

Living Landscapes

The Living Landscapes concept is a vision for our future, where wildlife-rich habitats such as those on the Langdon Ridge are restored, recreated and reconnected not just to benefit wildlife conservation but also local communities and the economy.

The Langdon Living Landscape Group has pioneered how to turn the vision into reality, demonstrating the remarkable progress that can be made when organisations and individuals unite to strive towards a common goal.

More and more people, from all walks of life and all ages, are cherishing Langdon's precious wildlife, championing its beautiful landscape, embracing its proud heritage and recognising that their shared Living Landscapes vision is building a better future, for wildlife and people to enjoy and treasure.

For more about Living Landscapes see:
www.essexwt.org.uk/living-landscapes



Woodlands

Langdon has a lot of woodland, some of it ancient (or primary), on land that has probably never been ploughed, and instead long managed to produce timber and fuel. Such woodland is species-rich and therefore precious. Carpets of springtime bluebells and anemones are typical, as are wild service trees on the clay woodlands.

Other woodland is so-called secondary, having grown up on neglected land which had been cultivated in the past – particularly since the 1870s. There is thus far more woodland on Langdon now than there was just one hundred years ago. In most cases, it started as scrub. Carpets of ivy on the woodland floor are typical of secondary woodland, which has fewer plant species than ancient woodland.

Woodlands on the gravelly hilltops, with acid soils, have plants like wood sorrel and bracken, unlike those on the London Clay, which support different species.



Meadows and grassland

The Langdon ridge is famed for its old meadows, and no other site in Essex has such a variety. Maintaining them is an important issue, since otherwise they would grow into scrub. A mixture of grazing and hay-cutting is necessary, with cattle, sheep and horses variously involved, to different management effects.

The meadows are very rich in plant species, several of which are now rare. Some have fine displays of orchids. In addition such delightful species as fairy flax, eyebright, milkwort, adder's-tongue fern, sulphur clover and quaking grass grow in several of them, while national rarities like Deptford pink and pale flax are particular treasures.

Several roadside verges are managed for their wildlife, leaving some sections uncut for two summers to support small mammals and provide nest sites for bumble bees. Some nationally endangered bumble bee species occur, as well as such beautiful butterflies as marbled whites.



Wetlands and watercourses

Despite its elevation, the Langdon ridge has some important wetlands, some of which owe their existence to the springlines formed where the free-draining sands and gravels of the higher ground meet the impervious London Clay. From these springs come the various streams which flow from the hills, feeding into the Crouch, Thames and Mar Dyke, in some cases via such time-honoured courses as the Hassing Brook, Crooked Brook and Vange Creek.

Scattered across the ridge is a series of ponds and small lakes, some of them the remnant of farmsteads now gone, and others purpose-dug more recently. Several are spring-fed. Between them they sustain an astonishing range of wildlife, from waterfowl, water voles, grass snakes and amphibians, to a dazzling array of dragonflies – some rare – and some rich marginal vegetation.

Under the auspices of the Langdon Living Landscape, several ponds have been restored, to become places of peace and beauty once more.



Hedgerows

Many of the hedges of Langdon are ancient, not least those that mark parish boundaries. In places these grow on stout banks, erected in Saxon times.

Elsewhere they grow beside lanes which were old when the Romans came, as in the case of the Bridleway which follows a north-south line inland from the Thames. Bluebells, wild service trees and several other plant species testify to such hedges being linear remnants of the original wildwood.

There is good cause to believe many of the field boundaries to be at least several hundred years old. Several have pollard oaks growing in them, as on Dry Street Farm, reflecting a time when hedgerows provided fuel and other resources, in a carefully-nurtured landscape.

The plotlands

The first half of the twentieth century was the heyday of the plotlands, when farming was depressed and many fields were divided up into plots for cheap sale to Londoners who, thanks to the railways, were able to establish weekend retreats, accessed via a network of unmade roads.

Most of these places have now gone, in many cases compulsorily purchased when Basildon New Town was built. Yet whole areas, including at Dunton and on parts of Willow Park, were never built upon. To this day, the remains of bungalows and outbuildings can be detected amid the scrub and grassland, while many a fruit-tree and small orchard can be detected where once there were carefully-tended gardens. Put together, they constitute a rich and varied resource for wildlife.



Underlying geology

Much of the south Essex area lies upon the London Clay, including the lower areas within the Langdon Living Landscape. The top of Langdon Hills has a capping of Pebble Gravel, which has been more resistant to longer-term erosion.

Between that resistant capping and the London Clay there is a series of sands and gravels, of the Bagshot Sands and Claygate Beds.

In past centuries, local parishes used to look to Langdon for cartloads of gravel for road mending, and depressions dating from such excavations can still be detected.

