetlands are unusual in our modern landscape, and with Lackford located on a major 'flyway', the Trust worked closely with RMC to design a wetland that, following the gravel extraction, would be a rich and diverse habitat for birds. Shallow-water areas were particularly important as these would provide valuable feeding areas for waders, geese and duck, while areas of reed and scrub added variety. The open water of the larger lakes gave safe refuge areas for roosting birds and the margins provided nesting opportunities.

By 1997, Lackford had become such an important place for both over-wintering wildfowl and dragonflies and damselflies that it was designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest. Then in 1999, following

Established
1987

Extended
2000, 2005, 2013, 2017

Reserve size
400 acres, 162 ha

Nearest town/ village
Lackford

Postcode
IP28 6HX

Watching wildlife at Lackford Lakes

the completion of all aggregate extraction, RMC transferred ownership of the entire site to the Trust.

The next step was to convert the former sand and gravel works into a people-friendly nature reserve. The visitor centre, car park, hides and trails were the first stage in making the wildlife at Lackford Lakes more accessible to visitors. This was followed by the creation of a large area of reedbed and improvements to the scrape. Grazing was brought back to the valley again to manage the orchid-rich grassland and lake margins. The diversity of habitats meant that Lackford was not only a birders' paradise but also an ideal place for environmental education. With woodland and dry grassland as well as wetland areas, Lackford is a fascinating mosaic of different areas, each offering unique learning opportunities.

The reserve was further extended when two adjoining former arable fields were purchased in 2005 followed by another large extension in 2017. The light sandy soils extending across these fields are typical of the Brecks, with sparse vegetation and prone to drought. These areas are already important for specialist Breckland species including the iconic stone curlew. To encourage declining farmland birds wild bird seed is grown to provide winter feed, and tree sparrows which were an occasional visitor, have since bred on the reserve.

What continues to make Lackford Lakes such an extraordinary place to visit is simply how close you are to the wildlife. Whether it is the tree sparrows on the feeders just a few metres from the visitor centre windows, the kingfisher sitting on a perch right in front of a hide or the spectacle of thousands of starlings overhead as they come in to roost.

The visitor centre, car park, hides and trails were the first stage in making the wildlife at Lackford Lakes accessible to visitors.

Lackford Lakes Centre

The Trust worked closely with RMC to design a wetland that, following the gravel extraction, would be a rich and diverse habitat for birds.

Kingfisher

Mickle Mere

Established
2002

Extended
2007

Reserve size
42 acres, 17 ha

Nearest town/ village
Ixworth

Some nature reserves are classic examples of semi-natural habitats, others are the product of meticulous design and a few are nothing more than an accident. Mickle Mere falls into this third category. Historically, Mickle Mere was part of the grazing meadows that follow the course of the River Black Bourn, but the construction of the Ixworth by-pass interfered with the natural drainage pattern. This inadvertently created a dynamic semi-natural wetland, prone to regular flooding and highly attractive to wetland birds.

The area quickly became part of the local birding circuit, gaining a reputation for turning up interesting birds. In 2000, the owner Mr Morley offered the Trust the opportunity to buy the land to safeguard its wildlife interest. A gift in the Will of Bill Payn, a notable Suffolk bird recorder and author made the purchase possible, securing Mickle Mere's future as a nature reserve.

Since then the Trust has managed to extend the reserve, creating an exciting inland wetland reserve that continues to attract a great many birds and remarkably, even a white-tailed eagle in 2015. Manmade islands and scrapes have encouraged ringed plover and lapwing to breed while winter flooding typically attracts hundreds of teal and wigeon. An accident maybe, but of the most fortuitous sort.

Norah Hanbury-Kelk Meadows

Established
1980

Reserve size
18 acres, 7 ha

Nearest town/ village
Barton Mills

Lying next to the River Lark in the village of Barton Mills, these flowery wet meadows are another example of a place that captured the imagination of an individual. Mrs Norah Hanbury-Kelk purchased the meadows in the 1930s at a time when west Suffolk was still an extremely undeveloped and rural part of the county. She kept the land as a small wildlife oasis while all around the countryside rapidly changed and villages and towns grew.

In keeping with her wishes, the meadows were gifted to the Trust in 1980 in order that they continued to be managed for wildlife. The meadows are home to a large population of early marsh-orchids, an attractive pale-coloured relative of the more common southern marsh orchid, as well as a great variety of other wetland plants and animals.

When Mrs Hanbury-Kelk bought the meadows they would have flooded most years during periods of heavy rainfall when the river was in spate, attracting large flocks of wetland birds. This is now a rare event as the river is embanked and separated from the meadows, although in winter, the meadows still lie wet and attract good numbers of snipe. The meadows remain one of the most attractive and interesting places for wildlife in the parish and a place that would still be recognised by those who knew it all those years ago.

Old Broom

Established
2013

Reserve size
17 acres, 7 ha

Nearest town/ village
Risby

Extraordinary, magical, there are many ways to describe Old Broom and none would be an exaggeration. The remarkable ancient oak pollards of Old Broom are between 250 and 500 years old and a remnant of an open wood-pasture landscape, perhaps more akin to savannah than woodland. It is the rarest woodland habitat found in Suffolk today.

Wood-pasture was a once extensive habitat, but much was grubbed out for agriculture, especially with the enclosure of common land. Wood-pasture that survived enclosure was often incorporated into the parkland of great estates and this most likely ensured its preservation. Today, just fragments of this important habitat remain in Suffolk, with Old Broom amongst the best.

Ecologically unique, the deadwood and hollow interiors of these great trees support many specialist fungi and invertebrates while the bark can host similarly rare lichens and mosses. The soils and grassland are equally ancient and undisturbed and being on the edge of the Brecks share many common Breckland characteristics, including periglacial vegetation stripes which are visible beneath the trees.

Owned and deeply cared for by the Hanbury family for two generations, Old Broom was gifted to the Trust in 2013, an act of great generosity that will ensure that this extraordinary place will remain extraordinary in perpetuity.

Wangford Warren

Established
1973

Reserve size
38 acres, 16 ha

Nearest town/ village
Brandon

Wangford Warren is the last place in the UK where it is still possible to see the most unlikely of natural features, inland sand dunes. Before the Brecks were tamed by forestry and modern farming, they were one of the most barren and inhospitable places in lowland England. The thin sandy soils were unstable and prone to being blown around, indeed history even records villages being buried by the shifting sands of the Brecks.

The dunes of Wangford Warren are now stabilised by the growth of natural vegetation, yet they still provide a sense of what the original Breckland landscape must have looked like. The soil is so poor that lichens are almost the only vegetative life capable of surviving periods of extreme drought and a lack of nutrients. Where vegetation does become established large numbers of rabbits keep the growth tightly cropped.

For many common wildlife species these conditions are simply too extreme, and instead it is rare specialist plants and animals that thrive. In addition to lichens, grasses and sedges, there are many invertebrates that are uniquely adapted to this type of environment. Unusual solitary wasps and bees burrow into the bare sand and ground beetles roam the surface in a unique environment they have made their own.

Wangford Warren is the last place in the UK where it is still possible to see the most unlikely of natural features, inland sand dunes.

3

A wilder **Valley Fens**

The valley fens of north Suffolk are the product of a unique set of circumstances. The retreating ice 10,000 years ago left a landscape of shallow valleys with river terrace sands and gravels overlying the chalk bedrock. Lakes formed in the depressions and as the climate warmed, the present-day pattern of rivers became established. Over thousands of years, layers of peat formed, the result of poor natural drainage preserving partly decomposed wetland vegetation, creating an interconnected series of fens along the Waveney and Little Ouse valleys extending from Diss to Garboldisham. Fens also developed along tributaries such as Hopton Brook.

What makes the valley fens so unique, is the water percolating through the chalk, sands and gravels that emerges as springs feeding the fens, which depending on the source, is either calcareous or acidic in character. This complex hydrology and water chemistry created incredibly diverse wetland plant communities and those that remain today are recognised as being of international importance.

Although exploited by humans for sedge, reeds and peat, these wetland landscapes remained largely intact until the 18th century when river engineering and drainage started to reshape the valleys. Then bit by bit, they were either drained or became fragmented leaving just a handful of isolated fens ranging from the still extensive, but badly damaged Redgrave & Lopham Fen to the tiny pocket-sized

Thelnetham Fen

pieces of Thelnetham Fen. Since the mid 1990s most protected valley fens have fared well. Restoration projects have restored or set on a path to recovery the most important fens, and more valley-bottom land has been brought into protective ownership with the Little Ouse Headwaters Project acquiring many strategically valuable blocks of land to reconnect isolated fens.

Wilding the valley fens would require three fundamental changes. The first step would be to reconnect at scale entire stretches of valley-bottom land. This would mean moving away from unsustainable intensive agricultural land use practices that depend on drainage, fertilisers and pesticides towards extensive grazing systems and novel crops. Historically, the fens produced highly valuable plant products in the form of sedge and reed. Today there are new markets emerging for sustainable products made from wetland plants such as bulrush where the fluffy seed heads can be used to make insulating clothing fill and common reed that is used to make insulation panels for buildings. Agricultural systems that utilise plants perfectly adapted to their natural environment have to be the way forward rather than endlessly trying to force the environment to accommodate plants that don't want to be there.

The second measure would involve reconnecting the Little Ouse and Waveney rivers to their floodplains. Both rivers have been straightened, deepened and in places embanked along much of their courses and barely resemble anything like a natural river system. The upper reaches of river valleys are often the easiest to restore to their natural state and the perfect solution would be to engage the services of the most effective river engineers on the planet – beavers. These industrious creatures can create the most complex and biodiverse wetland habitats at little cost and many studies of trial introductions are showing just how beneficial they can be. Yes, it would take a huge change of mindset to accept sharing our world with these remarkable animals, and yes, occasionally they might do the wrong thing in the wrong place, but yes, we could live alongside beavers if we really wanted to.

