

Target 2010 – West Midlands

The condition of the region's Sites of Special Scientific Interest in 2005



working towards *Natural England*
for people, places and nature



Ancient oak, Fishpool Valley SSSI, Herefordshire. Peter Wakely/English Nature 21,705

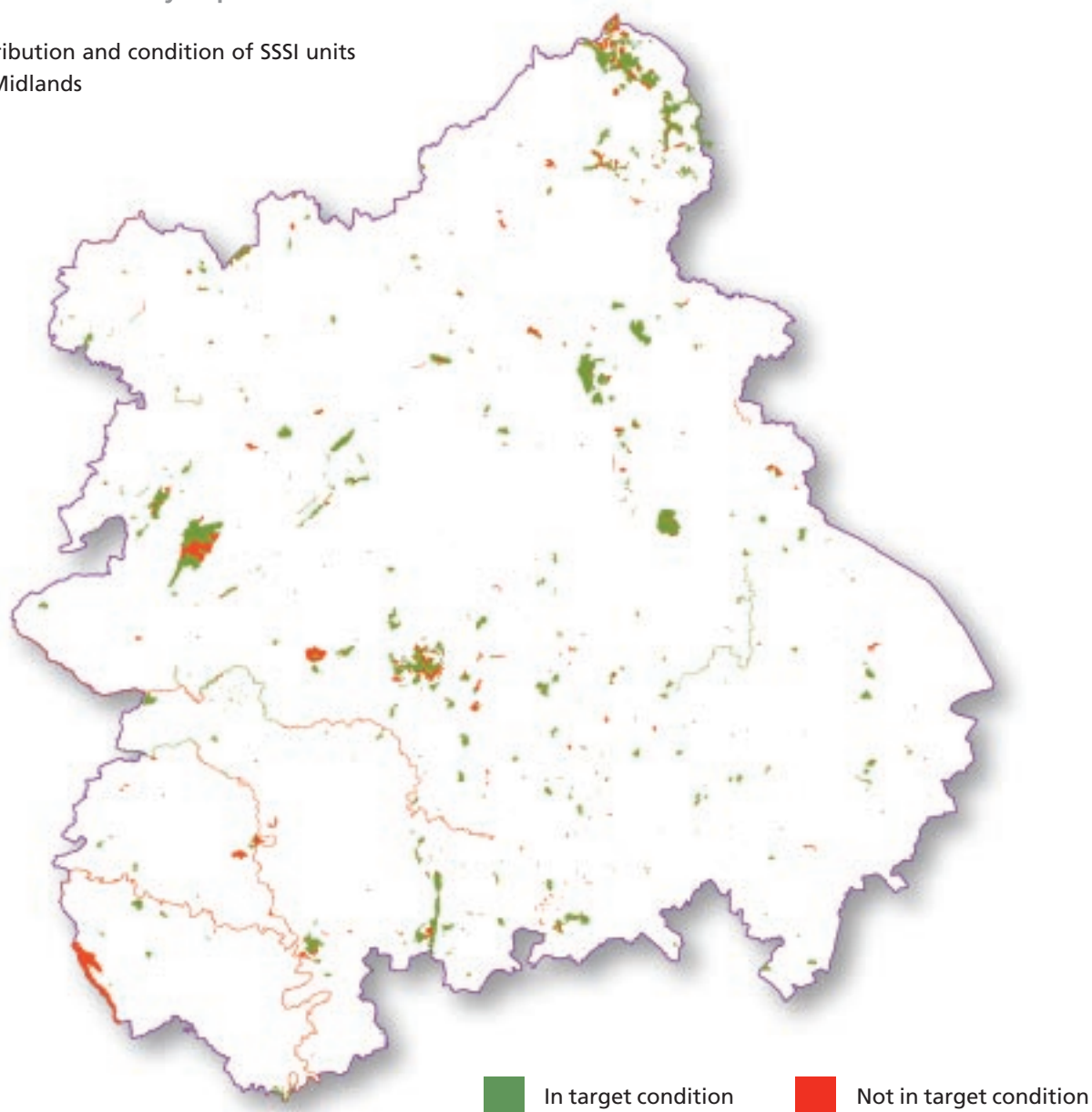
Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) are the very best wildlife and geological sites in England. The Government has signed a Public Service Agreement (PSA) to ensure that, by area, 95 per cent of these sites are in the best possible condition (target condition) by 2010.

