



7.1 Woodland Habitat Action Plan

VISION

A greatly expanded network of woodlands across the Borough, with every Swindon resident having easy access to it. A rich variety of woodland types, including glades and clearings, managed to provide habitats for trees, woodland flowers, birds, mosses, lichens and other wildlife.

KEY FACTS

What have we got?

Woodland cover within the Borough has historically been extremely low. National trends in woodland cover, which fell to as low as 5% after the First World War (Wilts BAP), have been accentuated in Swindon: ten years ago, the Borough had a mere 560ha of woodland, covering 2% of the land area.

New woodland plantings, particularly under the umbrella of the Great Western Community Forest, increased the area of woodland within the Borough: currently there are 925ha of woodland covering 4% of the land area. Whilst this represents a significant increase in area covered by new plantings it still compares poorly with a figure of 7% for neighbouring Wiltshire, 7.7% nationally, and a European average of around 30%. The Great Western Community Forest Plan covers the whole of the Borough of Swindon and beyond into Wiltshire and Oxfordshire.

Significant areas of woodland within the Borough are owned and managed by Forest Enterprise, the Woodland Trust, Wiltshire Wildlife Trust and to some extent SBC. These woodlands are under proactive and sustainable management programmes. Forest Enterprise and Woodland Trust sites are managed under FSC/UKWAS

accreditation schemes. On private land, the Forestry Commission provides funding under the Woodland Grant Scheme. This provides funding for long term woodland management. Most SSSI woodlands in the Borough are covered by such an agreement.

New, predominantly broadleaf, woodlands continue to be planted and developed under the umbrella of the GWCF initiative, in areas such as Highworth, South Marston and Shaw Forest Park.

Why is this habitat important?

Ancient semi-natural woodlands, covering 119ha within the Borough, are generally recognised as the richest areas for wildlife across all woodland types. This includes three woodlands notified as Sites of Special Scientific Interest: Clouts Wood, Burderop Woods, and Bincknoll. Burderop Woods are by far the largest single block of ASNW within the Borough, covering some 48ha. As an SSSI it is described as predominantly acid pedunculate oak-hazel-ash woodland with wet ash-maple. The Borough also has 33 woodland County Wildlife Sites covering 148ha, the majority of which are associated with ASNWs. The woodland at Stanton Park, in addition to being a County Wildlife Site, has recently been declared a Local Nature Reserve (Nov 2003).

In addition Swindon Borough also contains tree species that are rare or uncommon - making these individual trees a priority. There are known to be populations of Black Poplar within the Borough and at least one Wild Service tree (at Seven Fields LNR). Awareness needs to be raised of these individual trees and where appropriate they need to be protected.

Biodiversity priority species associated with woodland in Swindon Borough include: bats, song thrush, nightingales, bath asparagus, lichens and mosses.

The urban centre of Swindon contains fragments of ASNWs, such as Hagbourne Copse, Great Copse and Peatmoor Copse. As remnants of ancient woodlands, these are areas rich in ground flora such as bluebells, wood anemone, and dog's mercury. These together with other urban/fringe sites offer important opportunities for local people to enjoy and experience woodlands. On a smaller scale, woodlands within school grounds are considered locally important in offering immediate opportunities for contact, education and awareness raising.

Woodlands also provide many other benefits, some of which are listed below:

- Landscape
- Screening within developments
- Carbon fixing
- Shelter belt plantings
- Noise and pollution control
- Streetscapes
- Provision of shade
- Linkage between habitats

How is this habitat protected?

The first layer of protection for woodland includes felling licences, woodland TPOs, SSSI and protected species legislation, conservation area legislation and planning conditions.

Newly establishing woodlands within the Borough, such as those at Wanborough, Kingsdown, Stratton, Shaw Forest Park and the Croft, attract a wealth of wildlife and are easily accessible to residents and visitors to Swindon. A good example is at Nightingale Woods, South Marston where Forest Enterprise have been working with the RSPB to improve the habitats for birds. Part of this is an active “ringing” programme to monitor populations, and where there is a hide to enjoy the wealth of bird life on the site such as barn owl, snipe, and kingfisher.

Some significant areas of woodland within the Borough, including SSSI woodlands, are currently covered by pro-active management plans supported through the Forestry Commission's Woodland Grant Scheme. There is also increased

interest in the uptake of sustainable forestry certification schemes within the UK Woodland Assurance Standards (UKWAS). However, given cost and lack of incentive, this is not the case in woodlands under private ownership.

The Forest Education Initiative aims to raise awareness of woodland issues tied into the National Curriculum. The local “cluster group” is co-ordinated through GWCF. The GWCF team has traditionally worked in developing woodlands in school grounds and has recently developed the first “Forest Schools” projects in the Borough.

