

Oxfordshire's Biodiversity Action Plan and Conservation Target Areas

Why biodiversity matters

Biodiversity is all the life on earth with an intrinsic value which we have a duty to protect. People and wildlife are part of the same ecosystem so by protecting biodiversity, we're improving life for ourselves. A natural environment rich in biodiversity delivers numerous benefits to Oxfordshire's communities including improved health and wellbeing, higher property values and flood prevention.

This document sets out Oxfordshire's vision for biodiversity which everyone can contribute to by helping to protect, reconnect and enhance biodiversity.

Oxfordshire is a special county with a range of valued landscapes. Amongst the hills, vales and downs you will find a stunning array of wildlife treasures waiting to be discovered.

Highlights include the River Thames and canals, the world-renowned beauty of the Cotswolds, the intimate wooded chalk hills of the Chilterns, and the stunning vistas of the North Wessex Downs, not forgetting our attractive city, towns and villages which are so rich in culture and history. These diverse landscapes support a wide range of habitats and species, some of international importance.

Woodland and hedgerows Three-quarters of Oxfordshire's woodlands date back to medieval times, with swathes of bluebells within the remnants of old oak hunting forests and magnificent beech woodlands. At the woodland edge countless wild flowers benefit from the combination of shelter and sunlight, attracting insects and berries to sustain birds, whose songs fill the woods from dawn to dusk. Hedgerows serve as wildlife corridors, lessening the isolation of species in small pockets of woodland.

Grassland Oxfordshire has been farmed for centuries, but the geology and underlying soil, the lie of the land and different farming methods have produced distinct types of grassland, each with their own special plants and associated wildlife. These include the limestone Cotswold Hills, the chalk grassland of the Chilterns, Ridgeway and North Wessex Downs and the neutral grassland and grazing marsh on the clay vales and river floodplains.

Wetland Rivers and streams, fens, ponds, ditches, canals and gravel pits make up Oxfordshire's wetland heritage, attracting a vast array of wildlife. The wet meadows and reedbeds of Otmoor and old gravel pits attract warblers, waterfowl and wading birds by the thousands. While spectacular damselflies and dragonflies chase and skim over the open water.

Apart from its intrinsic value and contribution to our health and well-being, biodiversity provides us with 'Ecosystem Services':

- Flood storage (e.g. flood meadows)
- Carbon storage (e.g. woodland)
- Food (e.g. cereals and grazing)
- Reducing urban heat island effect & air pollution (e.g. urban trees).
- Clean water (e.g. reedbeds)
- Medicine (e.g. St John's Wort)
- Economic growth (e.g. timber & woodfuel)

Challenges to Oxfordshire's habitats and species which are leading to continuing biodiversity loss include:

- Increasing fragmentation of habitats
- A changing climate
- The many demands on our land (biodiversity, food, energy, recreation and housing).

We need to work together to address these challenges. Looking after wildlife in small reserves and patches across the county is no longer enough. We need to reconnect existing habitats, create new habitats, and re-green our city and towns, focusing on those areas where our efforts will make the most difference.

Having a strong *Biodiversity Action Plan* in place is vital if we are to achieve these aims in order to protect and enhance Oxfordshire's habitats and species for the future.

Photo: Craig Blackwell



Photo: Oxfordshire County Council Countryside Service



Photo: Tony House/seeing.org.uk



Oxfordshire's Biodiversity Action Plan



Background

In 1992 at the Earth Summit in Rio, the UK and 150 other countries signed the *Convention on Biodiversity*. As a result, in 1994 the UK produced the 'UK Biodiversity Action Plan'. In 1998 Oxfordshire produced its first Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP); a framework for reporting on national and local priorities through Habitat Action Plans which placed an emphasis on numerical targets for increasing particular habitats or conserving species. Recently, the government commissioned the *Lawton Review* and DEFRA will be publishing a *White Paper on The Natural Environment* in June 2011.

Oxfordshire's BAP

Oxfordshire has been one of the first counties to develop a new, spatial, approach to biodiversity action planning. This helps partners to see where the main biodiversity hotspots are, and therefore where conservation efforts can be most effective.

The Biodiversity Action Plan for Oxfordshire is hosted by [Oxfordshire Nature Conservation Forum](#) (ONCF) and includes:

- [The Conservation Target Areas \(CTA\) Map](#)
- [Individual Conservation Target Area target statements](#)
- [Oxfordshire BAP habitat targets](#) for maintaining extent, achieving condition, restoration and creation of habitats.
- [Numerical 2015 targets](#) for restoration and creation of habitat.