This publication is one of nine regional documents produced as sister publications to the national report *Target 2010 – the condition of England’s Sites of Special Scientific Interest in 2005* (English Nature 2006). It reviews the current situation in the West Midlands and details the progress that has been made towards the 2010 target since September 2003. It summarises the major factors affecting SSSI condition and some of the key actions that need to be carried out over the next five years if the target is to be achieved in the region. The report should be read in conjunction with the Target 2010 report mentioned above which sets the national context and also contains useful definitions of the Government’s PSA for SSSIs, and what is meant by target condition.

The West Midlands picture

The West Midlands region is made up of Herefordshire, Shropshire, Staffordshire, Warwickshire, and Worcestershire together with Metropolitan Authorities of the West Midlands conurbation. It is a region of sharp contrasts, supporting a rich and varied natural environment and includes some of the most sparsely and densely populated parts of England. Parts of the region have a distinct upland character, including the Staffordshire Moors in the north east and the Welsh border country of Herefordshire and Shropshire, characterised by thinly settled, open landscapes of high wildlife value. The region includes part of the Peak District National Park and all or part of five Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty - Cannock Chase and the Shropshire Hills in the north, and the Malvern Hills, Cotswolds and Wye Valley in the south. The quality and character of these landscapes owes much to the extent of semi-natural habitats including acid grassland, rough pasture, heathland/moorland, and native broadleaved woodland. The West Midlands are also characterised by the major river systems of the Trent, Severn and Wye that cross the region, and support a number of internationally important wetland sites.

Figure 1 Distribution and condition of SSSI units in the West Midlands

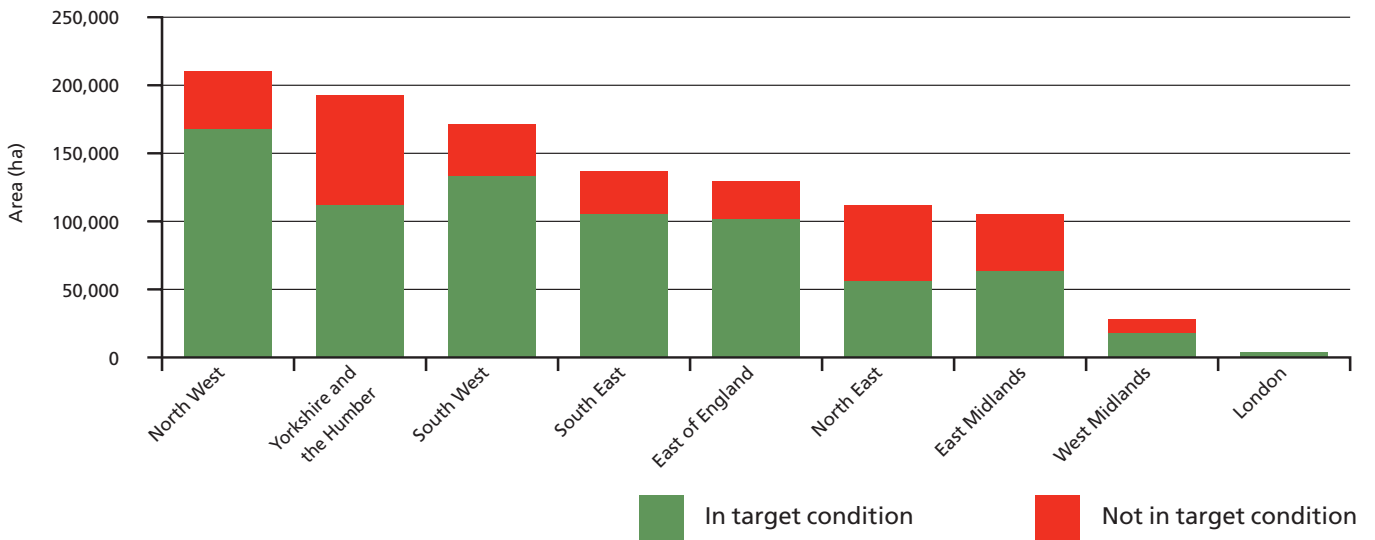


There are 441 SSSIs in the region covering over 26,000 hectares – the smallest area of SSSI land in any region except London (Figure 2). This is in part due to

the absence of coastline and large coastal and estuarine habitats found elsewhere. A purely area based account, however, underestimates the significance

of the region’s contribution as it holds over 10% by number of England’s SSSIs. Of the nine English regions, four have a larger percentage of their SSSIs in target condition.

