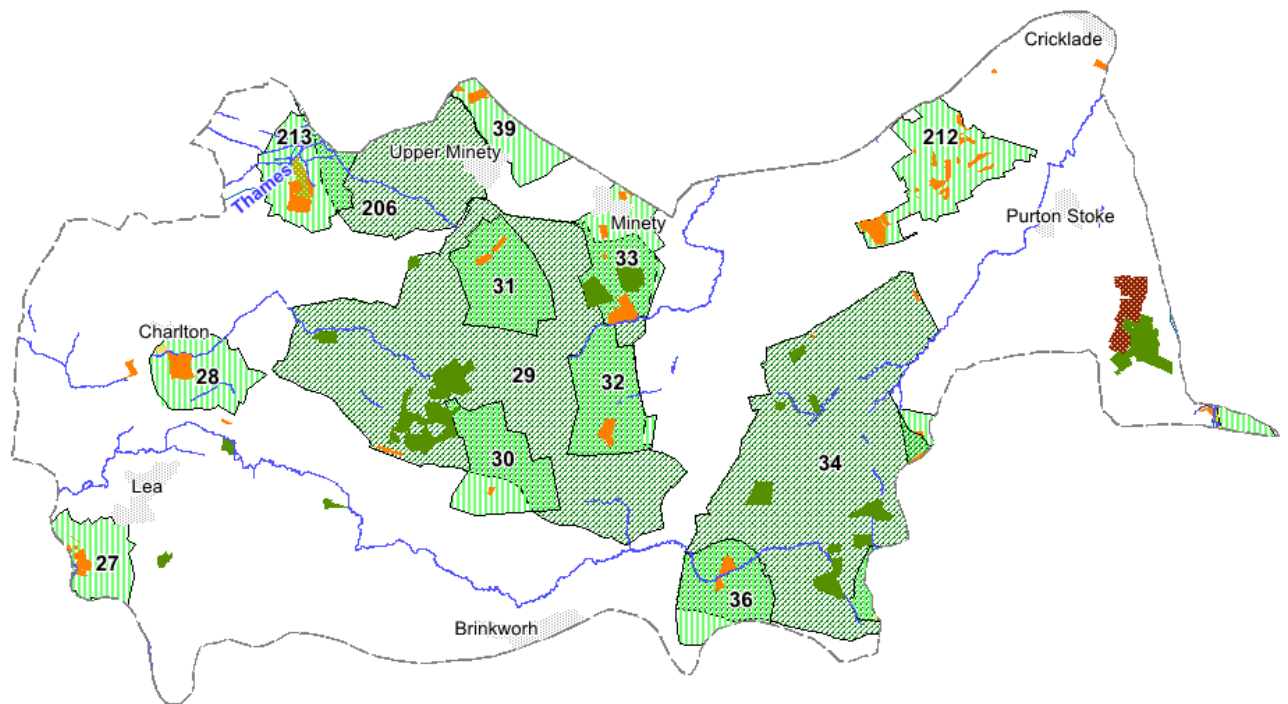


Area 03 –Braydon Forest



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Figure 5: Braydon Forest Landscape Biodiversity Area indicating priority habitats and the labelled, numbered Strategic Nature Areas within this Area.

4.3.1 Area Profile

National Character Areas – [Upper Thames Clay Vales \(108\)](#), small section of [Cotswolds \(107\)](#) at eastern side

Landscape Character Types –Rolling Clay Lowland (11)

Landscape Character Areas –Minety Rolling Clay Lowland (11B)

AONBs – None

Related BAPs - None

SNAs – There are 13 SNAs and the River Thames. See [here](#) for SNA targets for Area 03

Geology – The Area is part of a huge belt of low-lying land which extends across south central England. The dominant geology of Oxford Clay yields abundant fossils and is interspersed by areas of Kellaways Sands and limestone which can form low intermittent hills to the west of the Area.

