



57. Annual Report 2025

<u>Period of the Report:</u>	01.10.2024 – 30.09.2025
<u>State:</u>	Federal Republic of Germany
<u>Name of the Area:</u>	Lüneburg Heath, (Lüneburger Heide)
<u>Certifications or national/ International designations</u>	Nature reserve area (LÜ002) FFH- Area (Nr.70) Bird- Saving Area number (V 24) European Diploma for protected areas (DE940003)

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Conditions: List here all conditions which were attached to the award or the renewal of the European Diploma. Explain either how the conditions have been totally complied with or detail the progress in complying with the conditions. Please also indicate any unresolved difficulties that you have encountered.

There were no conditions attached to the renewal of the European Diploma (see Resolution CM/ResDip(2023)3).

Recommendations: List here all recommendations which were attached to the award or the renewal of the European Diploma. Explain either how the recommendations have been totally complied with or detail the progress in complying with the recommendations. Please also indicate any unresolved difficulties that you have encountered.

1. further continue reducing the concession of ground-water extraction and technically and quantitatively co-ordinate with the activities and infrastructures of Wasserwerke Hamburg ground-water extraction for irrigation on farmland; permanently monitor the ground-water situation of the entire Lüneburg Heath Nature Reserve using a ground-water monitoring network evaluating changes in the eco-hydrological situation due to water extraction and climate change (changes in seasonality of rainfall and atmospheric humidity); use of ground-water modelling is recommended to simulate the impact of all factors possibly influencing the ground-water level, the surface waters including streams, the different types of vegetation including forests, the biotopes of red-list species and the natural dynamics of the whole ecosystem;

Since 2019, there has been a legal dispute between Hamburg Wasser, the regional waterworks, and the administration of the Harburg district over the delivery volumes for annual groundwater extraction. There will be no decision in 2025 either.

The Harburg district is currently developing a new concept for groundwater protection. Landowners have been asked to report areas particularly worthy of protection. The concept also aims to identify existing conflicts regarding groundwater use.

2. strengthen political recognition and increase the structural funding of the Lüneburg Heath Nature Reserve beyond the local level and continue increasing the public funding to the same level as that provided to federal nature parks; secure funding for a permanent group of employed rangers (Naturwacht);

In the Lüneburg Heath nature reserve, there are still no rangers employed by public institutions. The VNP, a private non-profit organization, still pays a team of rangers itself.

3. continue ensuring appropriate funding for the rearing and maintenance of the grey-horned "Heidschnucke" (graue gehörnte Heidschnucke) and of the Dülmen wild horses (Dülmener Wildpferde) by Lower Saxony and the Federal Republic;

There is still no public funding for the highly endangered rare breed "Dülmener Pferd" in Lower Saxony.

4. implement the broad corridors in woodlands meant to link open heathland habitat, as foreseen in the management plan of the Natura 2000 sites overlapping with the Lüneburg Heath Nature Reserve; assess the possibility of creating suitable ecological corridors between the Lüneburg Heath Nature Reserve and the black grouse biotopes outside the reserve;

VNP is responsible for the development of around 700 hectares of ecological corridors between heath and forest.

In 2024/5, VNP cleared 6 hectares of forest in the area of Osterheide, near Silvestersee to create structurally diverse transitions between forest and heath. This measure is intended to improve the habitat of the black grouse.

The black grouse population of the Lüneburg Heath is now the only long-term viable population outside the Alps in Central Europe (FFH-Managementplan 2022). The following diagram shows the development of the black grouse population in Lüneburger Heide nature reserve since 1990.

From 2020 – 2023 “Institute for Wildlife Science of Hanover Veterinary University” (ITAW) carried out a research project about “Occurrence and spatial use of black grouse predators in the Lüneburg Heath”. The final report is unfortunately still not available.

The Nature Conservation Agency of Lower Saxony (NNA) in cooperation with ITAW is currently working on a new conservation program for Black Grouse. The development of the action plan was planned for the period 2024 – 2025. The action plan has not yet been finalized. The report is now expected in March 2026.