Figure 2 Area and condition of SSSIs in England’s nine government regions



River Wye SSSI, Herefordshire. Peter Wakely/English Nature 17,098



Progress towards the 2010 target

In the past two years, excellent progress has been made towards the 2010 PSA target in the West Midlands. Back in September 2003, 55.9 per cent of SSSI land in the region was in target condition - a figure that, as of 31 December 2005, has risen to 70.5 per cent (Figure 3) – ahead of the national figure of 69.8 per cent. This improvement represents an excellent achievement and in terms of area, means that over 3,500 hectares of SSSI have been brought into target condition in the region during this period. This huge step forward reflects the hard work of landowners and managers, representing the outcome of many years of careful land stewardship and management. However, with almost 8,000 hectares of SSSI land not in target condition, there is clearly still a great deal of effort required over the next five years in order to achieve the PSA target by 2010.

Figure 3 Progress towards PSA target in the West Midlands since September 2003

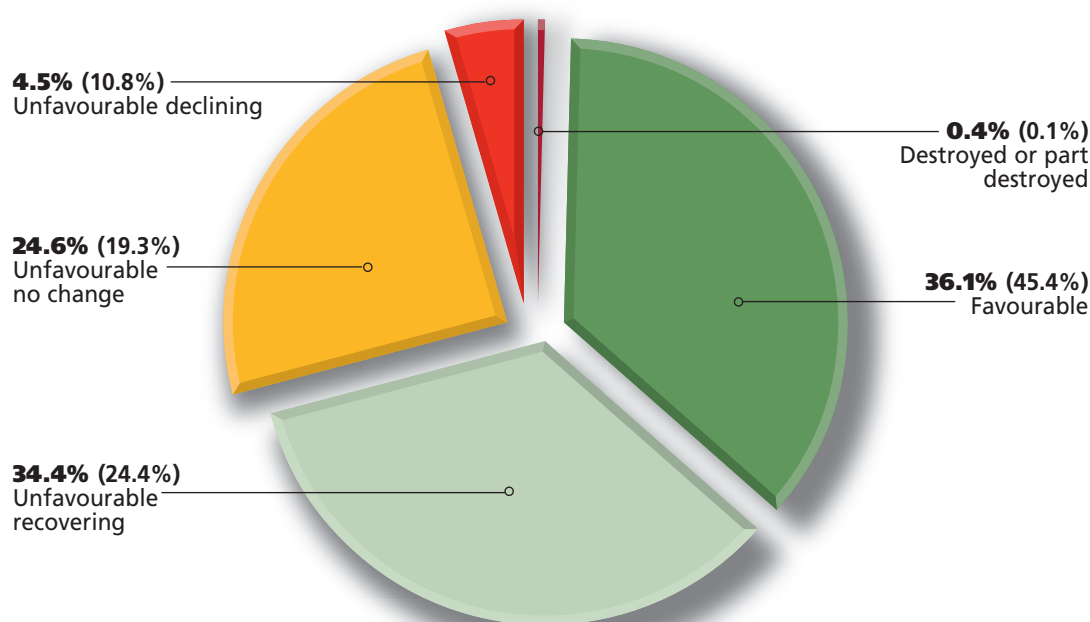
	In target condition		Not in target condition	
	%	Area (ha)	%	Area (ha)
September 2003	55.9	14,834	44.1	11,680
December 2005	70.5	18,624	29.5	7,796

All land designated as SSSI in England is part of the Government's 2010 PSA target. English Nature uses five categories to assess the condition of SSSIs. These categories (described in the national Target 2010 report) are

shown in Figure 4, which also compares the current regional and national positions. For the purposes of this report however, we concentrate on the two main categories – SSSI land in target condition (made up of SSSIs in

favourable and unfavourable recovering condition) and SSSI land not in target condition (made up of SSSIs in unfavourable no change, unfavourable declining, part-destroyed or destroyed condition).

Figure 4 Condition of SSSIs in the West Midlands at 31 December 2005 (national status in brackets)