The sands and clays of the ridge, together with the ready supply of fuelwood, sustained a once-vigorous industry of brick and tile making.



Butterflies and moths

With 35 species recorded, Langdon is one of the best locations for butterflies in the county, thanks to the rich mosaic of habitats. When in season, white admirals, silver-washed fritillaries, commas, brimstones, purple hairstreaks and speckled woods frequent the woodlands, while the meadows and hedgerows are graced with ringlets and meadow browns, blues and skippers, tortoiseshells and peacocks, and jewel-like small coppers. The grizzled skipper, extinct elsewhere in the county, still frequents some of the Langdon meadows.

This richness is also reflected in the diversity of moths, with over 650 species recorded. The woodlands are particularly rich in species, with some that are scarce elsewhere in the county, such as the August thorn and the mocha.



Birds

Past bird-ringing activities demonstrated the importance of the Langdon ridge for migrating birds, with so many springtime migrants passing through the woods and meadows. Several warbler species breed successfully in the hedgerows and coppices. In recent years, however, the nightingales, willow warblers and turtle doves which once were such a distinctive feature of the area have become very much scarcer. By increasing the amount of coppice management this trend might be reversed.

Our resident woodland birds continue to thrive, with encouraging numbers of treecreepers, nuthatch and the three species of woodpecker. Bird numbers are swelled in winter by the flocks of fieldfares, redwings and other thrushes which migrate from further north and east, and by the shy woodcock which move into the less-disturbed woodland areas.



Small mammals

Analysis of owls' pellets has told us a lot about the small furry animals inhabiting the area. Barn owls, in particular, have a close affinity with the field voles that are their principal prey, but we know that they take bank voles, field mice and house mice as well as the tiny harvest mice, the nests of which are sometimes found in taller grass on the edge of scrub – as alongside some road verges. Populations of yellow-necked mice have also been recorded.

The remains of all three species of shrew – common, pygmy and water – turn up in the owls' pellets, but it seems that the moles escape their attentions.

Water voles and dormice - both of them protected species – are also present on the Langdon ridge.



Reptiles and amphibians

All four resident reptiles – lizards, slow-worms, grass snakes and adders – continue to inhabit suitable areas, and they enjoy legal protection. Similar protection exists for the great-crested newts which are such a feature of so many of the ponds in the area. Other newts, along with frogs and toads, also frequent these ponds, and it is clear that garden ponds play an important part in maintaining vital links for aquatic creatures across the landscape.

Marsh frogs continue to thrive in and around one of the larger lakes on Willow Park. On sunny days in early summer they make a remarkable noise, audible across a considerable distance.

Wild orchids

The Langdon ridge is remarkably rich botanically – and the numbers of wild orchids reflect this. Exceptionally for such a non-calcareous area, eleven species have been recorded, quite the most numerous of which are the green-veined orchids which abound in some meadows in springtime. Later on, their place is taken by the common spotted orchids, which in one meadow hybridise with the southern marsh orchids. Twayblades and pyramidal, early purple and bee orchids are rather more elusive, as are the helleborines, but by far the scarcest are the ladies' tresses and saprophytic bird's-nest. Sadly, though, the greater butterfly orchids have not been seen in the local woods for over a hundred years.

All these species need the stable conditions provided by undisturbed ground, since it can take up to seven years for a flowering plant to develop from the microscopic seed – and even then there needs to be a symbiotic relationship with mycorrhizal fungi.

Partner logos, including:-

- Essex Wildlife Trust
- Veolia Pitsea Marshes Trust
- Basildon Natural History Society
- Essex Badger Protection Group
- RSPB
- Essex Field Club
- Essex County Council
- Thurrock Council Basildon Council



For more information contact:-

Essex Wildlife Trust
01268 419103

Rod Cole
01268 553149

Thurrock Council
01268 542066

Langdon Living Landscape

Langdon Hills 1 Recreation Ground

Set up in the 1920s on an already old meadow, this site has a wonderful flora, which Basildon Council has been careful to maintain, while also attending to the recreational facilities. In May thousands of green-veined orchids flower on the outfield, together with Fairy Flax, Adder's-tongue fern, Hay-rattle, Quaking grass and other such distinctive species.

Dunton 2 Plotlands and Lincewood

Thick Hawthorn scrub occupies much of 73 acres at Dunton, growing among the remains of plotland bungalows built between the turn of the century and the 1940's. During the winter months Redwings and Fieldfares roost here in their hundreds.

Lincewood consists of 71 acres of wide plotland roads and semi-ancient Bluebell woodlands, with mature Oaks and Hornbeams lining the footpaths. Green and Greater-spotted woodpeckers frequent these large trees. Fine views of London can be had from the west side of the reserve.

