# *Biodiversity Opportunity Area Statement*

## **Name:** High Weald

**Description**: A large and dispersed target area covering a mosaic of small woods, patches of heathland and acid grassland, and neutral grassland, interspersed with streams and ponds, and reflecting the complex geology and topography of the High Weald landscape. The landscape has long been shaped by the impact of human activity and intervention, but has remained relatively unchanged in modern times.

**National Character Area(s)**: High Weald
**Kent Character Area(s):** Kent Water – Upper Medway; Penshurst Central High Weald; Pembury CentralHigh Weald; Kent Fruit Belt – Kentish High Weald; Bayham Central High Weald; Bewl & Bedgebury Kentish High Weald; Cranbrook Kentish High Weald; Bodiam Lower Rother Valley.
**Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB):** High Weald

**Landscape Character:** A landscape whose complex geology gives rise to deeply incised gill stream valleys and ridges.. Water systems here are typically flashy. A scattered settlement pattern of small villages, hamlets and historic farmsteads produce a distinctive character. Historic sunken lanes are typical of this area, with steep sides their unique microclimate supports a rare flora of ferns, and bryophytes. Drove ways follow the distinctive NE-SW pattern running across the low weald to the Downs. Distinctive and scattered sandstone outcrops or 'bluffs' rise above the farmland. Ancient woodland is a characterising feature, and often thick, ancient shaws bound fields. Fields are typically small and irregular in pattern, having been 'cut out' of larger woodland blocks. Pasture is a typical land use on the poor soils of the High Weald – heathland, meadows and acid grassland are all characteristic.

**Geology:** Sandstones and clays of the Hastings Beds series.

**Biodiversity:**

1 An intricate matrix of ancient semi-natural woodland and grassland, with small water bodies, streams and rivers and associated riparian habitats, as well as patches of heathland and important areas of acid grassland and lowland meadow. Some woodland and grassland sites are of national significance.

2 The area contains furnace/hammer ponds and other acidic water courses which are unique.

3 The area is important for many species which are at the edge of their range in Kent, including golden-ringed and brilliant emerald damselflies, and a number of western bryophyte species associated with rock outcrops and gills. The area is important for bats, particularly woodland species. Bechstein's bat is recorded breeding here. Birds otherwise very scarce in Kent, including willow tit, lesser spotted woodpecker and woodlark occur here.

**Targets:**

1 Restore, recreate and enhance woodland through active conservation management, particularly locally unique gill woodlands, heathy woodlands and wood pasture. Restore plantations on ancient woodland sites to native woodland.

2 Secure the appropriate conservation management of all existing Lowland Meadows. Enhance at least 100ha of species-rich neutral grassland to bring it to UK BAP priority habitat Lowland Meadow quality. Pursue opportunities to create new species-rich neutral grassland where this will contribute to meeting the county-wide target of 37ha, in blocks of 2ha or more, by 2020.

3 Reinforce the intricate matrix of habitats by restoring and recreating heathland, acid grassland, and neutral grassland, and reconnecting fragmented woodlands. Opportunities should be taken for heathland or acid grassland restoration and enhancement as part of woodland management, for example at Bedgebury Forest and Hemsted Forest and in the Pembury area. Additional opportunities for creation of acid grassland and heathland should be pursued where this would contribute to the county-wide target of creating up to 28ha by 2020.

4 Pursue other opportunities to create new acid grassland and heathland, of up to 20ha in blocks of at least 1ha and no more than 500m from other existing or new semi-natural habitat. Enhance at least 10ha of species-rich acid grassland to bring it to UK BAP priority habitat Lowland Acid Grassland quality.

5 Maintain and restore water courses, achieving a quantifiable improvement in ecological status as judged by Water Framework Directive indicators and maintain, restore and create ponds.

6 Action for naturally widely dispersed habitats (ponds, traditional orchards), wildlife associated with arable farmland, and widely dispersed species such as great crested newt will need to focus across the whole of the area and not just within the Biodiversity Opportunity Area boundary.

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**How should Biodiversity Opportunity Area maps and statements be used?**

1. The BOA maps can be seen as a spatial reflection of the Kent Biodiversity Strategy. They indicate where the delivery of Kent Biodiversity Strategy targets should be focused in order to secure the maximum biodiversity benefits. The BOA maps also show where the greatest gains can be made from habitat enhancement, restoration and recreation, as these areas offer the best opportunities for establishing large habitat areas and/or networks of wildlife habitats. As such, they will be useful to local planning authorities in the development and delivery of Green Infrastructure and resilient ecological networks . The BOA statement documents will provide guidance on the conservation priorities which should be adopted in each area.

2. Information provided on the habitats and species associated with each BOA is not definitive. Rather, it identifies those priority habitats for which the area is known to be most important, and provides a range of examples of priority species for which the area is known to be important. It is likely that each BOA will support additional habitats and species of principle importance for the conservation of biodiversity, and reference should be made to the Kent Habitat Survey and the Kent & Medway Biological Records Centre to support decision-making.

3. Biodiversity targets identified in the statement documents incorporate, where appropriate, targets in the Kent Biodiversity Strategy. However, not all targets in the Strategy are easily spatially defined, and the BOA maps and statements should be read alongside relevant Action Plans in the Kent Biodiversity Strategy.

4. The BOA maps should not be seen as planning constraint maps. It is not intended or proposed that nature conservation becomes the primary land-use within the target areas, so long as the targets and objectives for each area can be met, and development of any kind is not precluded. However, consideration might in some cases need to be given to ensuring that development within a BOA did not significantly increase the fragmentation of wildlife habitats within target areas or neutralize significant opportunities for habitat restoration or recreation.

5. BOA boundaries are not absolute. They have been drawn to follow mapped boundaries wherever possible in order to facilitate spatial planning and decision-making. However, a project immediately outside the mapped boundary should not be immediately dismissed if it would help to deliver the targets identified for the BOA concerned. It is also not the case that all land within a BOA offers the same opportunities for habitat restoration or recreation, and reference should be made to the Habitat Opportunity maps on the Kent Landscape Information System, when this becomes available, to support detailed decision-making.

6. The areas outside the identified BOAs still have substantial biodiversity interest, and include a number of nature reserves, Local Wildlife Sites, ancient woodlands and other areas of habitats. Although the focus of any biodiversity action should be on the BOAs, it will still be necessary to maintain, enhance, buffer and extend areas of wildlife habitat outside the mapped areas in order to maintain the wildlife interest and richness of the wider countryside.

7. Some biodiversity interest is not well served by the BOA mapping process, and action for ponds, traditional orchards, wildlife associated with arable farmland, and widely dispersed species such as great crested newt will need to focus across the whole of Kent and Medway and not just within identified Opportunity Areas.

8. While the primary purpose of the BOAs is to direct positive action for nature conservation, information on landscape has been included in the target documents. Reference should be made to AONB management plans or other landscape policy documents in drawing up proposals for habitat restoration or recreation in order to maximize the positive benefits for landscape and avoid conflict with features of landscape importance.

Kent Nature Partnership – http://www.kentnature.org.uk/
Kent & Medway Biological Records Centre – www.kmbrc.org.uk/