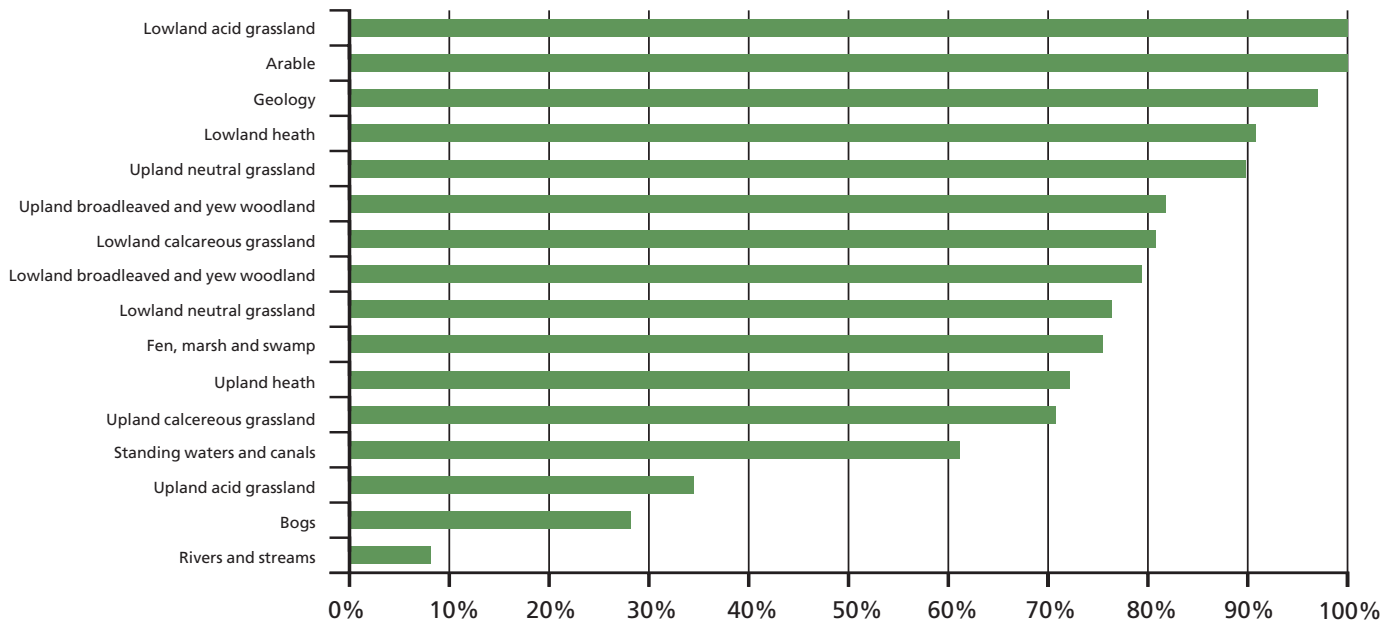
Condition of SSSI habitats in the West Midlands

Nationally, SSSIs are broadly divided into 21 main habitat types, 16 of which are found in the West Midlands. These range from broad-leaved woodlands and grassland sites, through heathland and aquatic habitats, to geological features. Figure 5 lists all the main SSSI habitats found in the region and shows their condition at the end of 2005.



Calling Moor, Fenn's, Whixall, Bettisfield, Wem and Cadney Mosses SSSI, Shropshire. Peter Wakely/English Nature 19,965

Figure 5 SSSI habitats in the West Midlands (percentage in target condition)