Dunton Lake and Meadows, managed by EWT and owned by the Land Trust, constitute a further 40 acres. The meadows are managed for the endangered Grizzled Skipper. The lake offers a tranquil setting for a stroll or picnic. Fishing on the lake is by membership only.

The Hill-top 3 Woodlands

Coombe Wood and **The Park** are mainly ancient woodland, with coppiced hazel and several areas of pine plantation. These woods are renowned for their bluebells, and a photo taken here was chosen by the public as the winner for the 2014 Countryfile Photo Calendar. The main access to this area is via the Beacon Field, which in the past held a prison-of-war camp during the Second World War.

Hall and **Gravel Hill Woods** are known for their steep slopes, cherry trees and bluebells. There are fine views to the west, with London on the skyline.

Old Hill and **Great Sutton Woods** provide a walking link between Westley Heights and One Tree Hill. A hard-surfaced horse and cycle ride also links up to One Tree Hill. Rare plants recorded here include Upright Goosefoot and Deptford Pink.

Marks Hill Wood 4

Managed by the Basildon Natural History Society and owned by the EVT, this area is remarkably rich in wildlife, because of its varied geology, spring lines, and diverse mosaic of ancient and secondary woodlands, meadows, former plotland and ponds.

Woodland coppicing in the winter months is done by volunteers. There is no better wood for tree lichens in the county. In turn, it supports a variety of moths and other insects rare elsewhere. Sparrowhawks, owls and woodpeckers all nest here, while the dense coppice regrowth provides cover for smaller birds and an abundance of small mammals.

Scarce plants and trees include Wild Service, Helleborine orchids and ferns like Soft Shield-fern, Polypody and Hartstongue, while butterflies include Silver-washed fritillaries and White Admirals.

Willow Park 5

At 220 acres, Willow Park is the largest part of Langdon Nature Reserve, with the greatest variety of habitats and some of the rarest and most interesting species. The stout banks and old trees of a medieval deer park are still evident. There are several meadows, species-rich and varied in nature and quite the prettiest in the county. One of them, Rough Piece, chosen as the county's Coronation Meadow in 2013, commands fine views over the Thames estuary. It has an abundance of wild orchids, and, along with several of the other meadows, supports a delightful number of butterflies, including Green Hairstreak, Marbled White and Grizzled Skipper.

Longwood is a Hornbeam coppice woodland, with some majestic oaks, some of them sessile.



Vange Hill Open 8 Space and Basildon Golf Club

Vange Hill Open Space
This Local Nature Reserve supports a rich wildlife, including some wildflowers which now occur nowhere else in the region, such as pale flax and kidney vetch, together with such other localised species as Bythinian Vetch and Grass Vetchling. Rare bumble bees and a host of butterflies, including Marbled Whites, Ringlets, Gatekeepers and Speckled Woods grace the meadow and woodland sections, while in favourable years migrant Painted Lady and Clouded Yellow butterflies resort to the south-facing slopes.

Flocks of Fieldfare, Redwing and other thrushes feast on the berries in winter, sometimes accompanied by the rarer waxwings, while summer migrants like Whitethroats, Blackcaps and Chiffchaffs nest in the thick bush-growth.

Basildon Golf Course
This ridge has magnificent views and much wildlife. The wild flowers support many invertebrates, including national rarities like some of the bumble bees, and over 25 butterfly species. All four reptiles occur here, as well as badgers, foxes and squirrels.

The fine old pond of the former Vange Hall Farm, on the ridge, has recently been restored as part of the Langdon Living landscape.

Northlands Wood and One Tree Hill 7

Northlands Wood is an ancient wood, taking its name from the high ground north of the Thames. It contains very old coppiced hornbeam, wild service and other tree species. Notable butterflies occurring here include speckled wood, white admiral and silver-washed fritillary.

One Tree Hill takes its name from a lone hilltop ash tree which was said to have been used by sailors navigating their way along the Thames. As well as being known for its woodlands, this area has many wildflower meadows, extending eastwards as far as Nethermayne. Some of these are Sites of Special Scientific Interest, renowned for their orchids and other plants such as bird's-foot trefoil, violets, adder's-tongue fern, along with cinquefoil and agrimony – food-plants for the rare grizzled skipper butterfly.



Westley Heights 6

The Heights cover the highest part of the Langdon Hills, reaching 385 feet (118m) above sea level. Essex County Council purchased the land in 1932, following public pressure against development, and this far-sighted act marked the beginning of the County Council's land acquisition under the Green Belt scheme, which was to continue for the next 30 years. Westley Heights has public toilets, a mile-long access-for-all path, a natural play area and an orienteering course, and hosts a number of large events throughout the year, including the Santa in the Woods weekends.