Community Area Boards – Malmesbury Area Board and Royal Wootton Bassett & Cricklade Area Board.

4.3.2 Background

The Braydon Forest Landscape Biodiversity Area is a low lying area of land on Clay which lies to the north of the county. It is largely surrounded by other low lying land, including the clay vales of the Thames to north and the Bristol Avon to the south. To the east and west there are small nucleated villages such as Cloatley, Minety and Charlton which has areas of historic parkland, linked by winding roads¹. The Braydon Forest Landscape Biodiversity Area is more wooded and sparsely settled than the surrounding area which, in part, reflects the strong influence of its historic land use as part of the Royal Hunting Forest of Braydon.

This Area is characterised by 18th century enclosure landscapes of small woods, pastoral fields and a good network of hawthorn/blackthorn hedges with many mature oak hedgerow trees. Substantial blocks of ancient woodland remain in the central part of the area, including woods which have been traditionally managed to maintain a high canopy of mature trees with an understorey, generally hazel, which is coppiced to maintain a varied woodland structure. Sunny glades allow sunlight to penetrate the woodland floor, encouraging the ground flora and associated invertebrate communities. Wet woodlands are indicative of areas of poorly drained soils and wet ground and sizeable patches of this habitat are present to the east of Area 03.

The Area has a significant number of herb rich lowland meadows which are traditionally cut for hay in the mid summer, including the SSSIs of Cloatley Manor Farm Meadow, Stoke Common, Distillery Farm Meadows, Emmett Hill Meadows and Avis Meadows. Areas of lowland meadow generally occur in close proximity to watercourses and alongside areas of woodland priority habitat. Many of these meadows are floristically rich and provide important habitat for ground nesting birds such as skylarks as well as for a diverse invertebrate fauna, including rare species such as the marsh fritillary butterfly.

4.3.3 Priority Habitats

Priority Habitats	Area (ha)
Lowland mixed deciduous woodland	203
Lowland meadows	111.14
Wet woodland	33.73
Rivers	19.6
Purple moor-grass and rush pastures	8.78
Lowland calcareous grassland	2.37
Coastal and floodplain grazing marsh	1.58
Eutrophic standing waters	0.15
Lowland dry acid grassland	0.08
Total	380.43

4.3.4 Priorities and Opportunities for Conservation

1. Woodland

- Ancient Woodland and woodland mosaic
- Bats
- Lepidoptera
- Hedgerows

2. Neutral Grassland

- Unimproved neutral meadows
- Lepidoptera

Woodland – SNAs: 29, 34

Ancient Woodland

Braydon Forest is characterised by its wooded landscape which includes a relatively high concentration of ancient woodland sites, including some particularly valuable SSSIs such as Ravensroost Wood. While the cover of woodland is well understood and remains fairly stable, many of the woods are undermanaged and are vulnerable to deer browsing pressure. Although this Area has been the focus of the Wildlife Trust's Braydon Forest Living Landscape project, continued work with landowners is needed to ensure that those areas outside of reserves and statutory wildlife sites design are managed to enhance their biodiversity potential and increase connectivity across the wider environment. Priorities for this habitat are:

- Increase the area of ancient woodland sites under favourable management
- Buffer / extend ancient woodland sites with appropriate new woodland planting
- Improve connectivity between ancient woodland sites through hedgerow and woodland planting, and integrate them into the wider landscape
- Take steps to reduce deer grazing pressure at vulnerable ancient woodland sites where there is evidence that this is negatively impacting the condition of the woodland.
- Maintain the mosaic of woodland and grassland sites throughout the Braydon Forest Landscape Biodiversity Area.
- Identify and protect veteran and future veteran trees in woodland sites and wood pastures

Bats

The mosaic of woodland and grassland habitats in the Braydon Forest provides important habitats for bats, particularly rare woodland species such as Bechstein's, Barbastelle and Lesser horseshoe bats, which are known to roost and forage within the landscape. It is important to maintain the mosaic of woodland, grassland and open water habitats which help support such a rich diversity of bat species. Identifying roosting sites and foraging grounds is important in understanding how this protected group of species is utilising the Area and how best we can conserve their habitats.