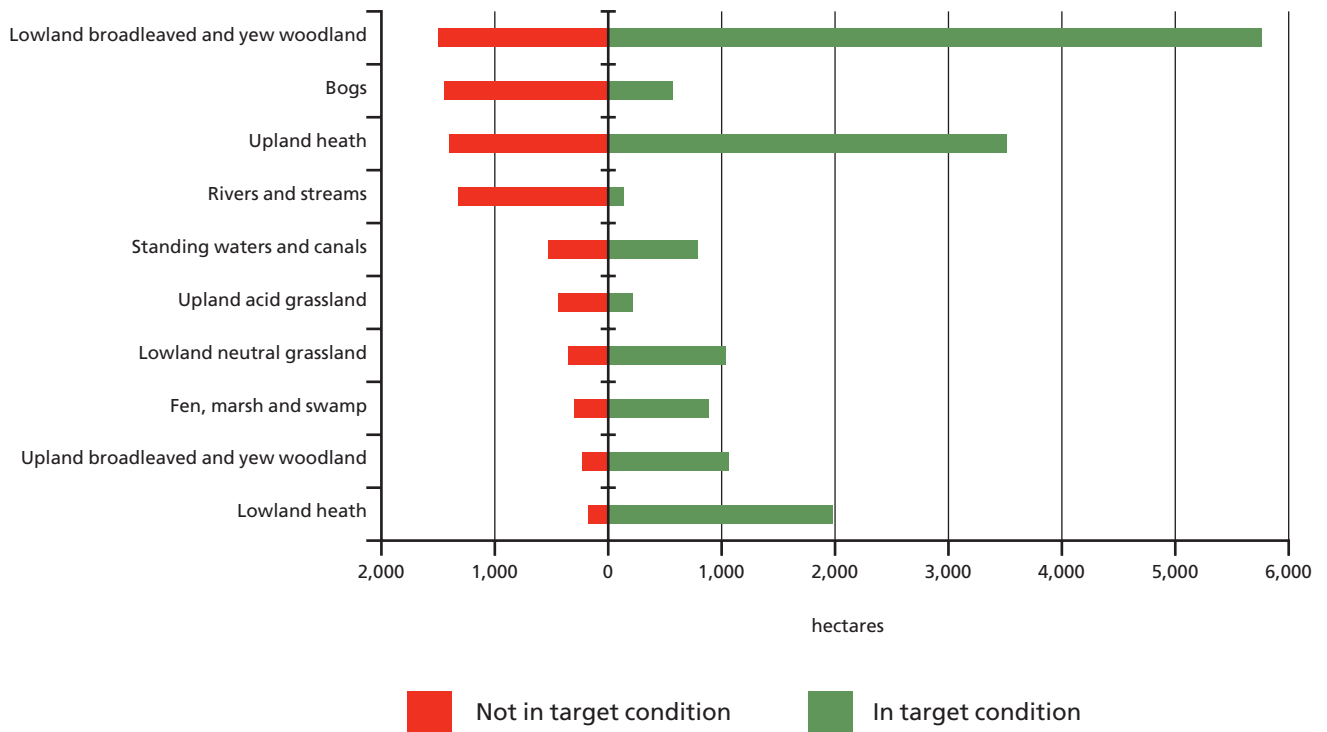


By percentage the habitat type in the worst condition is rivers and streams, as is the case nationally. Although not a major contributor to the overall area of SSSI in the West Midlands, the condition of this habitat is still cause for serious concern as in some cases, it can affect the condition of other SSSI habitats. By 2010, we would

want to see all habitats in the region in good condition including rivers and streams. However, as Figure 6 shows, the area of SSSI that falls in each habitat category varies widely and, inevitably, a sharper focus is brought to those habitats where the largest areas of land can be brought into target condition. In the West Midlands

this means prioritising efforts on the woodlands, heathlands, bogs, and rivers and streams habitats which can make the greatest contribution to the 2010 target. Of the 7,796 hectares of SSSI land still not in target condition in the West Midlands, over 5,600 hectares can be accounted for by these four habitats.

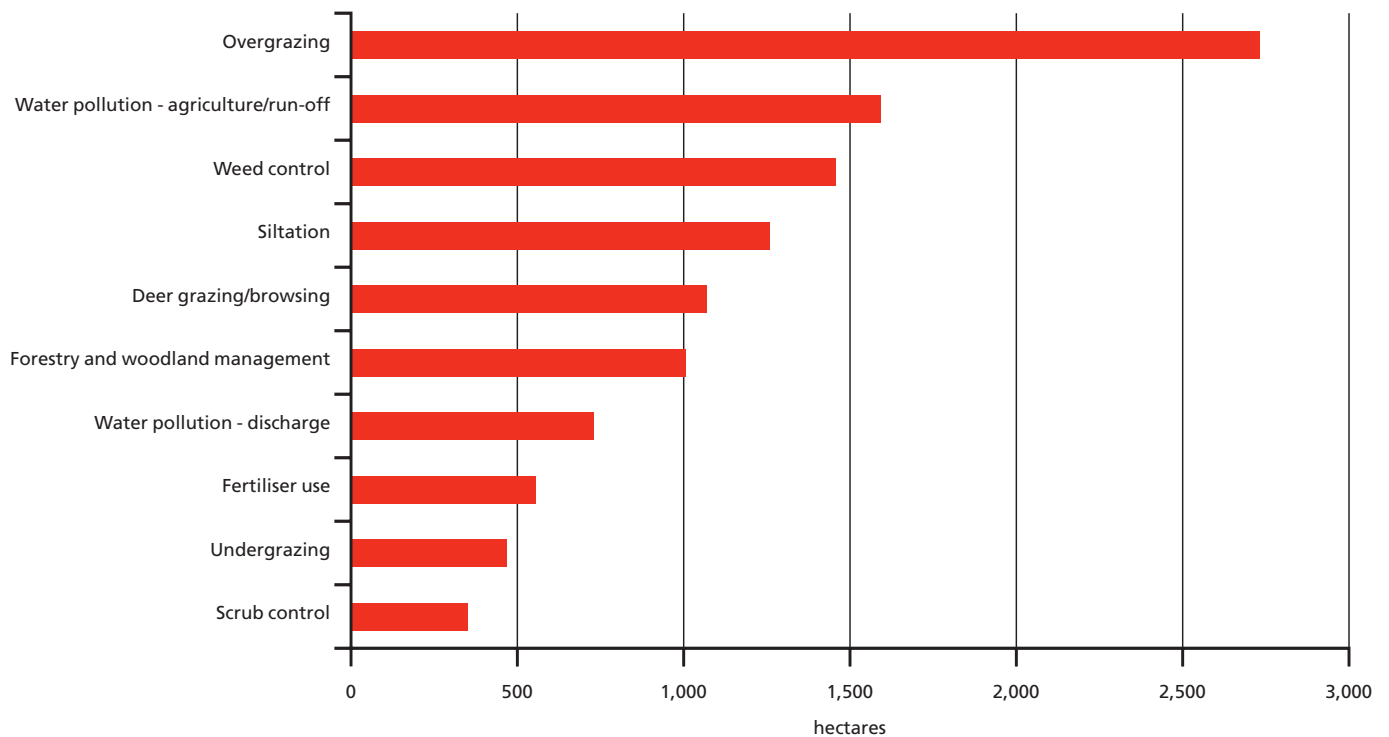
Figure 6 SSSI habitats in the West Midlands – top ten in order of greatest area that is not in target condition