Restoration and creation targets for specific CTAs are collated across the county and then feed into the delivery of the [England Biodiversity Strategy](#).

UK BAP priority species and habitats

Priority Habitats are recognised as being of principal importance for the conservation of biodiversity within the UK

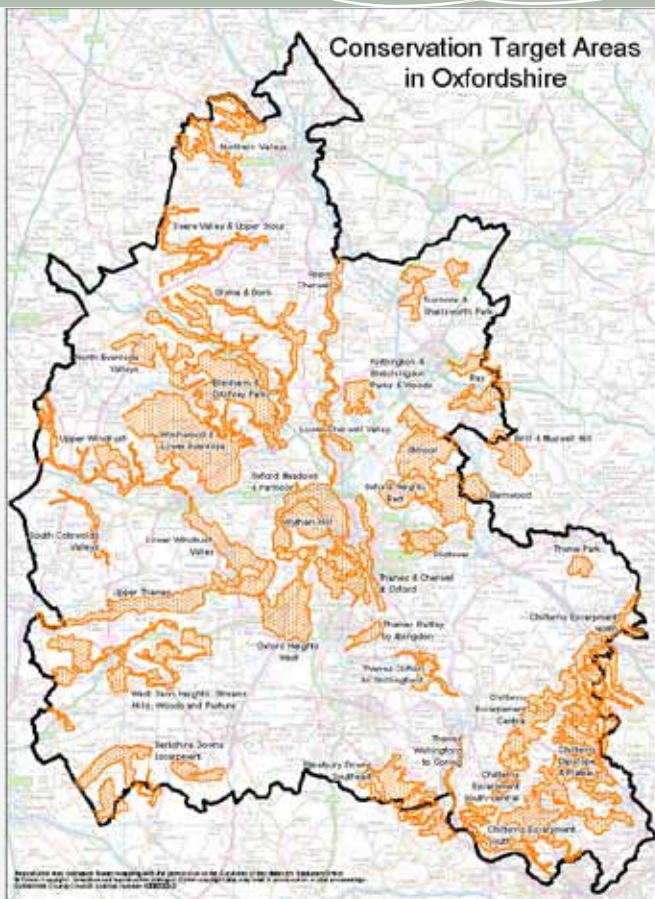
- Within England there are 65 UK BAP priority habitats; listed under S41 of the [NERC Act](#) (2006).
- In Oxfordshire there are 20 UK BAP priority habitats which are widely distributed through the county.
- Many of these are designated as Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) or Local Wildlife Sites (LWS).

There are 1149 BAP priority species in UK with 231 recorded in Oxfordshire from 1989 – 2009.

- BAP species include rare and declining species of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, invertebrates, plants and fungi.
- Up to date information on current known distribution of habitats and species is collated by the [Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre](#) (TVERC).
- A list of UK BAP priority species and habitats found within Oxfordshire can be found on the ONCF website.



Conservation Target Areas in Oxfordshire



There are 36 CTAs in Oxfordshire. CTAs are the most important areas for wildlife where targeted conservation action will have the maximum benefit. Their aim is to restore biodiversity at a landscape-scale through the maintenance, restoration and creation of BAP priority habitats.

The CTAs contain 95% of the SSSI land area in Oxfordshire and 74% of the Local Wildlife Sites.

Each CTA supports one or more of the 20 UK BAP priority habitats found in Oxfordshire.

They cover 17% of the land area of Oxfordshire but contain 85% of the mapped UK BAP priority habitat and 83% of all records of UK BAP priority species.

A similar approach has been adopted by all the counties in the south-east (known as **Biodiversity Opportunity Areas**) and in the south-west (known as **Strategic Nature Areas**).

CTA targets

There are maps, statements and targets for the CTAs with active partnerships working in them.

These partnerships, coordinated by ONCF's Biodiversity Project Manager, work towards meeting these targets.

Upper Thames CTA - A case study

In 2004, 70ha of arable land at Chimney Meadows Nature Reserve, owned by the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire & Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT), was reverted back to lowland meadow. Green hay taken from the National Nature Reserve provided the seed source and was spread onto prepared fields. Fields were initially topped to control growth of competitive plants. Subsequently fields have been hay cut and aftermath grazed. Monitoring has shown that the new meadows are becoming UK BAP priority habitat. A nearby landowner within the Upper Thames CTA will now be able to use green hay from Chimney Meadows to create species-rich wildflower meadows on their land. This work delivers BAP targets for lowland meadow creation in the Upper Thames CTA. For further information about using green hay to re-create meadows in the Upper Thames please contact BBOWT on 01865 775476.