Therefore, priorities for bats in this Area are:

- Maintaining mature and veteran trees, particularly those known to be used for roosting
- Identifying and favourably managing the next generation of mature / veteran trees
- Managing existing hedgerows and woodland used for foraging and commuting routes

- Hedgerow planting and woodland creation to improve connectivity between key roosting / foraging sites
- Maintaining the important mosaic of woodland, grassland and open water habitats which help support such a rich diversity of bat species
- Identifying and map important roosting sites and foraging grounds for the rarest species

Hedgerows

The hedgerow networks in this Area are generally good and play an important role for connectivity in relation to several other priorities in the area including woodland and bats, and help to mitigate sediment and nutrient run-off from arable fields. Elms would traditionally have been a significant feature of the hedgerows and their loss due to Dutch elm disease has left gaps in places. Some hedgerows have been removed, or traditional management abandoned in favour of fencing, leading to a reduction in habitat connectivity and the availability of habitats for species such as the endangered Brown hairstreak butterfly. In addition to this the use of fertilisers, herbicides and pesticides can reduce ground flora diversity adjacent to hedgerows. Priorities for hedgerows in this Area are:

- Lay / coppice degraded hedgerows, planting up gaps
- Allow mature standard trees to develop within hedgerows
- Replant species-rich hedgerows where these have been completely lost
- Manage hedgerows regularly to maintain a wide and dense base
- Maintain grassland buffer strips alongside hedgerows in arable fields

Neutral Grassland – SNAs: 212, 27, 28, 30, 31, 32, 33, 36, 39, 213

Unimproved Neutral Meadows

Braydon Forest is important for unimproved neutral meadows, which are floristically rich and are an important habitat for ground nesting birds such as skylarks as well as for a diverse invertebrate fauna. Meadows are traditionally managed, being cut for hay in mid-summer and aftermath grazed by sheep or cattle, with important sites including the SSSIs of Cloatley, Stoke Common, Distillery, Emmett Hill and Avis Meadows. The Blakehill Farm complex to the northeast of the Area represents one the UK's largest neutral grassland restoration projects and the biggest of the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust's reserves.

- Informing landowners and managers where they own / manage important neutral meadow sites
- Secure favourable management on neutral meadows
- Restore degraded meadows using seed of local provenance
- Enlarge existing neutral sites through habitat creation

Lepidoptera

The mosaics of habitats within the Braydon Forest are known to support a wide range of rare species of moths and butterflies including the marsh fritillary, brown hairstreak and the Barberry carpet moth. Marsh fritillary butterflies have been recorded from grasslands in the Braydon Forest in which

its larval food plant, devil's-bit scabious occurs. Adults tend to be sedentary and remain in a series of linked metapopulations, which frequently die out and recolonise. It is therefore essential to conserve a cluster of sites in close proximity to ensure the long term survival of this species. More widely, hedgerows should be sympathetically managed to provide suitable habitat for brown hairstreak butterflies; avoiding winter flailing of hedgerows with known populations of brown hairstreaks, ensuring that there is sufficient new growth of blackthorn on which their larvae feed and encouraging ash standards which are used by males as 'master trees' on which they congregate and breed. The Barberry carpet moth is limited to a few small sites, mainly in Wiltshire, with colonies also in Gloucestershire, Dorset and introduced colonies elsewhere. Priorities for Lepidoptera are:

- Integrate actions that will benefit these endangered Lepidoptera into future management plans within the Braydon Forest.
- Survey and monitoring for key species, including winter egg counts on blackthorn to check for presence of brown hairstreak.
- Habitat management at existing key sites should include protection of ash standards and cutting of blackthorn hedgerows on rotation (brown hairstreak) and low-intensity grazing using cattle (marsh fritillary).
- Habitat enhancement around key sites to encourage connectivity between meta-populations
- Planting barberry in hedgerows and woodland edges