Beaver

Thirdly, the upper reaches of the Little Ouse and Waveney valleys hold a significant proportion of the peat soils in Suffolk. Landscape-scale restoration would therefore not only restore a series of remarkably species-rich fens but would re-start at scale the sequestration of carbon through peat formation. This is simply something we must do if we want to avoid climate chaos.

Hopton Fen

The view from the high ground overlooking Hopton Fen reveals the fen nestling in the valley below, and as you walk down the gently sloping footpath you gain a real sense of what the term 'valley fen' really means. These are places that both collect water from the surrounding slopes and channel the up-welling waters from the chalk aquifer below.

Hopton Fen lies downstream from Market Weston Fen in the same valley, a tributary of the Little Ouse, and it was the protective ownership of the Hopton Combined Charities that prevented the fen from being drained. In common with other fens, however, the lack of demand for fen products such as sedge and reed led to a slow 'scrubbing over' of the fen and the decline of the richest plant communities.

Over a number of years, the Trust has cleared encroaching scrub, restored fen habitats and introduced grazing to maintain an open fen. One by one, the rare fen-dependent plants are reappearing. Marsh fragrant orchid, bog pimpernel and yellow sedge have all made a comeback in response to the more open conditions.

Shallow pools created by peat cutting were one of the richest fen environments and while there is no longer a demand for peat turfs for heating and cooking, the Trust is recreating the same habitat by excavating new pools. These are rapidly colonised by fascinating species such as the insectivorous bladderwort and strange aquatic plants with 'skeletons', called stoneworts.

Established
1992

Reserve size
37 acres, 15 ha

Nearest town/ village
Hopton

Market Weston Fen

Established
1981

Extended
2006, 2012, 2017, 2022

Reserve size
179 acres, 72 ha

Nearest town/ village
Hopton

There are a handful of special places in Suffolk that are nothing short of exceptional in their biological richness, and Market Weston Fen is one of them. Every now and again various factors – soil types, water chemistry, historical land use – coincide in such a way that they create just the right conditions for a great diversity of species. Market Weston Fen is such a place and home to an extraordinary variety of plants, invertebrates and other animals. Some are exceedingly scarce in Suffolk, the pale-flowered form of early marsh-orchid and grass-of-Parnassus for example. A great many others are just very rare.

Lying in a shallow valley created by a tributary of the Little Ouse, Market Weston Fen avoided the onslaught of 20th century drainage and agricultural improvement that so badly damaged many other fens. Equally important, there are no water abstraction boreholes near the fen and as a result the chalk springs that feed it still flow as they have done for millennia.

When the Trust first became involved at Market Weston Fen, it was overgrown and declining. The fen had not been cut for years and the heathland margins were being overwhelmed by bracken and birch trees. A huge investment of time and effort has now fully restored the heath and fen habitats and the response has been astounding. Suffolk rarities such as common butterwort and marsh fragrant orchid with their exotic and colourful flowers have reappeared and the recent discovery of the scarce emerald damselfly, which had been classed extinct in Suffolk, is further proof of the importance of the reserve.

Early marsh orchid
spp. ochroleuca

In 2006 the Trust was able to purchase much of the remaining part of Market Weston Fen. As is so often the case, this was only possible because of a legacy and the support of Trust members. This was followed by another important acquisition of fen edge that has allowed the nature trail to be extended around the entire reserve. The generosity of David Feavearyear and James Webb will now forever be linked with Market Weston Fen, helping to bring the fen into the Trust's protective ownership and so ensuring its future.

Early in 2022 with the support of our members and donors and a legacy from Rosemary Wilson, the nature reserve was once again extended, not with more wetland habitat – that is now all protected – but with a large tract of former organic grassland and arable land. This acquisition creates a new and hugely exciting opportunity to 're-wild' an area almost as big as the reserve once was and it will become yet another small 'nature factory' where wildlife can flourish. Market Weston Fen has always been a place for the extraordinary, but this new wilder dimension will make the reserve equally important for the 'ordinary' wildlife we need just as much.

It is through increasing our land ownership that the Trust has been able to have the most profound impact on the fen.

Redgrave &Lopham Fen

Established
1965

Extended
1997, 1998, 1999, 2004

Reserve size
403 acre, 163 ha

Nearest town/ village
South Lopham

Postcode
IP22 2HX

The realisation that Suffolk needed an organisation to protect its most treasured wildlife began at Redgrave & Lopham Fen. In 1961, a small group of individuals from Suffolk Naturalists' Society, recognising both the wildlife significance of the fen and the need to preserve this, established the Suffolk Trust for Nature Conservation. The fen became the first Trust nature reserve, and in those early years, a small but dedicated group of volunteers did what they could to maintain the precious wildlife of the fen with their limited resources.

The origin of the fen lay in the post-glacial landscape. The head of the Waveney Valley was occupied by a vast lake and as the lake became overgrown with vegetation, peat formation began in the developing mire. This great wetland complex was the source for both the River Waveney that flowed east towards Yarmouth and the Little Ouse which flowed west to the Wash. As the fen developed, the peat, sedge and reed were exploited by local people and for many centuries the harvesting of fen products helped shape and modify the mosaic of habitats.

In 1961 the fen supported the most amazing wildlife, plants such as marsh helleborine and grass-of-Parnassus and invertebrates including black darter dragonfly and small red damselfly, as well as a great diversity of birds and other wildlife. However, in 1959, a water abstraction borehole was placed in the chalk aquifer beneath the fen and it was only many years later that the consequences

Fen raft spider

of this disastrous decision were fully realised.

Over time, the chalk springs that fed the fen and supported the richest and most unique habitats slowly dried up and the water table across the fen was gradually lowered by the borehole and the deepening of the River Waveney. The surface of the fen then dried, encouraging the development of scrub and woodland, and a great many wetland species ultimately became extinct. The fen raft spider, which was then only known from Redgrave & Lopham Fen, hung on in pools irrigated with water, which ironically had to be taken from the very borehole that was destroying their habitat.

These were desperate times when it became apparent that the fen might be lost forever. Within 30 years, one of the most exceptional wetlands in the UK had been brought to the brink of destruction, and for much of this time the Trust had been powerless to stop it.

What followed was a huge and concerted effort to put right a dreadful wrong. With European Union funding, a consortium led by the Trust involving Essex & Suffolk Water and the Environment Agency relocated the borehole, restored river levels and began the colossal task of restoring the fen. Vast swathes of young woodland and scrub had to be cleared, but most significantly, the dried-out layer of peat on the surface of the fen had to be removed in places to restart the process of peat formation. Hardy Polish ponies were brought to the fen as an innovative measure to help maintain the open wetland through grazing.

Nearly 30 years on from the start of the restoration project, the fen has responded and species that had become extinct continue to return. Sundew, butterwort

Redgrave & Lopham Fen is today, one of the foremost nature reserves in Suffolk.

and marsh fragrant orchid are amongst many species that have reappeared now that the chalk springs are flowing and the fen is once again a proper wetland. There have been surprises as well. The scrapes created when the top layer of dry peat was removed now support important species such as rare stoneworts and the insectivorous bladderwort which turns the water surface yellow as thousands of plants flower simultaneously.

Common butterwort

Redgrave & Lopham Fen is today, one of the foremost nature reserves in Suffolk. Not just an exceptional place for wildlife but a testament to the vision of those who did their best to protect this unique wetland. It demonstrates that with determination it is possible to restore these complex wetlands. It will take many decades, possibly longer, to fully rehabilitate the fen, but it remains a place that inspires and gives a sense of these extraordinary valley fen landscapes.

Roydon Fen

Established
1994

Reserve size
37 acres, 15 ha

Nearest town/ village
Roydon

Tucked away down a little lane just a mile or so from the busy town of Diss is the wonderful Roydon Fen. Poised on the edge of the Waveney Valley, the fen is another largely intact remnant of the more extensive wetland landscape that once dominated the valley.

In common with the other valley fens, Roydon is incredibly wet most of the time with the spring-fed, deep peat soils permanently water-logged. As common land, the fen used to be cut regularly for sedge, reed and peat by local villagers but it was largely abandoned in the early 20th century and a large area of fen was lost as wet woodland and scrub developed.

Today, the western end of the reserve is still dominated by woodland, but the open fen areas to the east are wonderfully rich with many classic fen species such as marsh helleborine, marsh fragrant orchid and saw sedge. The trail that weaves through the reserve takes visitors through each of these habitats in turn.

In 1994 South Norfolk Council, who had taken responsibility for the fen, invited the Trust to manage the reserve and this partnership has both enabled a significant part of the fen to be restored and secured the future of this wonderful place.

Thelnetham Fen

Lying alongside the River Ouse, Thelnetham Fen is a remnant of a great swathe of valley fen habitat that once occupied much of the valley floor stretching from Redgrave Ford to the east, downstream towards Hopton. Since that time, hundreds of years ago, the valley has been greatly modified by drainage with the loss of almost all the fen habitat. What remained at Thelnetham was almost entirely due to the land being owned by Thelnetham Feoffe, a charity supporting the poor of the parish.

The fen vegetation at Thelnetham developed as an extraordinary mat that 'floated' on water-logged peat. Prior to the drainage of the valley, this floating fen known as 'schwingmoor' or literally 'swinging moorland' would have wobbled disconcertingly as it was walked upon. The Trust continues to mow the fen each year to maintain the conditions the most specialized fen plants require and the volunteers who undertake much of this work still experience at first hand a sense of what schwingmoor must have felt like!

Thelnetham Fen was awarded to the Feoffe (pronounced 'feef') under a 19th century enclosure act, to compensate for land that was taken elsewhere, and it is leased to the Trust. Local people retain rights to take wood and cut turfs for fuel although these rights are rarely exercised.

In recent years a new local charity, the Little Ouse Headwaters Project, has managed to acquire much of the land surrounding Thelnetham Fen restoring the marshes and fens. Working in partnership has greatly enhanced Thelnetham Fen which now lies at the centre of a large, secure and sympathetically managed wetland landscape.