OPPORTUNITIES AND THREAT

Opportunities

The presence of a Community Forest with a proven track record is a significant opportunity for the Borough.

Swindon Borough Council and the Swindon Strategic Partnership have begun to compile a Global Climate Change Strategy. This presents an opportunity to promote the role that trees and woodlands in urban areas can play in mitigating the impacts.

Whilst markets for timber and wood products remain difficult, there are an established, increasing and quantifiable recognition of other social and economic benefits of woodlands: biodiversity, recreation, health, education, inward investment etc.

Development of these “markets” alongside other new markets for woodland products including wood fuel may offer new opportunities for stimulating interest in woodland management.

Whilst there have been significant gains in woodland creation over recent years, the scarcity and fragmentation of all types of woodland in the area continue to constrain the biodiversity potential of this habitat. Opportunities for the creation of new woodlands are limited by several factors including lack of markets for timber and

wood products, and high land values associated with the potential for new development. Implications of changes in the agricultural sector through CAP reform are as yet unclear, although under the wider Sustainable Food and Farming agenda forestry and woodlands are recognised as a priority area with an attendant regional priority statement.

The Forestry Commission's Woodland Grant Scheme (England's Woodland Grant Scheme from 2005) remains the prime tool for stimulating interest in new woodland planting.

Planting of new community woodlands close to settlements, such as Highworth, Wanborough and Swindon, places a strong emphasis on community consultation, participation and on-going 'ownership': from design through to implementation. Community involvement includes the business community, with high-profile local businesses such as Nationwide Building Society, Honda UK, AFL, Co-op and Innogy supporting tree-planting and tree-related activities.

New woods and copses can be made more biologically diverse by the addition of woodland species such as honeysuckle, to provide critical nectar and food sources for wildlife. Bluebells and other woodland species can be introduced from local seed sources. Damp woodlands can often support wetland wildflowers such as Hemp Agrimony.

There has been an increase in funding available for woodland creation through planning gain agreements arising from new developments, such as the Great Western Hospital or South Marston Rail Freight Terminal.

Many studies and consultations have clearly illustrated the enthusiasm people have for, and value they attach, to their local woodlands. We now have an enormous opportunity, particularly in the light of an expanding population, to harness this enthusiasm in using woodlands to raise awareness and understanding of biodiversity

issues. Some barriers to this include security fears, particularly amongst women, lack of information available on where to go and what's there, and the lack of a single, extensive and easily accessible ancient woodland site within the Borough where people can experience the full beauty and diversity this habitat can offer.

The creation of a significant area of woodland within the Borough, as part of a green infrastructure, would help to get over some of the financial constraints, lack of incentives and competition for land. A large enough area of woodland linking the existing urban area to new developments, and large enough to achieve economies of scale in management, would significantly improve the town for residents, new and existing businesses, recreation and sport etc.

Future funding opportunities for woodland creation are likely to come from new, large-scale development areas such as the Southern Development Area, as Swindon expands.

Threats

There is little, or no, economic return from the management of existing woodlands, particularly within the small fragmented woodlands typical of the area where any economies of scale are difficult to achieve. Subsequently woodlands have remained largely neglected over the past decades. In the past, traditional woodland management resulted in woodland habitats/assemblages of note, for example, woodland butterflies within coppice woodlands. However, when coppicing declined, so did the butterflies and their habitat. Their small size and fragmentation also makes these woodlands susceptible to other pressures, such as the impact from visitors and nearby farming operations, for example from spray drift and run off. In tandem with this is a decline in knowledge and skills available to manage woodlands and a lack of control of pest species.

Whilst many new woodlands have been, and continue to be planted within the Community Forest, many suffer a lack of longer term management planning. As such, many have now

reached a stage where active management is needed if their long term potential is to be achieved.

The expansion of urban Swindon over the past decades has increased the isolation of woodlands subsumed into the urban setting. This process is set to continue with the planned expansion of the town as a Principal Urban Area within the County/Borough structure plans. An expansion in population has also increased demand on the woodland resource as a whole for recreation activities.

Care must be taken in the siting of new woodland planting to avoid damaging existing biodiversity and archaeological interest.

PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

What needs to be done?

With a greatly diminished and pressured woodland resource, work is needed to ensure that existing woodlands are actively managed to maximise their biodiversity potential. ASNW's in the Borough represent the last vestiges of a precious wildlife habitat and these need to be better understood, protected and cherished.

Even with protection and management, these woodlands will remain fragile given their small size and fragmentation. Woodlands need to be allowed to expand and new woodlands created, to a point where they can fully function as wildlife habitats and withstand increasing pressures.

Whilst creating additional pressures, and in some cases posing a direct threat, new developments within Swindon can also provide opportunities to manage and expand existing woodlands. Through expansion and linkage work is needed to ensure woodlands do not become "islands" within an urban setting.

