

North Norfolk: Wilder, Wetter, Better for Nature

Landscape Recovery Pilot Project

December 2024

Overview

This transformative, landscape-scale project, led by farmers and land managers, and supported by a cross-sector public-private partnership, will create entirely new wildlife habitat from current arable land. It will fill in the habitat gaps, north of the A149 between Hunstanton and Weybourne, to give a contiguous area of habitat of approximately 20,000ha. It will also create and enhance terrestrial corridors along five chalk rivers. In total, 5,096 ha of new habitat will be created.

It takes a source to sea approach, extending inland to reconnect the North Norfolk coastal plain to the headwaters. Informed land-use change, and management actions will deliver in the short-term diverse grazing marsh, a range of dry grasslands and scrub mosaics as well as restoring areas of sand dune.

In the longer term this will also enable the coastal plain to function as a fully dynamic environment as sea levels rise and saline/brackish habitats roll landwards and up the river valleys.

Benefits could include the creation of inland freshwater habitat to compensate for coastal freshwater habitat reclaimed by the sea. It will improve species migration and colonisation opportunities, enhance biodiversity, improve water quality, increase climate change resilience and connect visitors and local communities to the natural world around them.

The project has identified five endangered 'flagship' species which are expected to benefit as a result of creating and connecting habitats. These include the natterjack toad, spoonbill, grayling butterfly, turtle dove, and barbastelle bat. Other species likely to benefit, and which will be monitored throughout the lifetime of the project, include water vole, otter, white-clayed crayfish, fish and aquatic invertebrates.

Who's involved?

A total of 67 farmers and land managers are currently involved with the pilot scheme.

They are supported by a cross-sector public-private partnership consisting of the grant recipient Norfolk Coast Partnership (hosted by Norfolk County Council), Norfolk Rivers Trust and Holkham Estate.

There are a range of other organisations involved who attend regular project delivery group meetings including Natural England, Environment Agency and the Forestry Commission.

More broadly, the project works closely with the UEA who produced the North Norfolk Biodiversity Audit which underpins the project. Other local wildlife groups and organisations are also involved including RSPB, Norfolk Wildlife Trust, National Trust, Norfolk Barbastelle Study Group, Norfolk Ornithology Association, British Trust for Ornithology, Norwich and Norfolk Naturalists Society, Cley Bird Group and Butterfly Conservation.

The project is funded by Defra during the current Project Development Phase (until June 2025).

What have we achieved?

During the current Project Development Phase (PDP) six 'deliverables' are required to be completed. These are a Land Management Plan, Monitoring & Evaluation Plan, Blended Finance Plan, Governance Plan, Site Access Plan and a Stakeholder Engagement Plan.

To date, a significant proportion of the 5,000ha of land has been subject to an ecological baseline survey, either via UK Habs or a River Condition Assessment as appropriate. The baseline habitat surveys are 70% complete, and river condition assessments are 80% complete, plus the majority of the protected species surveys for water vole, white-clawed crayfish and fish.

Land Management Plans are currently being developed with each land manager, setting out the habitat creation/ restoration proposals for their field parcels.

Blended Finance consultants are currently developing a bespoke business plan for the project, with a legal team exploring appropriate governance options to establish a 'single legal entity' to manage the project in the long term.

How do we do it?

The project proposes to deploy a range of techniques to deliver the habitat enhancements identified. For example, the creation of dry species-rich grassland is likely to be delivered via the use of locally sourced, bespoke wildflower seed mixes, as well as natural regeneration where appropriate. Grassland would then be managed via

grazing and/ or mowing, with the arisings removed to ensure nutrient levels are reduced over time to encourage a diverse range of plants to flourish.

NRT will utilise their experience in restoring (or re-wiggling') water courses and reconnecting rivers with their floodplains wherever possible.

What's next?

The short-term focus of the project is to successfully complete the six key deliverables required by Defra during the Project Development Phase (PDP) which runs until June 2025.

The project will then enter into a period of negotiation with Defra (referred to as the 'bridge' period) which is anticipated to last for up to six months.

Subject to the successful outcome of this negotiation phase, the project would then enter into a long term 20-year agreement to implement the agreed habitat and access enhancements.