Established
1981

Reserve size
20 acres, 8 ha

Nearest town/ village
Thelnetham

4

A wilder **Suffolk Broads**

It is easy to overlook the fact that in north-east Suffolk, we share with Norfolk one of the largest and possibly most unique wetland ecosystems in Europe. The Broads National Park is a fascinating landscape which while natural in origin has been highly modified by people. For almost a thousand years the Broads demonstrated how people could exploit and manipulate a landscape, but in ways that were not exclusively at the expense of wildlife. Countless wetland species simply took advantage of the progressive changes taking place as peat, sedge and reed was extracted from the Broads over the centuries leaving a legacy of open waters, fens and reedbeds rich in wildlife.

Damaging manmade change came much later with the embankment of the rivers and the loss of large areas of fen habitat, although the grazing marshes created by building river walls and using wind pumps to drain the land would retain some species. It was the 20th century changes that really started to impact on the wildlife and landscape of the Broads, the most damaging being the conversion of grazing marsh to arable land. Deep drainage destroyed the rich ecosystems associated with dykes, and dried out neighbouring fens and marshes, while the increasing use of fertilisers impacted on the water quality. Even grazing marshes that escaped arable conversion were still reseeded, sprayed and fertilised to make them more productive.

Carlton Marshes

Today the National Park faces a number of critical challenges. Climate change and sea level rise have the potential to change the Broads in ways that could devastate the current balance of freshwater habitats. Poor water quality due to agricultural runoff throughout the Broads continues to severely blight the rivers and open-water habitats with pesticide residues and nutrients, while the fragmentation of many habitats has left them isolated and vulnerable.

A wilder Broads could mean a 'softer' Broads. One where intensively farmed fields no longer abut highly sensitive wetland ecosystems, that instead are buffered and protected by strips of gently wilder land removed from agriculture. We need to recognise that buffer zones between intensively managed land and 'naturally' managed land are essential in environments such as the Broads, much as we acknowledge and prize the transitions from dry land to wetland that are amongst the richest environments for wildlife.

Another vital way in which we can make the Broads wilder is by simply allowing natural plant communities to express themselves. Throughout the Broads there are small pockets of land, road verges and field margins that if cut or mown less often would reveal themselves as patches of fen, reedbed or wet scrub that could be home to some of the unique species that are only found here. There is no doubt, the Broads still retains much wonderful wildness, but there are equally as many parts that could once again be much wilder.

Scarce chaser

Carlton Marshes

In the early 1970s marsh harriers were still exceptionally rare in England with just one pair breeding in north Suffolk. These magnificent birds of prey were a key reason for establishing Carlton Marshes as a Trust nature reserve, as local naturalists endeavoured to help the harriers recover from this perilously tiny population. The large area of fen and reedbed known as Whitecast Marsh, on the edge of Oulton Broad, was ideal nesting habitat and the breeding success of the harriers at Carlton Marshes in those early years made a significant contribution to the recovery of the UK population.

Formerly a Suffolk County Council tenanted farm, Carlton Marshes is a microcosm of Broadland habitats. Beyond the open grazing marsh are areas of wet woodland, fen and three small broads. As elsewhere, the broads are almost certainly the result of peat digging in the past, but there is little documentary evidence to confirm their origin. What also remains unclear is why the wet fens and woodland were not drained or agriculturally improved as was so often the fate of such areas. The tenant farmer was clearly not someone to be told what to do, having been admonished by his council landlord because his marshes were 'too flowery'! Ignoring this instruction to spray the land with herbicide ensured the marshes remain wonderfully 'flowery' to this day with hundreds of marsh-orchids flowering in June.

The dykes at Carlton Marshes have long been known to support large populations of Norfolk hawker, scarce chaser dragonflies and a rich assemblage of plants including water-soldier, frogbit and bladderwort. However, survey work in the 1990s also highlighted the national importance of the reserve for several species of tiny freshwater snails. All of these species depend on clean, low-nutrient water and demonstrate just how valuable these wetland environments can be when the conditions are right.

In 2018 everything changed. The Heritage Fund made one of their

Established
1975

Extended
1978, 2008, 2011, 2006, 2018, 2020, 2022

Reserve size
623 acres, 252 ha

Nearest town/ village
Lowestoft

Postcode
NR33 8HU

largest ever awards to a Wildlife Trust granting just over £4 million to enable the Trust to buy a huge tract of land at Carlton to restore wetland habitats and build a new visitor and learning centre. As ever, this was only possible because of the hugely generous legacies and public donations needed to match such a grant. Today, the reserve is three times the size it was extending to over 600 acres with new areas of reedbed, fen and wet marsh that are already home to incredible numbers of birds and other wildlife. New trails and viewpoints allow visitors to enjoy every bit of the reserve while new moorings on the river enable those holidaying on the Broads the opportunity to visit.

The new centre offers an unrivalled opportunity to enjoy a coffee and cake with a fine view across the Waveney Valley while outside, youngsters can indulge in wild play and wild learning activities.

The story of Carlton Marshes has been remarkable. From helping to secure the future of the marsh harrier in the UK 50 years ago, the efforts of those local naturalists also secured this wonderfully unspoiled corner of Suffolk. But much more than that, they paved the way for the restoration of a great swathe of the Broads National Park creating one of the most important nature reserves in East Anglia. Once again it was the vision and determination of a few committed individuals who enabled the Trust with the support of many more, to achieve so much for Suffolk's wildlife.

The new centre

For botanists, Carlton Marshes is one of the very best places in north Suffolk for the sheer variety of plants.

Bog pimpernel

In 2018 the National Lottery Heritage Fund made a grant of over £4 million to Carlton Marshes enabling the restoration of wetland habitats and the building of the new visitor centre.

Castle Marshes

Established
1983

Extended
1988

Reserve size
175 acres, 71 ha

Nearest town/ village
Barnby

The vast open expanse of the Waveney Valley is best seen at Castle Marshes, where the views from the river wall extend to Lowestoft in the east and almost to Beccles in the west.

In the depths of winter this can be a bleak, exposed landscape, yet for many species of duck and geese the Waveney Valley is a place of shelter and refuge from yet harsher conditions further north. The wet marshes with flashes of surface water provide both somewhere to feed and a safe night-time roost for large numbers of wigeon and teal.

In summer the contrast couldn't be greater as the combination of warmth and moisture promotes the luxuriant growth of grass, sedges and reeds and cows are once again turned out onto the marshes, usually with their calves and a bull. The dykes come to life with an extraordinary diversity of plants and invertebrates, making the reserve one of the best sites in the Broads for Norfolk hawker and scarce chaser dragonflies.

For many years the Castle Mill drainage pump was a significant landmark, illustrating changing times as the sailed wind pump was replaced with a steam pump, which in turn was replaced by a diesel engine and finally by a rather anonymous electric pump. The old pump house still has an important job though, providing a home for a pair of barn owls.

Lound Lakes

Established
2012

Reserve size
248 acres, 100 ha

Nearest town/ village
Blundeston

Straddling the boundary between Suffolk and Norfolk, Lound Lakes is the most northerly point in the county. It is a remote but wonderful outpost of both great scenic beauty and considerable wildlife interest.

The lakes were created in 1857 by the Lowestoft Water, Gas and Market Company who excavated the valley floor creating a series of lakes to store water for the Lowestoft district. Today, Lound Lakes is owned by Essex & Suffolk Water and continues to be an important part of the local water supply network. In 2013, the Trust entered into a partnership with Essex & Suffolk Water to manage the 230 acres of land that surround the lakes, with the aim of preserving water quality and maximising the wildlife interest.

The lakes themselves are fed largely by springs that emerge from the underlying Crag rock formation as well as by rainfall that falls within the Lound catchment. The layers of peat in the valley that have formed over thousands of years support many rare and threatened plants such as bog pimpernel, heath spotted orchid and milk parsley while the lake margins are equally important for plants including cowbane and lesser water plantain. Many of the fields surrounding the lakes were cultivated until 1980, but in response to rising nutrient levels in the lakes, they were converted to permanent grassland and no longer fertilized. Since then, nutrient levels in the thin dry sandy soils have fallen rapidly and as a result, an interesting diversity of plants has become established. The very poorest soils support little more than lichens and opportunist annual plants that are particularly adapted to harsh conditions. Invertebrates flourish in these conditions and ant colonies do especially well, which in turn attract green woodpeckers which are regularly seen feeding in the fields.

Despite Lound Lakes being a largely manmade landscape it has considerable aesthetic appeal. The belts of Scots pine planted many decades ago on the valley sides have matured into quite majestic trees

Broad-bodied chaser

Lound Lakes is a remote but wonderful outpost of great scenic beauty.

and now frame the lakes beautifully. Beyond the pines, the fields are gently rolling, bounded with good hedges and patches of scrub. In June, many fields turn red with vast swathes of sheep's sorrel while above skylarks sing incessantly.

The 2011 Broads Biodiversity Audit identified the Lound area as a biodiversity 'hot spot' due to the high number of notable species found here and the connection via Fritton Lake to the River Waveney makes Lound Lakes very much part of the Broads ecological network. For example, Lound Lakes is possibly the best dragonfly and damselfly site in Suffolk with nearly every species found in Suffolk recorded as well as some very interesting vagrant species. Both the small red-eyed damselfly and lesser emperor dragonfly have been observed egg laying indicating that these continental European species might be establishing UK breeding populations in the same way that the willow emerald damselfly has established itself in Suffolk in recent years.

Lound has a particular reputation for attracting interesting passage and migrant birds. Osprey, wheatear and ring ouzel are regular visitors in both spring and autumn while warblers and hobby spend the summer at Lound. Bittern are regular winter visitors benefitting from the good fish populations in the lakes while kingfishers are seen all year round. A longer term hope is that osprey might eventually stay to breed. With the larger Fritton Lake immediately to the west, there is no shortage of suitable fishing areas and some of the more remote wooded areas with mature Scots pine could provide a perfect nest site.

There is no doubt Lound Lakes is an exceptional place. However, it belongs to what is sadly a small and exclusive club of places in Suffolk that are especially rich in wildlife. The partnership between Suffolk Wildlife Trust and Essex & Suffolk Water will ensure this specialness is preserved but the challenge is to make much more of Suffolk 'special'.