People have a great appreciation of, and enthusiasm for, woodlands. This interest - amongst residents and visitors alike - needs to be nurtured to provide for better understanding of woodland habitats and wider biodiversity issues. In turn, this will create a more sustainable future for woodlands in the area.

Where can I find examples of this habitat?

- Hagbourne Copse. A Wiltshire Wildlife Trust Nature Reserve in Blagrove Industrial Estate with a magnificent display of bluebells 01793 526228.
- Stanton Park. Owned and managed by Swindon Borough Council 01793 771419.
- Clouts Wood SSSI. Just below the Science Museum at the former Wroughton Airfield. Access from a lay by on the A4361 Wiltshire Wildlife Trust 01793 526228.
- Nightingale woods a newly created woodland as part of the Great Western Community Forest 01793 466324.

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7.2 Scrub Habitat Action Plan

VISION

A contained, but protected and valued, network of areas dominated by bush, thicket and long grass, rich in birds such as the nightingale.

KEY FACTS

What have we got?

Scrub habitats are widespread throughout Swindon Borough at numerous sites including SSSIs and County Wildlife Sites. Scrub habitats are very transient and can develop wherever favourable conditions are found. For example: scrub develops on brownfield sites and sites managed less intensively due to changing land management regimes. Scrub habitats are variable, occurring as large continuous patches, as a matrix of smaller areas or as an isolated island. Scrub habitats have developed along with the industrial heritage and development of Swindon Borough – on railway embankments, disused canals and road verges.

No figures are available either nationally or within Swindon Borough to determine trends in the amount or quality of scrub habitats. The extent of scrub habitat is constantly changing from year to year as land management alters.

Why is this habitat important?

Scrub is a transient/colonising/intermediate habitat and it is important to control scrub where it encroaches onto other high valued habitats such as neutral meadows. However, scrub is a valuable habitat in its own right, supporting many scarce species. These include species such as the plants, lily-of-the-valley and fly orchids, and bird species such as the nightingale and nightjar.

The variability of scrub habitat provides sites for shelter, food and breeding for a wide range of wildlife. For instance breeding bird numbers are

typically composed of some 30 species. In the Swindon area these include the following species of conservation concern: blackbird, grasshopper warblers (amber-listed), linnet, song thrush, bullfinch, and dunnoek (red-listed).

The woody plants are the principal food plants for many insects. Scrub areas teem with life. For instance, hawthorns are known to support some 230 insect species, brambles 107 and crab apples some 133.

The patchwork nature of scrub, with small pockets of grassland surrounded by woody shrubs, provides a refuge for many species of mammal such as deer, fox, badger, weasel and stoat.

How is this habitat protected?

Scrub is not well covered by NVC and is not listed in SSSI selection guidelines. No explicit UK BAP action plan or statement covers this habitat.

Some of Swindon's long-standing community conservation groups actively manage scrub areas on highly prized local sites such as Seven Fields, Peatmoor, the Quarry Wildlife Garden and Cuckoo Corner.

OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS

Opportunities

Woodland Grant Scheme provides opportunities for creating and managing woodlands. If scrub is a coherent part of the woodland, grant aid may be available as part of a woodland management plan.

Linear features such as railway embankments provide opportunities to create scrub-based habitats managed in rotation.

The creation of woodland using natural succession also provides opportunities to create transitional scrub habitats.

Threats.

Scrub has an image problem, perceived as being worthless, with no intrinsic value. This has created a situation in which:

- Scrub is "tidied" or the site seen as ripe for development.
- Development often comes through conversion to more formal public open space.
- Scrub has little policy or legal status.
- Vandalism, especially fires, can be rife.
- Scrub can be subject to wholesale clearance, on sites such as railway embankments, without due regard to the wildlife present.
- Very little scrub is actively managed for biodiversity; most management involves removal of scrub and replacement with other habitat types.
- Inappropriate grazing levels - too little allows scrub to invade.
- Lack of management leading to succession (development of woodlands).
- Direct conversion to woodlands.
- Targeted as development land.

PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

What needs to be done?

Priorities during the life of the plan will be to raise the profile of scrub as a habitat in its own right; to ensure that, where quality scrub habitat exists, it is managed appropriately, and to use scrub habitat to link other habitats.

Key actions are therefore:

- To promote scrub habitats as valued, wildlife-rich sites.
- To conduct a phase one survey to provide baseline information on sites where scrub has developed and become a feature of the area.
- To work with landowners, land managers, developers and others to ensure that no significant areas of scrub are lost.

WHERE CAN I FIND EXAMPLES OF THIS HABITAT?