Why some habitats in the West Midlands are not in target condition

The main reasons why some SSSIs are not in target condition are well understood, as are the type of habitats on which they impact. Nationally English Nature has identified 42 different causes – a comprehensive description of which is provided in an earlier publication (*England's best wildlife and geological sites – The condition of Sites of Special Scientific Interest in England in 2003* – English Nature, 2003). Figure 7 shows the main causes for the West Midlands by area.

Figure 7 Why SSSIs in the West Midlands are not in target condition



Montgomery Canal, Aston Locks – Keeper's Bridge SSSI, Shropshire. Peter Wakely/English Nature 22,215





Moccas Park SSSI, Herefordshire. Peter Wakely/English Nature 17,109

Overgrazing – 2,733 hectares

Overgrazing, particularly in the uplands, is the most significant and long-standing issue within the West Midlands. Three SSSIs are particularly affected by overgrazing, the Black Mountains in Herefordshire, the Long Mynd in Shropshire, and the Leek Moors in Staffordshire, which together account for the majority of bog and dwarf heath habitats not in target condition, totalling 2,534 hectares. We have been working successfully with land owners, graziers, commoners and the Rural Development Services on these sites to secure long-term solutions.

Water pollution – agricultural/run-off (diffuse) – 1,593 hectares

Diffuse pollution has been a long-standing problem for wetland SSSIs. The increase of nutrients such as phosphates entering water courses and wetlands from neighbouring farmland leads to a reduction in species diversity of habitats such as rivers, lakes, fens, and lowland bogs. The West Midlands' SSSIs impacted by diffuse pollution include the Rivers Wye, Lugg and Teme, and the meres and mosses of north Shropshire and west Staffordshire. We are beginning to tackle diffuse pollution in collaboration with the Environment Agency and the

Rural Development Service to promote catchment sensitive farming, which may require changes in land use near watercourses.

Weed control – 1,457 hectares

Weed control involves the management of habitats such as grassland, heathland lakes and drainage channels to prevent encroachment by native species and the spread of introduced plants that can result in the loss of local species diversity. This is an increasing cause of SSSIs not meeting target condition in the region. For native species such as bracken, there are a range of recognised control methods available. For exotic introductions, such as Himalayan balsam and Australian swamp stonecrop, we have initiated local eradication projects but increased effort will be needed with current methods of control to get on top of the problem.

Siltation – 1,262 hectares

Siltation is a major problem for lakes and rivers. It is caused mainly by run-off from arable farming in the river valleys, intensive stocking of sheep and cattle in catchments of water bodies and from direct discharges of sewage and food processing effluent. Siltation smothers the

gravel beds of rivers and lakes, preventing the spawning of fish and the growth of aquatic plants. The problems affects many of the region's rivers, as well as a number of a number of open water sites such as Aqualate Mere National Nature Reserve in Staffordshire. Silt removal is required from some lake SSSIs and the Government's new Catchment Sensitive Farming programme will help rivers to attain target condition.

Forestry and woodland management – 1,005 hectares

Many of our best woodland SSSIs are the result of centuries of traditional management, such as coppicing. However, over the last century demand for woodland products, including charcoal and hurdles, has virtually disappeared and, as a consequence, traditional management is not being carried out. In some cases neglected woodlands have lost or are losing the species that people most associate with English woodland, such as dormice and fritillary butterflies. Implementation of the Regional Forestry Framework, together with targeted use of the Forestry Commission's new England Woodland Grant Scheme will be vital tools in achieving target condition for woodland SSSIs.



Sutton Park SSSI, West Midlands. Peter Wakely/English Nature 21,844

The county picture

Just as there are obvious differences in the issues and problems facing the West Midlands when compared to the other English regions, there are differences within the region. For each county in the region, the condition and key causes for SSSIs not being in target condition can be summarised as follows:

- **Herefordshire**

(36% in target condition)

The Black Mountains are home to important areas of upland grassland, heathland and blanket bog. Overgrazing and bracken infestation are the major problems affecting these habitats. River SSSIs also have a high profile in the county, including the Wye and the Lugg. Diffuse pollution has resulted in a reduction in species diversity and is the major cause of not meeting target condition. Elsewhere, large areas of woodland SSSI are adversely affected by deer browsing which prevents young woodland plants from successfully regenerating.