Oulton Marshes

Established
1982

Extended
2005, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2019

Reserve size
242 acres, 98 ha

Nearest town/ village
Lowestoft

Local naturalists have always known about Oulton Marshes. It is the sort of place birders and botanists are drawn to, with the promise of the rare and exotic. It used to be one of the few places in Suffolk where Cetti's warblers could be found along with other rarities such as grasshopper warbler. Botanists would also visit, in search of marsh pea, marsh sow-thistle and bog pimpernel, some of the rarest plants in Suffolk.

Today, Oulton Marshes is still home to these species and a great many more, and this is largely due to the drive and determination of a small group of local volunteers, who in the late 1970s sought to make Oulton Marshes a Suffolk Wildlife Trust nature reserve. For many years the original reserve was confined to a narrow strip of derelict fen and fen meadows, but more recently the reserve has grown out of all recognition and now extends across the valley, taking in great swathes of grazing marsh.

The simple reason Oulton Marshes remains rich in wildlife is because it escaped the 20th century agricultural 'improvement' that impacted so greatly on much of the Broads. At one time the fen meadows were mown to provide marsh hay for the nearby Somerleyton Estate but that practice declined after the war and the marshes were gradually abandoned. Too wet to be cut with a tractor-mounted mower and too wet to plough, the fens and marshes simply had no place in a changing agricultural landscape. In the late 1970s the Trust started restoring the most important fen habitats, clearing planted willow trees and scrub and mowing the fen

Cetti's warbler

Oulton Marshes is the sort of place birders and botanists are drawn to, with the promise of the rare and exotic.

meadows, formally establishing the reserve in 1982.

Since 2008 the Trust has gradually acquired large blocks of adjoining grazing marsh to join Oulton Marshes to another Trust reserve formerly known as Camps Heath Marshes. Creating this large reserve has only been possible because of legacies and the support of Trust members who enabled the Trust to realise an ambitious vision for the reserve.

The partnership the Trust has developed with local graziers who bring their cattle to Oulton Marshes for the summer has been critical to the success of the reserve. Oulton Marshes has always been a farmed landscape and its wildlife depends on a strong relationship with farmers.

Oulton Marshes has been through some enormous yet, in many ways, subtle changes and wildlife is responding. The marshes now lie wet in winter, attracting large numbers of wildfowl, while in summer the restored dykes are rich with aquatic plants and dragonflies. Oulton has become the best place in north Suffolk to see short-eared owls that spend the winter here. The river walls have also been rebuilt and in doing so, new open-water and reedbed habitats have been created. Oulton Marshes is very much back on the wildlife enthusiasts' 'map' and building a new reputation for turning up interesting birds and other wildlife.

5

A wilder **Coast and Heaths**

It is often asked why so many Trust reserves are located along the coastal strip. This is not due to favouritism or chance; it simply reflects the incredible wealth and diversity of wildlife in this part of Suffolk. The estuaries, the coastal grazing marshes and the heaths and forests are of international importance for birds, supporting significant populations of breeding and over-wintering species ranging from nightjars and woodlarks to bitterns and avocets. The Trust is not alone, with the National Trust, RSPB, Forestry England and Natural England each owning or managing extensive tracts of land along the coast.

Yet, for all the national and international designations bestowed on the coastal strip to protect the special interest, be it wildlife or landscape, it remains an area under considerable pressure. Climate change, industry, a growing population and increased recreational demands are each creating issues that impact on wildlife. The landscape itself is becoming ever more polarised, with changes in land use creating situations where for example on one side of a fence there is an internationally important wildlife habitat while on the other there is an intensive outdoor pig unit, nuclear power station or international port.

While widespread habitat destruction and neglect is no longer a concern, it is the way the coast might change in response to a warming climate and rising sea levels

Simpson's Saltings

that has become the most pressing conservation issue of our time. It is an issue that affects both people and wildlife living on the coastal fringe in equal measure. While the vast majority of homes for people will be protected, the outlook for the homes of many wildlife species is far from assured. Suffolk has some of the UK's most extensive and important reedbeds which are home to bitterns, marsh harriers and a host of other reedbed specialists as well as extensive tracts of coastal grazing marsh. These vital habitats are largely protected by earth embankments or shingle ridges which are highly vulnerable to rising sea levels and storm surges.

A wilder Suffolk Coast is one that is ready to adapt to sea level rise, a place where the most important wildlife areas are connected to one another via newly created semi-natural habitats and one where the most sensitive ecosystems are buffered from the most intensively farmed or industrialised areas. The Suffolk coast will adapt to sea level rise but there are only two ways that can happen. One that is planned and one that results from extreme weather or flood events that reshape the coast. There is still just time to plan for the former, but it will require a bold and creative vision. 'Hold the line' is no longer a viable option, instead we must consider what areas could be given over to new saltmarsh and intertidal habitats and what areas must be secured to protect homes and infrastructure.

Creating more space and corridors for wildlife is especially important given how climate change has the potential to drive extinction as less mobile species become trapped on 'habitat islands,' isolated by inhospitable tracts of land. Forestry England can play a critical role as the extensive plantations at Dunwich, Tunstall and Rendlesham separate many areas of heath and other habitats from one another. Creating corridors through the forests or in the case of Dunwich, redesigning the forest can deliver at scale the connectivity that is required. The most marginal non-irrigated farmland along the coast will become increasingly unprofitable to farm as subsidies are withdrawn and these are the areas that have a new wilder future, where financial reward comes instead from making space for nature.

Bittern

The coastal strip is the only part of Suffolk that today retains any real sense of 'wildness' where the human hand has had the lightest touch, which of course is why there is still so much wildlife. A Wilder Suffolk would ensure this remains the case for future generations.

Alde Mudflats

Established
1981

Reserve size
316 acres, 128 ha

Nearest town/ village
Iken

Jutting out into the Alde estuary, Iken Church is a familiar landmark sitting on a small mound overlooking the river. Less well known is the 316 acre nature reserve that surrounds it on three sides. Suffolk Wildlife Trust leases Alde Mudflats from the Crown Estate in order to secure an extensive refuge area for birds. Extending for almost three miles, the reserve at low water is a vast expanse of inter-tidal mud with a narrow fringe of saltmarsh, supporting nationally important numbers of avocets and black-tailed godwits as well as impressive numbers of redshank, dunlin and shelduck.

Estuarine mud is an abundant larder for wetland birds and the upper reaches of the Alde provide a safe feeding and roosting site for thousands of waders and ducks each winter. Disturbance is an increasing threat to the vast numbers of birds that spend their winters on the Suffolk estuaries, as each time the birds are forced to take to the sky they waste valuable energy. As our estuaries become busier places, the need for safe refuge areas has increased.

Alde Mudflats is part of an important network of sites on the upper estuary which includes the Trust's Hazlewood Marshes and Snape Marshes reserves and the privately owned Iken Marshes and Stanny Marshes. Collectively, these places provide undisturbed feeding, breeding and roosting areas throughout the year, helping to make the Alde estuary an internationally important environment for birds.

Blaxhall Common & Tunstall Link

Approximately 3,500 years ago our Bronze Age ancestors buried their dead at the highest point on Blaxhall Common, marking the burial with a round barrow. The location was no doubt chosen for the commanding views from this point, looking north across the Alde estuary which at that time would have extended west beyond Snape, and to the south over a largely open expanse created by the first farmers who found the light sandy soils easy to cultivate.

Almost the same location was chosen just 400 years ago for a windmill which would have been a prominent landmark then, but today both the views and the wind are contained by the conifer plantations that now surround the common. Following the planting of Tunstall Forest at the start of the 20th century, Blaxhall and Tunstall Commons are the only significant areas left of what was one of the greatest expanses of heathland in the Sandlings.

In recent years Blaxhall and Tunstall Commons have once again been linked through clearing the conifers that separated them and this represents the first step towards restoring a more open heathland landscape in which woodlark and nightjar can thrive. Silver-studded blue butterflies now grace the common, having been successfully reintroduced, and Blaxhall Common remains one of the most reliable places on the coast to hear the beautiful churr of the nightjar at dusk.

Established
1986

Reserve size
159 acres, 64 ha

Nearest town/ village
Blaxhall

Bromeswell Green

Condensed into this small reserve close to Woodbridge is a great variety of semi-natural habitat and wildlife. Uniquely, for what is a relatively small place, there is a complete transition from the muddy edge of the Deben Estuary through brackish rough marsh, scrub and woodland to spring-fed fen meadow.

The value of Bromeswell Green lies in its role as a rich oasis of wildlife, which being part of a network of small, diverse natural areas, is collectively just as important as the largest reserves. The fact that there are still places like this scattered across the county means that there will always be future opportunities for wildlife to expand into new or restored habitats nearby.

Bromeswell Green with its wetland plants, marsh-marigolds, marsh valerian and marsh-orchids, together with nightingale, many butterflies and an exceptional variety of fungi in the damp birch woodland, is a valuable reservoir of wildlife. The wet meadows are as good as any in the county, demonstrating that allowing wetland habitats to function naturally, without manmade drainage systems, preserves a remarkable diversity of wildlife.

Established
1978

Extended
1986

Reserve size
18 acres, 7 ha

Nearest town/ village
Bromeswell

Nightingale

The fact that there are still places like this means that there will always be future opportunities for wildlife to expand.

Captain's Wood

Captain's Wood sits on a crag ridge with commanding views over the River Alde and Orford Ness. It is the largest remaining part of a great wooded landscape which was extensively destroyed in the post-war years. The scale of the loss is difficult to comprehend, not only was the bulk of the adjoining and much larger Sudbourne Great Wood cleared for agriculture, but large tracts of heathland also disappeared under the plough. Great hulks of oak can still be found, the trunks of ancient oak pollards that lie slowly decaying where they were pushed by the bulldozers that cleared the land over 60 years ago. The woodland that remains today now lies in a very different landscape dominated by intensive agriculture where turf, potatoes, carrots and onions are grown on an industrial scale.