- Area of CTA: 2284 hectares
- Extent of Lowland meadow habitat: 74.6 hectares
- % of Lowland Meadow in CTA: 3.3%
- % of Lowland Meadow county resource: 6.9%

2015 targets

- Restoration: 30 hectares
- Creation: 115 hectares



Biodiversity outside the CTAs

Conserving and enhancing biodiversity is important, wherever it is. The CTA approach does not imply that areas outside the boundaries have no biodiversity or that biodiversity here should not be protected and enhanced. It is simply a way of showing where the efforts and limited resources can be targeted to achieve the best results – protecting, enhancing and linking existing habitats.

Biodiversity both within and outside CTAs is protected by a range of legislation and through the planning system, as set out in our guide: **Biodiversity and Planning in Oxfordshire**.

OWLS

The Oxfordshire Wildlife and Landscape Study (OWLS) provides information on landscape character and biodiversity for the whole of Oxfordshire.

OWLS was completed in 2004 and provides broad, strategic biodiversity and landscape guidelines for each of the 24 landscape types which were identified as part of the study.

These can be viewed at county, district and parish scales.

BAPs in Local Development Frameworks

Local Development Frameworks (LDFs) are the collection of planning documents prepared by a local planning authority (LPA) to outline how they will manage development and land use in their area.

Local authorities have a duty under the **NERC Act** to conserve biodiversity and embedding the CTA approach in their LDF can help them meet this duty by:

- Using development to contribute towards BAP habitat management, restoration & creation both on development sites and within the CTAs.
- Highlighting to developers that CTAs are opportunity areas for compensation and enhancement required to mitigate the impacts of development.
- Protecting and enhancing biodiversity by developing policies founded on the strong evidence-base used to identify the CTAs and Local Wildlife Sites.
- Assessing biodiversity deficits, and develop approaches to improve local people's access to biodiversity
- Planning new green infrastructure, including biodiversity enhancements, and effectively direct planning gain.

Despite rapidly changing planning approaches, there is very strong policy support for the CTA approach at the national level:

Planning Policy Statement 9 highlights the importance of networks of natural habitats in paragraph 12 and states that 'local authorities should maintain networks through policies in plans' and 'such networks should be protected from development and strengthened by or integrated within it'.

How you can help

Oxfordshire's BAP belongs to everyone. Local businesses, organisations, statutory bodies, parish councils, groups and individuals can all make a valuable contribution, working on your own land or working in partnership with others. Oxfordshire Nature Conservation Forum (ONCF) provides an important focus for partnership working in the county and offers a first point of contact for anyone keen to find out more about what they can do.

- In Oxfordshire there are over 80 local conservation groups with over 1,000 volunteers actively working to enhance wildlife in their local 'patch'.

- Local farmers contribute to Oxfordshire's BAP through participation in agri-environment schemes and other conservation work on their land. There are currently 714 agri-environment agreements in place, covering almost 125,000 ha.

- Local businesses and other organisations contribute to wildlife conservation in Oxfordshire through corporate BAPs and Parish Councils often have a wildlife section in their Parish Plans or a local parish BAP.

Visit the Oxfordshire Nature Conservation Forum website for more information on how you can contribute to Oxfordshire's BAP and sign up to the ONCF weekly bulletin for the latest news in your area.

The Lawton Review and the Natural Environment White Paper

In September 2010, the Government commissioned the **Lawton Review** of England's wildlife and ecological network. DEFRA will be publishing a **White Paper on The Natural Environment** in Spring 2011.

The essence of what needs to be done to enhance the resilience and coherence of England's ecological network can be summarised in four words:

MORE, BIGGER, BETTER, JOINED

There are five key approaches:

- 1 Improve the quality of current sites by better habitat management.
- 2 Increase the size of current wildlife sites.
- 3 Enhance connections between, or join up, sites, either through physical corridors, or through 'stepping stones'.
- 4 Create new sites.
- 5 Reduce the pressures on wildlife by improving the wider environment, including through the buffering of existing wildlife sites. Oxfordshire's Conservation Target Areas are the best place to focus our conservation effort to achieve these five key approaches.



Contact us

Oxfordshire Nature Conservation Forum
www.oncf.org.uk

Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre
www.tverc.org

Oxfordshire County Council
www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/naturalenvironment

Berkshire
Buckinghamshire
Oxfordshire



Cherwell DISTRICT COUNCIL
WANTS WOODLAND