- **Shropshire**

(68% in target condition)

Large moorland common SSSIs dominate the south of the county and for these sites, overgrazing is the main reason

for not achieving target condition. In the north, wetland SSSIs are prevalent and here the issues are poor water quality as a result of diffuse pollution. On lowland habitats including semi-natural grassland, wetlands, and heathland, undergrazing is the main problem, leading to scrub and weed encroachment.

- **Staffordshire**

(79% in target condition)

Heathland habitats on the upland blanket bogs around Leek and on the lowland dry heaths around Cannock constitute the majority of Staffordshire's SSSI area. The management of the Leek Moors SSSI blanket bogs represents the most significant issue for the county. Across lowland Staffordshire lack of grazing is leading to scrub and bracken encroachment, and elsewhere

the lack of effective management is leading to the deterioration of woodland and wetland habitats.

- **Warwickshire**

(90% in target condition)

Grassland and woodland habitats make up the largest area of SSSI habitats in the county. However, it is the wetland habitats that are suffering most from point source and diffuse pollution. Work is underway to improve specific sewage works and reduce the levels of phosphorus in certain rivers which supply water to wetland SSSIs. However, these improvements will not address other point sources of pollution such as major industrial sites or road drainage. As with the other counties in the region, overgrazing and undergrazing continue to affect the condition of many grassland habitats.



Northern marsh-orchid, The Flits SSSI, Herefordshire. Paul Glendell/English Nature 22,389

- **West Midlands conurbation - Birmingham, Coventry, Dudley, Sandwell, Solihull, Walsall, Wolverhampton (94% in target condition)** Heathland and grassland SSSIs in the West Midlands conurbation have historically suffered from lack of management. Sutton Park National Nature Reserve (NNR) is the conurbation's largest SSSI, and also the most visited NNR in England. Heathland management work carried out by Birmingham City Council, including removal of birch scrub and bracken from the heathland areas and the

re-establishment of a grazing regime, is delivering long term improvements to the condition of the SSSI. Since 2003, over 500 hectares of the site have been brought into target condition.

- **Worcestershire (78% in target condition)** The Wyre Forest is the largest area of lowland oak woodland in England. The historic management of parts of the woodland area has resulted in poor structural diversity and a lack of deadwood resource. Undergrazing and the loss of traditional agricultural

operations such as hay making are a threat to a number of grassland SSSIs in Worcestershire. Although over 70 per cent of neutral grassland sites are currently in target condition it is becoming increasingly difficult to locate contractors with the equipment to undertake haymaking operations, and stock to provide the necessary grazing. English Nature has established two grazing animal projects in the county, working with the Local Authorities, local farming businesses and contractors to tackle the problem.

The road to 2010

At the end of 2005, we know that 70.5 per cent of the West Midlands' SSSIs are in target condition. We also have a good understanding of the reasons why the remaining 29.5 per cent are not. Over the next five years the challenge is to ensure that this remaining area meets the 2010 target, and at the same time, take care that SSSIs already in target condition stay that way. To achieve this we need to be absolutely clear about what needs to be done, and by whom.

To tackle this critical step, English Nature established a Remedies Project in 2004, which has drawn together detailed information on every SSSI in the region. Each SSSI may be sub-divided into separate units, depending on habitat type and management of the site. For each unit not in target condition, the project:

- defines the actions needed to address these causes;
- details the mechanisms to enable the necessary actions to be carried out;
- identifies the organisations and individuals best placed to implement those actions and mechanisms, and
- enables and secures the agreement of land managers to ensure the actions are carried through.

Figure 8 lists the five most important remedies that have been identified in the West Midlands, in terms of the area of SSSI that can be brought into target condition.

Figure 8 Remedies for bringing SSSIs into target condition in the West Midlands – the top five (by area)

Remedy	Organisations who can help deliver the remedy	SSSI habitats that will benefit most from the remedy	Area of SSSI that would benefit from the remedy (ha)
Targeted agri-environment schemes	Defra Rural Development Service	Rivers and streams	1,528
Sheep Wildlife Enhancement Schemes	English Nature	Bogs	1,159
New/ renew Management Agreements	English Nature	Bogs, lowland heath, lowland broadleaved and yew woodland	1,071
Funding – Woodland Grant Schemes	Forestry authorities	Lowland broadleaved and yew woodland	986
Enforcement of overgrazing regulations	Defra Rural Development Service	Upland heath	808

Remedies in action

English Nature and the Rural Development Service are working closely with graziers, the Countryside Council for Wales and the Brecon Beacon National Park to address overgrazing in the Black Mountains of Herefordshire. In 2004 graziers on the commons in the Black Mountains entered into the Sheep and Wildlife Enhancement Scheme, working closely with English Nature to obtain an agreement to introduce a sustainable grazing regime with shepherding support from every grazier.