Yet again it is old maps that illustrate how Captain's Wood once sat in the local landscape, and while much has changed, it is still possible to relate most of today's landform to that drawn 300 years ago. The large field called Black Walks has always been an extensive clearing, and part of what we call Captain's Wood today was once a piece of Sudbourne Common, mapped as an open landscape with scattered trees. At that time, what we now know as Tunstall Forest was part of a vast expanse of open heath which stretched almost the length of the Suffolk coast, connecting Captain's Wood with this great swathe of semi-natural habitat.

The remaining veteran oak trees in Captain's Wood are a direct link with this lost past, having survived great changes. These ancient trees, some of which are thought to be more than 500 years old, are uniquely important for wildlife, sustaining rare fungi such as oak polypore and beefsteak fungus which depend on the rotting heartwood of very old trees. Carpets of bluebells grow beneath the

A new generation of oak trees grown from the acorns of the oldest trees will become the veterans of the future.

Fallow deer

trees while honeysuckle climbs into the canopy above. The open character of the woodland is maintained by a resident herd of fallow deer which browse amongst the trees. When the Trust purchased Captain's Wood, using a gift in the Will of Gloria Ford together with donations from hundreds of members, it meant that a substantial part of the remaining woodland could be protected.

Fields that had previously been ploughed were restored to acid grassland and heath and the rhododendron that had been smothering veteran oak pollards was cleared. A new generation of oak trees growing naturally from the acorns of the oldest trees will become the veterans of the future. The hope is some of these trees will see out the next 500 years, but instead of witnessing yet more losses, they will be part of a restored landscape in which wildlife thrives.

Established
2005

Extended
2014

Reserve size
155 acres, 63 ha

Nearest town/ village
Sudbourne

Church Farm Marshes

Established
2004

Extended
2009, 2010, 2016

Reserve size
138 acres, 56 ha

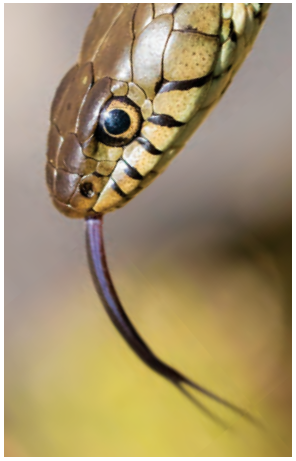
Nearest town/ village
Thorington

Suffolk Wildlife Trust staff work with many farmers and landowners, often providing advice on conservation issues and sometimes simply sharing a common enthusiasm for wildlife. Philip Elsey, the owner of Church Farm, was a highly regarded gun dog trainer and countryside enthusiast and Church Farm was both his place to train dogs and a place to enjoy wildlife.

As with so many privately owned sites, the Trust's involvement began with a wildlife survey. Not surprisingly, the survey of Church Farm reflected Philip Elsey's attitude to wildlife, it was there in abundance, not so much by design but through a desire to leave nature to its own devices.

Church Farm sits on a minor tributary of the River Blyth and for its size, has a huge diversity of habitats. The high ground consists of light sandy fields and oak woodland with bluebells, while the valley floor is a mix of grazing marsh, fen and wet woodland. It was the unimproved marshes that were initially the focus of the Trust's involvement which, having never been sprayed or fertilised, were full of wildflowers.

Philip Elsey made it clear that he wanted to secure the long-term future of Church Farm, explaining it was his intention to bequeath it to the Trust, and so in 2003 the Trust took ownership of the farm and with it the responsibility to fulfil the wishes of a man who cared about wildlife. Since that time, further survey work has shown just how important for wildlife the farm is. In particular, Church Farm is an exceptional place for reptiles. Grass snakes, slow worms and common lizards



Grass snake

Church Farm sits on a minor tributary of the River Blyth and although relatively small, has a huge diversity of habitats.

have been found in abundance, benefiting from the mix of habitats and the multitude of undisturbed corners.

In 2009 the Trust was presented with an exciting opportunity to extend Church Farm and purchase adjoining marshes. The marshes had been owned by Kathleen Phillips who took a similar view to Philip Elsey and had never improved her land, instead allowing wildlife to flourish. This was followed by yet another opportunity in 2016 to purchase the remaining marshes in this part of the valley. It was due to both Philip Elsey and a neighbour's generosity that these acquisitions were possible creating this wonderful reserve.

Walking around Church Farm and Marsh Farm it is easy to understand the reasons why their owners felt so strongly about these places. There is an immediate intimacy about them, the wildlife is obvious and abundant and above all else there is a sense that these places are timeless. In a county where there has been so much change, places like this are reminders of how wildlife can flourish, when for once there is little change.

Four-spotted chaser

Darsham Marshes

Established
1984

Extended
2014

Reserve size
52 acres, 21 ha

Nearest town/ village
Darsham

Gifted to the Trust in 1984 by the Rodocanachi family, Darsham Marshes is another example of an unspoilt part of Suffolk that was cherished by its former owners who wanted their land safeguarded for future generations. Nestling in the Minsmere valley, the marshes are a remote and secret place, quiet and undisturbed by modern living.

For many years the Trust had the help of a neighbour, Dilly Sharp, a retired farmhand who had known the marshes for most of his life and would check the cattle twice a day. He could remember trying to grow potatoes on the marshes after the war, a dismal failure, due to springs that made all attempts to drain the land futile. So instead, the marshes continued to be grazed by cattle and the remarkable diversity of wildflowers continues to flourish.

Wet as can be, the peaty marshes have always been agriculturally poor land dominated by rushes and sedges. Adding colour and diversity, though, are fabulous displays of marsh-marigolds, yellow-rattle and common sorrel. Resident barn owls hunt the marshes for small mammals and marsh harriers drift up the valley in search of prey. All around much has changed, but Darsham Marshes along with most of the Minsmere valley has retained its uniqueness and most importantly its wildlife.

Dingle Marshes

Established
1999

Reserve size
225 acres, 91 ha

Nearest town/ village
Dunwich

Dingle Marshes has become one of the most dynamic and unpredictable places on the Suffolk coast. It might be considered a bellwether for the entire coastline illustrating that huge coastal transformation is no longer just a future worry but very much a present-day reality. Since its acquisition in 1999, nearly 10 acres of the reserve has been lost to the sea as the shingle ridge that separates the marsh from the sea has been pushed inland up to 80m in places. At the current rate, it will only be another 50 years before the shingle beach reaches the edge of the high ground cutting off and diverting the Dunwich River, utterly transforming the reserve once and for all.

Between now and then, each big storm or surge-tide event will leave its mark, sometimes in dramatic fashion punching holes in the shingle ridge letting the tide wash in and out of the marshes for weeks or months at a time until the holes are naturally healed again by the tides.

The unpredictability is both fascinating and alarming. Currently a largely freshwater reserve, at some point the balance is going to tip and Dingle Marshes will become a mostly saline reserve with occasional periods when it reverts to being a freshwater system once again. This will not suit some species, for example the bittern is an exclusively freshwater bird and would be lost, yet others will benefit. Avocet and redshank are more adaptable and will make the most of future opportunities while the tiny starlet sea anemone will positively thrive as such change creates more saline lagoons. Across the reserve, wildlife is already having to adapt as is the management

of the land with fewer livestock now grazing the marshes. Years of 'steady state' management are giving way to a more flexible approach that embraces change.

Dingle Marshes is a part of the huge 2,420 acre Suffolk Coast National Nature Reserve, a complex of marsh, fen, reedbed, heath and woodland. This is an area of almost unparalleled wildlife richness in a wild coastal setting and provides a sense of scale that is unmatched in Suffolk. It is also a place where wildlife is less contained and more able to adapt to both the coastal and climate changes we are now experiencing. In the coming years we can learn much here about how to adapt and allow natural processes to create change that in turn allows wildlife to thrive and move around the landscape.

Gunton Meadow

Despite all the odds, fragments of outstanding wildlife habitat can still be found in Lowestoft. There is a diversity of semi-natural habitats which is unrivalled in any other Suffolk town ranging from coastal dunes and dry heath to fen and wet woodland. Huge development pressures have whittled away at the remaining old meadows and ancient woodland of north Lowestoft, yet a handful of remarkable sites have survived.

Gunton Meadow is one example, saved from development by the concerted efforts of local people and the Trust, and ultimately paid for as a planning condition when the adjoining supermarket was extended. This endeavour has secured a mix of species-rich grassland, scrub and incredible ponds for newts. Although neglected for years, past experience has shown that grassland can be restored. This was spectacularly achieved on an adjoining area of land. With five species of orchid and a host of other wildflowers flourishing under a reinstated regime of annual hay cutting, it is an excellent example of just how rich these old boulder clay meadows can be.

Given time, Gunton Meadow will be similarly restored and already the rejuvenated ponds are benefiting a huge local population of great crested newts. For such a developed area, the people of north Lowestoft have a quite unique wealth of wildlife on their doorstep.

Established
2006

Reserve size
6 acres, 2 ha

Nearest town/ village
Lowestoft

The rejuvenated ponds are benefiting a huge local population of great crested newts.

Hazlewood Marshes

During the night of December 5th, 2013, the largest North Sea tidal surge in a lifetime irreversibly changed Hazlewood Marshes. The freshwater marshes were completely inundated, but more significantly, the river wall that separated the marshes from the estuary was irreparably damaged. Two great holes were gouged out of the wall allowing the tide to flow in and out of the marshes at will. What had once been home to marsh harriers, bearded tits, waders and geese had overnight become a very different place.

It was quickly apparent that the wall was beyond economic repair, but it was equally apparent that the birds on the estuary found the 'new' reserve very much to their liking. Vast flocks of black-tailed godwit, lapwing, dunlin and redshank started to feed on the marshes illustrating perfectly the ability of wildlife to respond to new opportunities. Spoonbills once considered a rare and exotic visitor in Suffolk are now a regular sight at Hazlewood with flocks of up to 40 birds not uncommon. This would have been unimaginable 10 years ago.

The daily tidal inundation has resulted in yet further change, silt is being deposited across the marsh and this is driving the development of new salt marsh. Plants such as sea aster and samphire have already started to colonise the mud and the reserve is slowly reverting back to a state probably not seen since the Middle Ages prior to the initial reclamation of the land from the estuary.