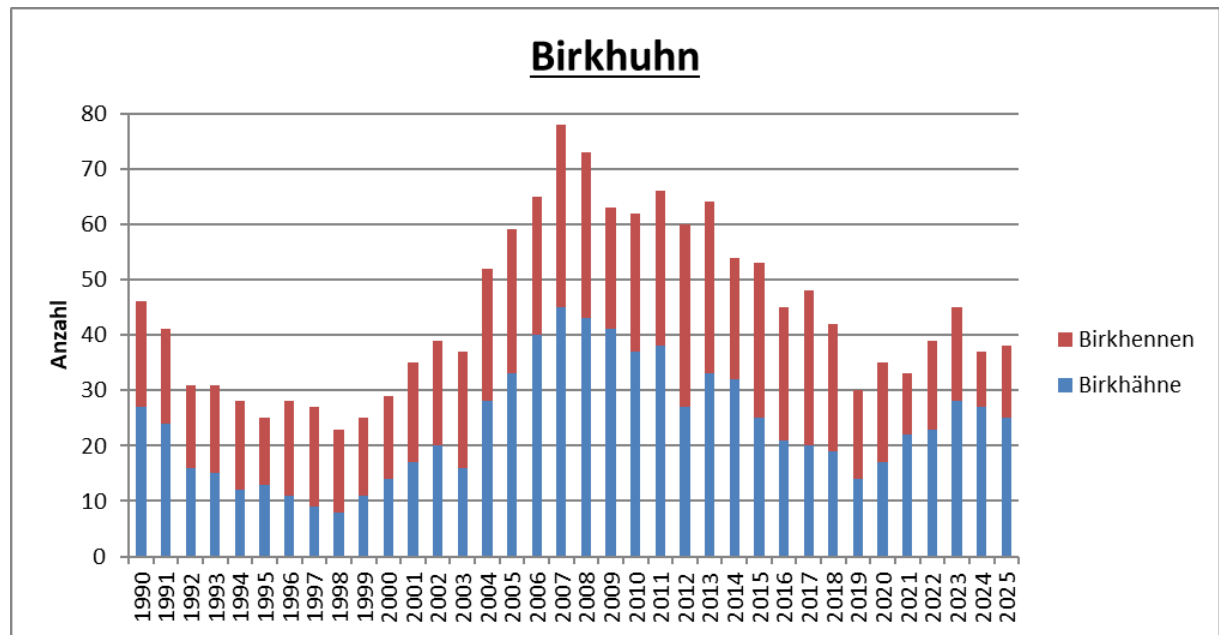


Figure 1: Black grouse population in Lüneburger Heide nature reserve since 1990, red females, blue males

In 2025, VNP staff and volunteers counted a total of 38 black grouse. The population has thus remained stable compared to the previous year. The greatest threat to black grouse in the Lüneburg Heath nature reserve comes from foxes and crows. In addition, the black grouse suffer from disturbance caused by hikers and cyclists who illegally stray from designated paths.

5. pursue the restoration of streams and associated wetland biotopes and buffer strips; maintain the efforts to safeguard the diversity of typical landscapes associated with the historical “heidepotstalsystem” (deep stable culture, so-called “Heidebauernwirtschaft”); further prepare the ongoing and future management projects in light of historical agro-pastoral land-use habits; develop modern, efficient and effective schemes to mimic to the extent possible these ancient techniques;

In 2024/25, measures were implemented to renaturalize the "Dierkshauser Bach" stream. First, the landowners were asked for permission. Then, coniferous trees, especially pines and spruces, were felled in the stream's floodplain. New deciduous trees were planted along the stream at wide intervals to replace the conifers. Gravel was added to the streambed to improve the habitat.