Lichen, Wyre Forest SSSI, Worcestershire. Peter Wakely/English Nature 15,182

Working together

As is clear from the preceding example, an enormous amount of credit is due to the partner organisations and individuals whose efforts have led to the significant advance towards the 2010 target in the last two years. Without such close partnership working, we would be a lot further back than the current position. The continuation of this approach is essential if the target is to be achieved.

Figure 9 Major landowners and the condition of their SSSIs in the West Midlands at the end of 2005

Organisation	Total area (ha)	Area of SSSI in target condition (ha)	Area of SSSI in target condition (%)
Local Authorities	2,874	2,543	88%
National Trust	2,747	1,991	73%
Wildlife Trusts	1,874	1,408	75%
English Nature	1,673	1,413	84%
Forest Enterprise	1,219	903	74%

Of all the partners that English Nature works with in the West Midlands, a small number manage large areas of SSSIs. These partners are described as the Major Landowners Group and they have a particularly critical role to play in adopting remedies and bringing SSSIs into target. Figure 9 provides a summary of the area and condition of SSSI holdings for

the major landowners in the region at the end of 2005.

This table shows the areas of land owned by each body. It does not necessarily reflect who is responsible for an SSSI not being in target condition. In many cases, there will be one or more reasons why the named landowner is not in a position to do anything about an

SSSI not meeting the target condition. At the time of going to press, English Nature is working to reach final agreement with our partners to identify, in such situations, which organisation is responsible for taking action. In the near future we will be able to show the area of SSSI holding for which the individual landholder has agreed responsibility.

Why the PSA target is so important

The protection of Sites of Special Scientific Interest has long been considered essential to the conservation of England's wildlife habitats and natural features but there is an increasing awareness of the wider value of these special sites. Firstly, by protecting particular habitats, many species, rare or otherwise, are conserved. Secondly, SSSIs perform many important 'ecosystem services' such as upland moorlands that provide our water, saltmarshes that protect our coasts from rising seas, and natural floodplains that buffer towns from flash flooding. Last but not least, SSSIs create social wealth, by offering people the simple enjoyment of a quiet walk in the countryside, and economic wealth through the opportunities they provide for local and regional ecotourism.

Achieving the PSA target will ensure that these benefits can be secured for future generations. It is clear that the biggest challenge ahead is to ensure that there is a continuing partnership approach, with truly co-ordinated action by key stakeholders. English Nature firmly believes the target is both realistic and achievable. Of course, this will require everyone to co-operate and adequate

resources to be dedicated to address outstanding issues.

The responsibility for overseeing this process passes from English Nature to *Natural England* later this year. The creation of the new organisation, *Natural England*, has already begun, with English Nature, the Landscape, Access and Recreation elements of the Countryside Agency and the

environment activities of the Rural Development Service working together as partners. Since April 2005, this natural partnership has been working together to deliver joint outcomes and pave the way for *Natural England* whilst continuing to deliver their separate and respective statutory duties. Achieving the PSA target will remain a vital area of work for the new organisation.

Water-crowfoot, River Mease SSSI, Staffordshire. Paul Glendell/English Nature 25,376







English Nature, the Rural Development Service and the Countryside Agency. Working in partnership to conserve and enhance our landscapes and natural environment, to promote countryside access and recreation as well as public well-being, now and for future generations.

This is one of a range of publications published by:
External Relations Team
English Nature
Northminster House
Peterborough PE1 1UA

www.english-nature.org.uk

© English Nature 2006

Printed on Evolution Satin,
75% recycled post-consumer waste
paper, elemental chlorine free.

ISBN 1 85716 914 X

Catalogue code ST12.7

Designed and printed by
statusdesign.co.uk, 0.5M

Front cover photographs:
Top left: Edingdale, River Mease SSSI, Staffordshire.
Paul Glendell/English Nature 25,367
Middle left: Ancient sweet chestnut, Fishpool Valley SSSI,
Herefordshire. Peter Wakely/English Nature 21,714
Bottom left: Black Mountains SSSI, Herefordshire.
Peter Wakely/English Nature 17,114
Main: Claverley Road Cutting SSSI, Shropshire.
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