Established
1991

Reserve size
157 acres, 64 ha

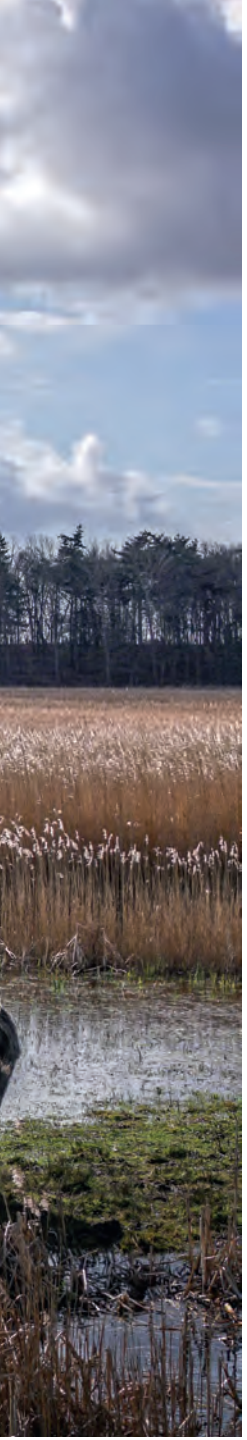
Nearest town/ village
Aldeburgh

Hazlewood is not only an important habitat for birds, but for fish such as sea bass and grey mullet. Shallow inter-tidal waters are perfect fish nurseries and surveys have found large numbers of juvenile fish from nine different species using the reserve. In addition to the bass and mullet, there are flounder, smelt, eels, sticklebacks and vast numbers of common goby that live permanently in this habitat. This of course attracts fish eating birds such as egrets and spoonbill while osprey is now a regular passage visitor.

At the tip of Hazlewood is Barber's Point, a small, raised area within the former marshes that archaeological investigations have shown was periodically occupied from Roman times. It was once an island in the estuary most likely reached via a causeway at low tide. Today, Barber's Point is again an outlier, only connected to high ground by the remains of the river wall that previously enclosed it, and in time, it will almost certainly become an island again completing the circle of transformation.

This is a new era for Hazlewood Marshes, the Suffolk coast is changing in response to rising sea levels and Hazlewood Marshes has become one of the first places where permanent land use change has happened on a significant scale.

Shallow inter-tidal waters are perfect fish nurseries.



Hen Reedbeds

Superficially, Hen Reedbeds looks like a natural wetland, yet beneath the reeds is an entirely manmade landscape of banks, ditches and sluices. In the same way a paddy field is engineered to grow rice by controlling the depth of water, Hen Reedbeds has been designed to grow reeds. The intention is to produce lots of reedbed wildlife, which Hen does very successfully in the form of bitterns, marsh harriers, warblers and otters.

In the mid 1990s the UK bittern population was small, vulnerable and largely dependent on a handful of Suffolk reedbeds. At the same time, it was recognised that the great Suffolk reedbeds of Minsmere, Walberswick and Easton Marshes would ultimately be lost to the sea. Therefore, for the bittern to have a future, new reedbeds would have to be created in suitable locations. The Trust had a small nature reserve in the Hen valley known as Norman Gwatkin Reserve, passed to the Trust in 1975 as an 'In memoriam' gift by his widow, Lady Gwatkin. This subsequently provided the catalyst to create the substantial reserve the Trust owns today.

Nobody would have envisaged at that time just how the reserve would develop, but in recent years, Hen Reedbeds has made a significant contribution to the recovery of the UK bittern population with up to three nesting pairs per year. Now part of the Suffolk Coast National Nature Reserve, Hen Reedbeds has demonstrated just how successful tailor-made wetlands can be.

Established
1975

Extended
1998, 2002

Reserve size
132 acres, 53 ha

Nearest town/ village
Blythburgh

Starling murmuration

Beneath the reeds is an entirely manmade landscape of banks, ditches and sluices.

Hutchison's Meadow

Established
1987

Reserve size
3 acres, 1 ha

Nearest town/ village
Melton

Hutchison's Meadow is just the sort of place that could have been lost in the blink of an eye. With the growth in housing all around the village of Melton, close to Woodbridge, small meadows such as Hutchison's are the stuff developers' dreams are made of. Recognising this threat and what a loss it would be, the owners Sir Peter and Lady Grace Hutchison gifted the meadow to the Trust to ensure its lasting survival.

The gently sloping meadow is dominated by two magnificent oak trees which have been Melton landmarks for at least the past 200 years. One has since fallen, but will be left as a valuable dead wood habitat. The character of the meadow itself almost defies explanation as the lower part is dry grassland, while halfway up the slope, it becomes quite wet. This change is due to a natural spring-line which keeps this part of the meadow damp for most of the year. Favouring the moisture, southern marsh-orchids grow in abundance together with a mix of other wetland plants.

The survival of small meadows such as this, not only maintains important populations of rare plants, but also preserves a sense of what a village such as Melton would have looked like before 20th century development. Change is often so rapid that it is only after the event that there is a realisation of what has actually been lost. Fortunately, Sir Peter and Lady Grace recognised this and thanks to them, we can enjoy a little bit of Melton as it always has been.

Levington Lagoon

Established
1988

Reserve size
13 acres, 5 ha

Nearest town/ village
Levington

Few Trust reserves have had quite such an inauspicious start in life as Levington Lagoon. During the 1950's and 60's it was viewed as just another area of unimportant salt marsh on the north side of the Orwell Estuary and in-filled with slag waste from industries in Ipswich. Local people including many birders successfully campaigned for the tipping to stop on the grounds that it was destroying an outstandingly attractive natural area and damaging the wildlife.

There is no trace of the waste today. Lost under an expanse of rough grassland and scrub it is wildlife that flourishes. A variety of birds, including over-wintering short-eared owl and breeding linnet, use the grassland and scrub habitats while waders and egrets feed in the margins of the lagoon.

Today's reserve is the result of the Trust's partnership with Suffolk Yacht Harbour, the owners of Levington Marina. As the marina has expanded, this in turn created opportunities to develop, extend and enhance the reserve. While the loss of the original salt marsh all those years ago was regrettable, the habitats that have since developed have their own value and complement the adjoining salt marsh and mudflats in the estuary.

Newbourne Springs

On a warm and humid summer day, Newbourne Springs has an almost tropical feel about it. It is a lush, green, narrow wooded valley, with ferns growing abundantly in the shelter of alder-dominated wet woodland. In between there are pockets of species-rich fen with orchids and other wetland plants. Higher up the valley sides, bluebells dominate before the woodland opens up into dry heathland.

In the valley, natural springs emanate year-round from the junction between the permeable Red Crag and impermeable London Clay rock formations and trickle down into the continuously flowing steam below. For many years this reliable source of water supplied Felixstowe, but today the springs are left to feed an extraordinary natural ecosystem. This geological wonder is still owned by Anglian Water but is now managed in partnership with the Trust as a nature reserve. It is thought the stream flowing through the reserve gives the village its name, Newbourne meaning 'new stream' although it is also suggested that Newbourne might originate from the earlier Old Norse words meaning 'nine springs'. Either way, this is a place that has in many ways defined the village of Newbourne.

Established
1976

Reserve size
51 acres, 21 ha

Nearest town/ village
Newbourne

For visitors, the boardwalk and path around the reserve create one of the most attractive nature trails in Suffolk.

Water forget-me-not

As well as being a source of water, the reserve has an old Red Crag pit which was once a source of ‘coprolite’. Although not actually fossilized dung as is often mistakenly suggested, these phosphate nodules are in fact derived from the underlying London Clay and were once important for the manufacture of fertiliser. As well as producing ‘coprolites’ the Red Crag is full of an amazing array of marine fossils ranging from bivalves to sharks teeth some 2 million years old.

For visitors, the boardwalk and path around the reserve create one of the most attractive nature trails in Suffolk. With wonderful views, the trail follows the contours of the valley with its rich mix of habitats, passing twice over the stream and through expanses of bluebells, before finally opening out into fen meadows shaded pink with the flowers of ragged-Robin.

Sandlings Heaths & Forest

The light sandy soils of the Sandlings had always been economically marginal. Historically valued for rabbit warrening and sheep walks, there have frequently been times when the land was abandoned and allowed to revert to heath after periods of cultivation. At the start of the 20th century, heathland was once again considered to be of little value, triggering landscape-scale change. In little more than two generations, afforestation, airfield construction and modern intensive cultivation have each played their part in destroying and fragmenting a landscape that human activity had shaped over thousands of years.

Since the 1980s the Trust has led the restoration of the Sandlings heaths, pioneering the reintroduction of sheep grazing and being the first organisation to use Exmoor ponies for conservation grazing in Suffolk. Much of the early restoration took place on Sutton & Hollesley Commons which just 100 years ago were a small part of a vast unbroken heathland landscape that stretched for miles. Today they are the largest and most intact heaths that remain in the South Sandlings. The restoration of Sutton & Hollesley Commons was a huge achievement enabling populations of specialist heathland birds like woodlark and nightjar to recover along with many unique heathland insects and reptiles.

Looking across the commons today, it is possible to gain a sense of just what the Sandlings landscape must have looked like in the past.

Established
1985

Reserve size
202 acres, 82 ha

Nearest town/ village
Hollesley

The trees and scrub that had invaded the heath have been cleared to create once more the open landscape so favoured by woodlarks and Dartford warblers. The late-summer spectacle of flowering heathers is as impressive as ever and colonies of silver-studded blue butterflies have since spread back into the restored heathland from the few remaining patches of heath that had kept them from becoming extinct in Suffolk.

The focus today is the partnership with Forestry England where the Trust along with the RSPB maintain patches of open heath within Rendlesham Forest. These vital areas sustain the remaining populations of nightjar and woodlark that continue to breed amongst the conifer plantations. It is hoped that in time as the conifer crops are felled, more of the forest might be restored to heathland to reconnect isolated areas of heath and further help the unique species that depend on this special habitat.