Existing Projects / Initiatives

- **Rebuilding Biodiversity** – the 30 square miles of the Braydon Forest is the focus of the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust's Rebuilding Biodiversity Living Landscape project. This project aims to promote species and habitat conservation on Wiltshire Wildlife Trust's 12 nature reserves situated within the project area, as well as to influence and improve the management of land not owned by the Wildlife Trust. The project helps to deliver practical restoration works, for example, re-establishing wildlife meadows, planting trees, creating ponds and hedge planting to establish wildlife corridors which enable wildlife to move between biodiversity rich areas. It is important to continue the momentum of this project and maintain relationships with landowners within the area to promote opportunities for extending the scope of the project and increasing biodiversity gains outside of the reserves. Grassland, pond and woodland management actions implemented during the project need to be maintained to ensure that they can deliver their biodiversity objectives.
- **Agri-environment woodland schemes** - As part of the review of the Common Agricultural Policy, Natural England and the Forestry Commission are looking at the role that Environmental Stewardship can provide in supporting farmers to conserve other "woody habitats", such as field trees, parkland, hedges and patches of scrub scattered through the landscape. Reforms resulting from this may be of immense benefit to increasing woodland and hedgerow connectivity within this Area
- **Butterfly Conservation** - Important sites for these species include Ravensroost and Avis Meadows, Ravensroost Woods and Somerford Common, which have all been surveyed regularly as part of the [UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme](#). Somerford Common is a key site for







butterfly and moth conservation in Wiltshire and work by the Forestry Commission and Butterfly Conservation here has seen the creation of wide sunny ‘box junctions’ where woodland paths cross and a rotational cutting back of vegetation to support populations of Marsh fritillary and Brown hairstreak butterflies.

Rivers SNAs: 664 – Thames; 769 - Ray

Tributary streams of both the Thames and the Bristol Avon run through the Braydon Forest Landscape Biodiversity Area. This network of streams and brooks provides important wildlife corridors and helps support a number of other priority habitats including wet woodlands and meadows. It is important to buffer these waterways from agricultural run-off and to maintain riparian habitats along their course. Invasive plants such as Himalayan balsam can cause problems and it is important to implement systematic removal of these species. Priorities for rivers include:

- Identify sites with suitable conditions for restoration of floodplain meadows (MG4)
- Restore meadows and wet woodland habitats in the floodplains
- Protect, enhance and sensitively manage riparian habitats
- Plant woodland / buffer strips to intercept runoff
- Carry out systematic surveying and removal of invasive species such as Himalayan balsam and Japanese knotweed.

4.3.5 Conservation initiatives

	* Bees for Everyone	A project to raise public awareness of the importance of bumblebees and the problems that they face, and conducting active habitat management to safeguard, restore and create valuable bumblebee habitats.	8, 9, 10		Bumblebee Conservation Trust website
	Meadow research project	Floodplain Meadows Partnership (based at the Open University) has been monitoring the plants, soils and water of key floodplain meadows for many years. This information is used to develop our understanding of how these meadow communities change in response to wider environmental factors and help guide the management of floodplain meadows elsewhere.	1, North Meadow and Clatford Farm SACs		Floodplain Meadows Partnership research site
	Great Western Community Forest	The purpose of GWCF is to create a multi purpose forest throughout Swindon from the centre of the town and into the surrounding countryside. Multi purpose forestry encompasses the creation and use of a diverse natural and built environment including trees and woodland, grassland, wetlands, hedgerows, ponds and rivers.	1, 2, 3 & 5		Click icon for GWCF webpage

Please see the attached table of current conservation initiatives within the particular Landscape Biodiversity Areas