Landschaftspflegehof Tütsberg, VNPs own farm, maintains several plots of arable land as "Heidebauernwirtschaft", i.e. a system of historic land use with a 10 year rotation and long fallow periods. In 2025, four fields were again cultivated with old varieties of rye, oat and buckwheat. The high rainfall in 2025 led to a very good flowering of segetal species.

6. continue reducing areas with cultivation of energy crops within and beyond the borders of the Lüneburg Heath Nature Reserve to a level that does not affect the nature reserve's flora, fauna, ground water and scenic attraction; continue the efforts to maintain, restore or create segetal plant communities, given the mere biodiversity richness and agro-historical value of these rare plant communities in Europe;

The cultivation of energy crops within and beyond the borders of Lüneburg Heath Nature reserve is still very extensive. VNP does not have more precise data on the development of energy crop cultivation in the area around the NSG.

VNP again collaborated with a farmer in 2024/25 to promote segetal species. The population was stable, especially the fire lilies.

7. continue ecological forest management and convert monocultures of spruce and pine into mixed forests, including native tree and scrub species; expand whenever possible spontaneous deciduous forest development in the forested areas according to the rewilding concept, but carefully monitor the succession to detect and avoid further coniferous tree expansion;

In 2024/25, 17.000 deciduous trees were planted with the help of volunteers. Several companies ("Laura stop the water", Firma Terra, Volksbank, Rossmann) supported the ecological forest conversion initiatives with donations. Within Lüneburg Heath nature reserve, mainly oaks, cherry trees, and small-leaved limes were planted. Outside the nature reserve near Surbostel, 2.000 wych elms were planted along the Böhme River.

Approximately 21 hectares of young forest were managed. Deciduous trees, especially beeches, oaks, and rowans, were specifically promoted, and coniferous trees were felled.

The VNP continuously marks and maintains 5-10 habitat trees per hectare in its forests.

A wooded area of approximately 60 hectares near Barri has not been used for forestry for more than 80 years. The area is being developed into a "natural forest plot".

8. continue including scientific experiments in regional planning processes and prevent negative impacts on the nature reserve from outside the area's boundary; carry out sufficient and detailed studies taking into account the recommendations formulated by the Verein Naturschutzpark before licensing a wind farm or any other construction project in the neighbourhood of the reserve; continue the co-operation with scientists and support scientific research programmes within the boundaries of the Lüneburg Heath Nature Reserve to further underpin the management with evidence-based arguments;

Since 2025, Deutsche Bahn (German Railway Company) has been pursuing plans very intensively for the construction of a new high speed railway line in the immediate vicinity of the eastern border of Lüneburger Heide nature reserve.

Deutsche Bahn has called on the German Parliament / Bundestag to approve the construction of a new railway line from Hanover to Hamburg as quickly as possible. Construction of the line is scheduled for completion in the 2030s. Local citizens' initiatives are demanding the expansion of existing railway lines instead of a new construction project.

VNP is very concerned about the potential fragmentation of habitats of endangered species particularly the black grouse.

In 2024/25, the Heidekreis district administration examined a total of 39 sites that appeared fundamentally suitable for the construction of wind farms. The only site directly adjacent to the nature reserve near Scharrl was excluded due to the presence of black grouse.

During the planning process, the VNP highlighted the particular importance of two other areas outside the Lüneburg Heath nature reserve for the protection of the black grouse.

"Außenschießstellung / Shooting Range Munster" and "Riensheide" are important stepping stone habitats for the black grouse. The planning process for the construction of wind farms in the district of Heidekreis is scheduled to be completed in 2026.

The VNP points out that the burden of light pollution ("Lichtsmog") on native fauna has increased significantly in recent years along the eastern border of the nature reserve. Intensely illuminated advertising pylons have been erected along the A7 motorway at the Evendorf, Bispingen, and Soltau-Ost exits.