Looking across the commons today, it is possible to gain a sense of just what the Sandlings landscape must have looked like in the past.

Simpson's Saltings

Established
1991

Reserve size
45 acres, 18 ha

Nearest town/ village
Hollesley

There are certain locations on the coast where the influence of man is almost completely absent and it is possible to see an entirely natural landscape. Simpson's Saltings is such a place. There is a remoteness about the location, which is no doubt why Hollesley Bay Prison was built nearby, that creates a sense of being on the very edge of modern civilisation.

Protected from the full ravages of the North Sea by the shingle spit of Orford Ness, Simpson's Saltings is a great expanse of low-lying vegetated shingle, salt marsh and tidal mud. Criss-crossed with creeks, it is a complex landscape best seen from the river wall that separates the saltings from the marshes inland. Simpson's Saltings is named after the eminent Suffolk botanist Francis Simpson, who funded the purchase of the reserve. Francis, who knew intimately almost every corner of Suffolk, instantly recognised the importance of this site with an assemblage of coastal species including sea-heath and sea pea found there. By ensuring that the land came into the protective ownership of Suffolk Wildlife Trust, Francis Simpson was able to leave a lasting legacy that reflected his lifetime of botanical study in Suffolk.

Sizewell Belts

The contrast between the attractive and nationally important wildlife habitats of Sizewell Belts and the industrial landscape of Sizewell power station could not be greater, yet the two sit side-by-side incongruously linked to each other. Owned by EDF Energy, the Belts were purchased from Sizewell Estate when Sizewell B was built, to provide both land for building and a wide buffer.

This was no ordinary countryside, being a diverse mix of habitats including sand dunes, wetlands, wet woodland and heathland. In 1993 the Trust took on the management of the Belts and set about creating a nature reserve in partnership with British Energy (now EDF). Fen meadows were restored, a reedbed created and former arable fields were reverted to acid grassland and heath. Today wonderful wetland habitats with a network of dykes and water courses lie in the valleys between ridges of light sandy land much of which is now heath once again.

If a third power station, Sizewell C, is built it will permanently change this part of the Suffolk coast and the Belts will not escape unharmed. The construction of Sizewell A began in 1961, the year the Trust was founded. Six decades on history looks to be repeating itself. We will work hard to limit the impact to the wetland habitats and ensure rare species, such as natterjack toad and barbastelle bat, can survive beyond the development.

Established
1993

Reserve size
416 acres, 168 ha

Nearest town/ village
Leiston

A diverse mix of habitats including sand dunes, wetlands, wet woodland and heathland.

Snape Marshes

Snape Maltings is possibly one of the best-known landmarks on the Suffolk coast, yet in its shadow, Snape Marshes went quite un-noticed. It was only in 2009 when the Trust purchased the marshes that surveys revealed a botanical wonder which surprised everyone. How had such fabulous marshes with so much diversity escaped attention?

The wildlife highlights of Snape Marshes are not just confined to plants, all four species of reptile found in Suffolk are present in good numbers, benefiting from the ideal mix of reptile habitats ranging from dry heathland edge to wet marsh. Barn owl, hobby and marsh harrier are routinely seen and the marshes are becoming one of the best places in Suffolk to see the normally highly elusive otter (with a little bit of luck of course!)

Once again legacy gifts provided the Trust with the means to respond to an opportunity. It seemed particularly fitting to be able to use a gift in the Will of Elizabeth Chrenko, a classically trained musician, to buy a nature reserve so close to Suffolk's premier classical auditorium. Further support from the legacy of Gloria Ford together with donations from Trust members enabled Suffolk Wildlife Trust to secure yet another part of the county's natural heritage for future generations.

Established
2009

Reserve size
75 acres, 30 ha

Nearest town/ village
Snape

Adder

All four species of reptile found in Suffolk are present in good numbers.

Trimley Marshes

Established
1989

Reserve size
197 acres, 80 ha

Nearest town/ village
Trimley St Martin

The origins of Trimley Marshes are steeped in controversy. The 1980s expansion of Felixstowe Docks, while creating hundreds of new jobs, was only possible because of an Act of Parliament which also allowed the destruction of the internationally important bird habitat at Fagbury Mudflats. Environmental groups including Suffolk Wildlife Trust, local birders and many others fought a robust battle to try to prevent the loss, but to no avail. At that time, the decision was made to mitigate for the destruction of the mudflats through the creation of a new wetland reserve on agricultural land alongside the estuary. This seemed like meagre compensation, but as a consequence Trimley Marshes nature reserve was 'born'.

Starting with virtually a blank canvas, a mix of wetland features was sculpted out of the former farmland in what became a major civil engineering project. A large reservoir was dug at the heart of the reserve to provide a year-round supply of water for the scrapes, dykes and pools that create the variety of habitat so essential for wetland birds. When it was all finished, the birds started to arrive and some of the ducks, geese and waders that previously used Fagbury Mudflats found a new home. Wigeon, teal, brent geese, avocets and redshank are among the ever-growing list of birds using the mosaic of grazing marsh, reedbed and scrapes that makes Trimley Marshes what it is today. Some species occur in huge numbers and make a fabulous sight as they move en-masse between the reserve

and the adjoining estuary.

The maturing reedbeds add another dimension and are now routinely visited by bittern in winter joining water rail and reed bunting and impressive numbers of warblers in summer. The tern rafts on the reservoir are used by common terns, cormorants and black-headed gulls.

Its coastal location means that Trimley regularly attracts a great variety of migrant birds in spring and autumn as well as the occasional rare vagrant. Notable birds such as black-winged stilt, pectoral sandpiper and stilt sandpiper have the ability to attract large numbers of birdwatchers.

Today, Trimley Marshes has probably exceeded all expectations. It was never designed to replace what was lost on a like-for-like basis, however Trimley Marshes does represent a remarkable achievement. The international designations that have now been placed on the reserve are a measure of the success in creating not only an exceptional wetland for birds but a place where we can enjoy them. Felixstowe Docks, although towering over the reserve, cannot begin to compete for our attention with the wildlife spectacle alongside. Every habitat has been developed to its full potential to create as much opportunity for wildlife as possible and hides overlooking the reserve allow visitors to enjoy every bit of this success.

Every habitat has been developed to its full potential to create as much opportunity for wildlife as possible.

6

A wilder **Stour Valley**

The undulating countryside along the northern fringe of the River Stour is quite distinct from the rest of the county. Numerous steep-sided valleys (by Suffolk standards) have been cut into the land by the many streams that feed the Stour, creating an exceptionally pretty landscape. The area between Sudbury, Polstead, Nayland and Bures is dotted with small woodlands, the majority of which are remnants of larger ancient woods, and a great many are the last refuge for Suffolk's dormice.

Not so long ago, this part of Suffolk would have been a dense network of small fields, meadows, hedges and woods, but modern farming has changed the structure of the countryside creating larger fields and converting much of the grassland to arable. Using Google Earth to compare the aerial images of Suffolk in 1945 with the modern day, makes sombre viewing. Looking at whole woods wiped off the map, miles and miles of hedges removed to create larger fields and the general simplification of a once complex landscape that had changed little in over 1,000 years is quite shocking. This fragmentation of the landscape that accelerated in the 1960s, is repeating a familiar pattern seen throughout Suffolk, but in this instance, it had a profound impact on the dormouse. Dormice spend their lives exclusively amongst the branches of trees and scrub and rarely cross open ground to reach suitable habitat.

Arger Fen

Removing the hedges that linked woodlands also fragmented the dormouse population, which over time has become more vulnerable to habitat change, climate change and genetic isolation.

In contrast, the River Stour has been repeatedly modified over hundreds of years since it was first engineered to be navigable. The most impactful change however has been the more recent draining of the adjoining floodplains that were once a colourful and rich series of water meadows, marshes and fens that would routinely flood during the winter months. Most have become featureless expanses of rye grass and arable crops and only a handful of stretches can naturally flood today.

A wilder Stour Valley would mean a return to a highly connected landscape where hedges are once again wildlife highways criss-crossing the landscape and the river is free to choose its course through the valley. It might not be possible to replant all the miles of hedges grubbed out in the 60s and 70s, but it is possible to be much kinder to the hedges that remain. Hedges that are maintained as stubby, near-transparent lines of stems are of no value to wildlife but a simple change to a less frequent and less harsh cutting regime can be transformative, allowing hedges to provide shelter and multiple food sources for a great variety of species. Replanting the many gaps and planting a new generation of hedgerow trees is one of the quickest and easiest ways we can address much of the damage done in recent decades.

Naturally functioning river valley systems provide multiple benefits ranging from flood protection for villages and towns to building soil fertility and storing carbon. Again, reconnecting the river to its floodplain along the entire course is no longer possible, but there are many stretches where there is real opportunity to return the river to a 'wilder' state.

The Stour Valley is designated as an 'exceptional landscape whose distinctive character and natural beauty are precious enough to be safeguarded in the national interest'. Restoring that 'natural beauty' and making the Stour Valley 'wilder' must be one and the same.

Dormouse

Arger Fen & Spouse's Vale

Established
1991

Extended
1997, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2021

Reserve size
286 acres, 116 ha

Nearest town/ village
Assington

In 1991 two sisters, Frances and Edith Vale, purchased a little piece of Suffolk near to their home, a small bluebell wood called Spouse's Grove. Four years previously it had been ravaged by the 1987 storm but it was a place they had regularly walked and knew to be special. Fortunately, their idea of ownership went beyond their own enjoyment of the land. They wanted the long term security that comes from protective ownership, and for that reason they gifted the wood to Suffolk Wildlife Trust.

Six years later, a large adjoining farm was put on the market which included an area of woodland and several small wet meadows alongside Spouse's Grove known as Spouse's Vale. Once again the sisters saw this as an opportunity to safeguard a little more of this corner of Suffolk to which they felt so attached, and they generously enabled the Trust to buy the land. Several years later, they chose to remember Suffolk Wildlife Trust in their Wills leaving an important legacy. It was clear that this should also be used to acquire land that would benefit wildlife, and in 2004 with the help of Trust members, Hulbacks Grove was purchased, a 42 acre arable field adjoining Spouse's Grove and Spouse's Vale.