- Moulden Hill Country Park. Owned and managed by Swindon Borough Council. (01793) 771419.
- Rivermead. Follow the River Ray Parkway towards Shaw Forest Park. This will take you through an area of scrub much used by migrating birds.

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7.3 Veteran Trees and Parkland Habitat Action Plan

VISION

All the parks, main river corridors and amenity areas in Swindon to contain protected veteran trees managed to enhance their wildlife value, and these areas to contain new tree plantings to replace ageing specimens.

KEY FACTS

What have we got?

English Nature's *Veteran Tree Management Handbook* describes them as:

- Trees of interest biologically, aesthetically or culturally because of their age.
- Trees in the ancient stage of their life.
- Trees that are old relative to others of the same species (a veteran oak may be of a very different age to a veteran poplar).

Many veteran trees are of great age and large size and have a significant impact on the landscape. They are widely scattered, occurring in a wide variety of habitats including urban situations. Numbers have declined as a result of factors including urbanisation, disease (Dutch Elm) and agricultural intensification.

Many parkland sites have strong associations with veteran trees. Parklands are the product of historical land management and therefore of national landscape, historic and cultural significance. Reliable statistics on the extent of the overall resource or on the historical and current rates of loss or degradation are not available (UK BAP). The best estimate for the current situation within the UK is 10-20,000ha.

Precise information on the extent of parklands within Swindon Borough is not available.

Why is this habitat important?

The genetic, historical, cultural, aesthetic and landscape importance of these trees needs to be recognised, but the significance of veteran trees and parkland for biodiversity has only recently been studied. It is estimated that 80% of Europe's veteran trees are to be found in the UK. Many of these trees exhibit signs of decay, creating a habitat for - amongst others - specialist saproxylic invertebrates (dead wood insects and molluscs), some of the most threatened animal species in Europe.

From historical records we understand that many parkland sites and the trees they contain have derived from medieval forests and is a possible source of indigenous genotypes (a genetic make up that has evolved to be local to the area). The age and size of the scattered trees and their links to other open habitats have significant benefits for a wide range of species. These include specialists such as saproxylic invertebrates, mosses and lichens, fungi and epiphytes, but also birds, mammals, butterflies and moths.

How is this habitat protected?

Swindon Borough Council has produced Supplementary Planning Guidance that provides a signpost to sources of guidance on tree management.

Many trees (but not all) are protected by the Town and Country Planning Act, 1990 - Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs).

Parkland sites are protected in the Draft Swindon Local Plan. Policy number ENV4 affords protection of Historic Parks and Gardens (although this, it should be noted, is not based on biodiversity).

OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS

Opportunities

The Great Western Community Forest has secured funding for a pilot project to re-pollard trees along the banks of the River Thames and can, in some instances, provide grants towards the costs of veteran tree management. Agri-environment schemes such as Countryside Stewardship also provide grant aid and advice on managing trees in fields.

Over the past century, the skills to manage veteran trees have been lost and the resource neglected. The loss of traditional tree management techniques such as pollarding led to trees collapsing, clumsy tree surgery, inappropriate management or unnecessary felling on spurious health and safety grounds. Techniques are now being rediscovered and professionals are taking a pride in these trees and their management.

Veteran trees are to many a symbol of our history and culture and have been honoured for many centuries. They provoke strong feelings within many people. Harnessing this affinity between people and trees provides a significant opportunity for education, engagement and long-term protection and enhancement of this magnificent habitat.

Threats

A list of reasons for the continuing loss of trees includes:

- Disease (recent problems involve willow, alder and oak).
- Drought and storm damage (exacerbated by climate change).
- Urban development.
- Pollution from industry, traffic and agrochemicals.
- Physiological stress and competition (other plantings).
- Soil compaction caused by trampling, livestock or urbanisation.
- Changes in groundwater level.
- Pasture loss through conversion to arable and other land uses.

- Inappropriate grazing levels - too little causes scrub invasion, too much leads to bark browsing, compaction etc.
- Increased recreational pressure.
- Historic landscape conversion.
- Often not replaced leaving even aged parkland trees.
- Close and deep cultivation, damaging tree roots.

PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

What need to be done?

Our key priorities are to ensure that there is no loss of parkland and veteran trees within Swindon Borough and to provide opportunities for the planting of a new generation of trees.

Our key actions will therefore be:

- To survey Swindon Borough to provide baseline information.
- To work within the existing planning and legislative framework to ensure adequate protection is afforded to parkland and veteran trees.
- To seek opportunities to plant new widely spaced trees.

WHERE CAN I FIND EXAMPLE OF THIS HABITAT?

- Lydiard Park. Owned and managed by Swindon Borough Council (01793) 771419.
- Stanton Park (01793) 771419.
- The Lawns (01793) 771419.

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