9. in close co-operation with the Lower Saxony authorities, continue the efforts to merge the extensive internal data with external data available (for example the database of Lower Saxony concerning Natura 2000) so that all species occurring in the reserve are recorded and mapped to ensure they are considered in regional, national and federal planning procedures; consider outsourcing the development of a data exchange system that will ensure the compatibility of both systems;

The NNA is currently working on expanding the official NIWAB database. NIWAB is currently used to record plant species, but is very difficult to use. As an interim solution for some species, data can be entered into the NIWAB database using Excel spreadsheets. In the future, interfaces will be integrated directly into the NIWAB database to allow the use of frequently used nature conservation apps such as "observation" and "iNaturalist".

10. assess the feasibility of creating buffer zones in the neighbouring areas of the Lüneburg Heath Nature Reserve with a high protection status in order to mitigate the effects of disturbances on the core zone;

In 2024 "Naturpark Lüneburger Heide", surrounding Lüneburg Heath nature reserve was expanded by 1993 ha and a large new buffer zone created. In 2025 there were no further enlargements of buffer zones.

11. continue monitoring invasive alien plant and animal species thoroughly, in order to implement appropriate management measures that minimise their presence and impact on the native species; implement, to the extent possible, the recommendations of the Standing Committee to

the Bern Convention regarding invasive alien species; strengthen national and international co-operation in the field of invasive alien species;

In 2025, late-flowering black cherries (*Prunus serotina*) was cleared by volunteers. Students from a Polish forestry academy and local school classes helped with the clearing work. *Prunus* was cleared on approximately 40 hectares in mixed stands of deciduous forests. On a further 7 ha along the railway line near Handeloh, *Prunus* was cleared by permanent employees of the VNP. In the Hörpeler Heide, *Prunus* was removed with the help of a mini-excavator. Cultivated blueberries (*Vaccinium corymbosum*) were dug up and removed by hand by volunteers. *Fallopia japonica* was excavated from a small area at Inzmühlen parking lot.

12. consider setting up a participatory stakeholder platform to address issues associated with the presence of the wolf in the broader area and to define consensual measures that are feasible, effective and fundable to deal with the potential impact of this carnivore species protected by European legislation; strengthen national and international co-operation to identify good species management practices.

The number of wolf packs in the German state of Lower Saxony increased to 59 by September 2025. The number of confirmed wolf territories rose to 64. Five wolves were found dead. Four of them died in traffic accidents. Thirteen wolf packs have been identified in the Heidekreis district and the neighboring region. The largest wolf pack (Munster, approximately 20 km from the Lüneburg Heath nature reserve) comprised up to 17 individuals.

At the end of 2024, the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention of the Council of Europe decided to lower the protection status of the wolf. As a result, the classification of the wolf was changed under the EU's Flora-Fauna-Habitat Directive from "strictly protected" to "protected". The EU member states subsequently approved a change in the law that makes it easier to shoot wolves to protect grazing animals.

In 2025, the German Federal Ministry for the Environment reported a favorable conservation status for wolves in the Atlantic region to the EU (the northern part of Lüneburger Heide nature reserve is situated in this region) as well as the Continental region (the southern part of the Lüneburger Heide nature reserve is situated in this region). This classification will make it easier for the German federal states to implement wolf management through hunting in the future. The German Federal Government is currently working on amending the Federal Nature Conservation Act and the Federal Hunting Act. This is intended to create the legal framework for hunting "problem wolves" in a timely manner.

Site Management and Boundaries, Other Information

In 2025, three farmers filed a lawsuit against management restrictions in the Lüneburg Heath nature reserve. The responsible court (OVG Lüneburg) has ruled that the regulation of the nature reserve is largely lawful. The requirements of the regulation are proportionate. The applications of the farmers and landowners were rejected.

VNP as a "Non-Profit-Organisation" is deeply worried about the current discussions regarding the future funding of EU agricultural and nature conservation programs. Initial drafts for the new EU funding period raise concerns that there will be massive cuts to nature conservation programs. The Lüneburg Heath Nature Reserve is urgently dependent on reliable and long-term funding for habitat management measures.