Historically, what we now call Hulbacks Grove had been a mosaic of small meadows, thick hedges and a copse, but that ancient landscape had been cleared away to make a single arable field. All that remained were scattered oak trees marking the positions of some of the lost hedgerows. Acquiring Hulbacks made it possible to once again link the three ancient woods of Spouse's Grove, Arger Fen and Rowley Grove, reconnecting a landscape that had been pulled apart by modern farming. Recreating what had been lost was not considered a realistic option and instead, the entire area was allowed to naturally regenerate as woodland so as to create a continuous link from one woodland to the next.

The emerging woodland is a powerful demonstration of the ability of nature to reclaim the land. Since the last wheat crop in 2004 there is no trace of the former arable landscape, and instead, a remarkable growth of trees blankets the field. Tens of thousands of trees grew from seed carried by the wind, birds and other animals creating what looks and feels like new woodland. However, it has not been without its setbacks. Ash which comprised much of the new growth has been greatly affected by the Chalara fungus, but this has simply allowed other species such as birch and thorn to fill the gaps. Dormice, one of the species that depend on a well-connected landscape, have already made the move into the new woodland, colonising the boundary with the ancient woodland of Arger Fen.

The next chapter in the development of this extensive woodland landscape was the acquisition of Arger Fen. This ancient woodland suffered greatly in the 1950s when the old coppice was cleared to make way for a crop of conifers but a restoration plan is bringing back natural broadleaved woodland. In response, woodland wildflowers are flourishing with vast expanses of bluebells, foxgloves and wild garlic. Once again the irrepressible force of nature is reasserting itself.

The development of this reserve has continued apace since 2012 with the acquisition of two more arable fields and then in 2014, an amazing opportunity to acquire a large block of land to the north, now called Ford's Heath in memory of Gerald Ford whose important legacy underpinned the acquisition.

Spouse's Grove

Arger Fen

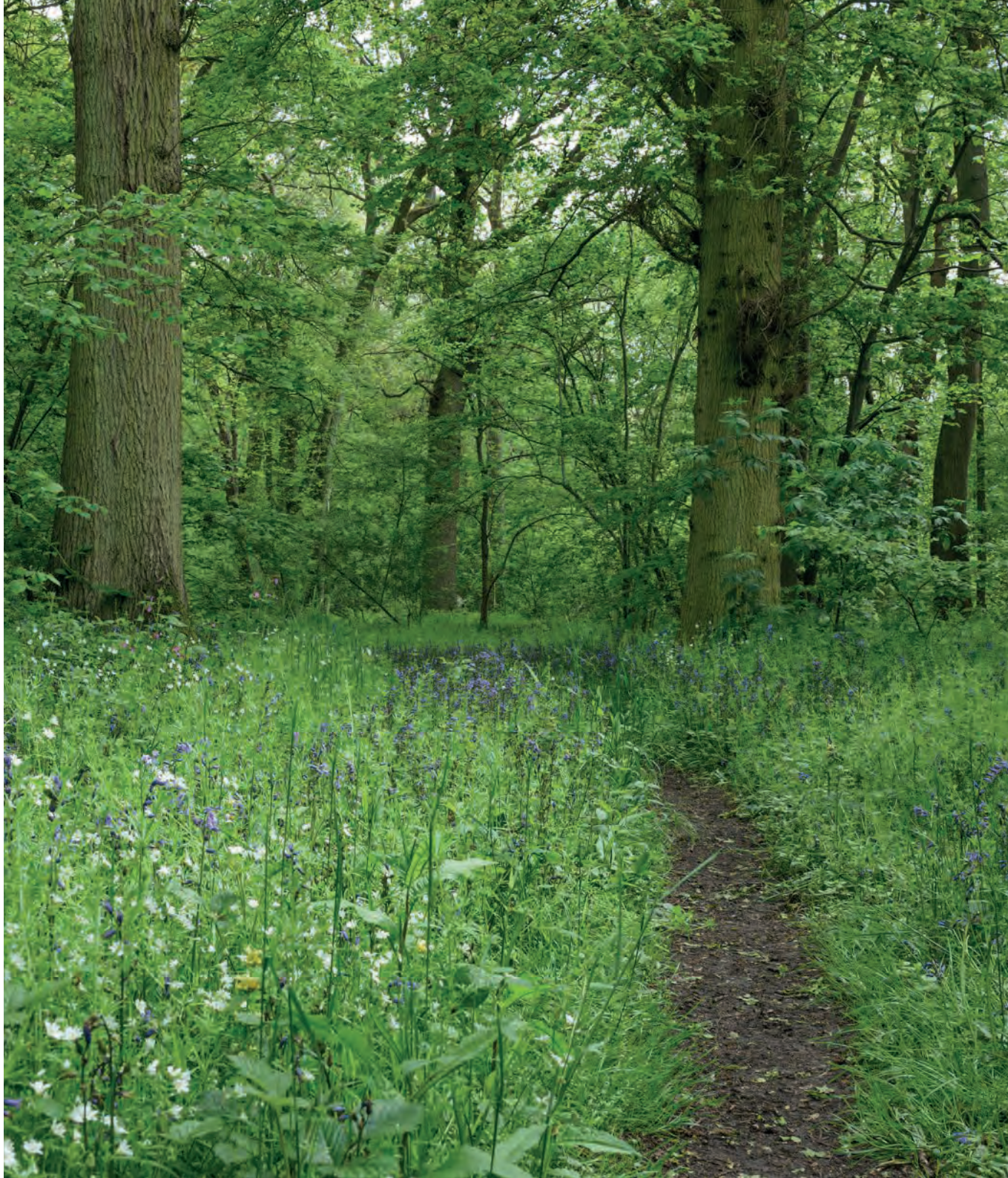
What is emerging now is a powerful demonstration of the ability of nature to reclaim the land.

In 2021 the opportunity arose to bring Rowley Grove into our protective ownership. Once again, Trust members and donors made this possible through their astonishing generosity and support.

Combined, these acquisitions have allowed the Trust to plan the creation of a genuinely landscape scale reserve utilising the inherently poor agricultural quality of the land. The low productivity soil lends itself to the development of grassland and scrub reminiscent of the 18th Century Leaden Heath, a great expanse of what was most likely unenclosed rough grazing land that once surrounded the village of Leavenheath. Over the coming years, a new landscape rich in wildlife will emerge with links to the past and a vision for the future.

In gifting Spouse's Grove to the Trust all those years ago, Frances and Edith Vale could not have envisaged the train of events they would set in motion. Today we look after a substantial and growing wood and grassland landscape, reconnected to the surrounding countryside through the efforts of neighbouring landowners who have planted hedges and set aside land for new woodland. The dormice that only just managed to survive the fragmentation of their aerial world in the tops of trees and hedges once again have the opportunity to move unhindered through the countryside using a revitalised landscape.

Over the coming years, a new landscape rich in wildlife will emerge with links to the past and a vision for the future.



Rowley Grove

Cornard Mere

The origins of Cornard Mere, a small wetland on the edge of Great Cornard near Sudbury, start in the post-glacial landscape of Suffolk almost 10,000 years ago. At that time the River Stour was a large dynamic water channel which would periodically change course. Cornard Mere was the product of these ancient changes in flow leaving an isolated wetland now a quarter of a mile from the course of today's river.

The wetland evolved over a long period of time from an area of open water into a deep peat fen, and on the surface it developed a rich and diverse flora. As recently as the 1980s, Cornard Mere was home to many rare fen plants such as bogbean and marsh cinquefoil but these are now lost. A nearby water abstraction borehole had a devastating effect, literally sucking the water from beneath the fen, causing the surface to dry out repeatedly. This resulted in the loss of many sensitive wetland species and only the most resilient now survive.

Despite all this, the Cornard Mere of today is still a notable wetland habitat. Every summer the reed fen is full of migrant reed and sedge warblers and the open-water meres are alive with many species of dragonfly while the reserve margins support good reptile populations. Cornard Mere demonstrates the resilience of wetlands, their dynamism and ability to adapt to even the most challenging manmade change.

Established
1973

Extended
1987

Reserve size
18 acres, 7 ha

Nearest town/ village
Little Cornard

Groton Wood

Woods often tell an extraordinary story of local land ownership and change, and unravelling the history of Groton Wood is no exception. Groton Wood is a wood of two halves. The northern part of the wood is dominated by small-leaved lime coppice (or 'pry' as it is also known), a species that is exclusively associated with ancient woods and maybe a direct descendant of the original wildwood. The southern part could not be more different with oak, ash and hazel together with numerous wild cherry trees.

At one time owned by Bury St Edmunds Abbey, the wood was confiscated and bestowed on Adam Winthrop in 1544 by Henry VIII. Over the next 200 years a large part of what was the original medieval lime wood to the north was destroyed while a new area of woodland developed to the south, explaining what we see today. Beneath the newer woodland is the 'ghost' of a medieval landscape. The ditches, numerous ponds and banks are all that remain of a farmed landscape lost to woodland sometime over 250 years ago.

In all this time, the small-leaved lime has barely moved, constrained by a different climate from that which allowed it to spread in post-glacial times. It is almost unique amongst trees in demonstrating a continuity of landscape type. In Groton, together with a handful of other Suffolk woods, it offers a direct link to a long-lost ancient landscape quite unlike the one we know today.

Established
1974

Reserve size
50 acres, 20 ha

Nearest town/ village
Kersey Tye

Small-leaved lime offers a direct link to a long-lost ancient landscape.

Thank you

Thank you to the Suffolk businesses who have supported the production of this book.
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In 1961 a small group of far-sighted naturalists recognised that urgent action was needed to safeguard Redgrave & Lopham Fen. Their vision led to the creation of Suffolk Wildlife Trust. This book celebrates the nature reserves and species that we can all enjoy today. It is a tribute to the commitment of those early pioneers and the thousands of volunteers and Trust members who have followed their lead.

From nature reserves to a wilder Suffolk – how we can bring back Suffolk's wildlife

Suffolk Wildlife Trust