

[Reflections on the management and restoration of a wildlife site near Stroud by James Webb, Gloucestershire Branch Member and BC work party volunteer.](#)

For the past five years I have been responsible for the management and restoration of ten acres of land in the Horn's valley, near Stroud. For its size the site is quite varied with two small meadows separated by a beech wood. A public footpath passes through the site as do three small streams. It is steep throughout and although relatively close to Stroud, it can feel much more remote.

The site suffers from very poor vehicle access, which is via a neighbour's field and restricted to a few dry months of the year. This poor access combined with steep terrain and often wet conditions is undoubtedly the biggest management challenge. However, these factors may have spared the site from intensive farming or forestry practices in the past.

The butterfly interest is largely concentrated to the meadows and the edges of the wood. 20 species have been observed on site and I am confident this will increase as conditions improve. The meadows are rich in large skippers, ringlets, meadow browns and marbled whites and the woodland edge provides suitable habitat for speckled wood and silver-washed-fritillary. The valley is also home to a vocal population of tawny owls, greater spotted woodpeckers, badgers and numerous roe deer.

Up to this point, much time and effort has been spent on essential site maintenance such as fixing fences, clearing boundaries, improving drainage and cutting weeds. Considerable work has also been assigned to woodland management. About half of the woodland has undergone a first phase of thinning, removing unhealthy trees and those with poor and crowded crowns. The best trees are left in situ and the newly created gaps in the canopy encourage the regeneration of dormant woodland flora. The aim of this work has been to produce a varied woodland structure ranging from small plants, shrubs and young trees to medium sized trees and larger trees forming the canopy. A varied woodland structure combined with plenty of light is well known to benefit a suite of woodland species including many of our declining woodland butterflies.

At the edge of the wood I have experimented with pollarding; a practice that was traditionally used in wood-pasture systems. Trees are cut at about 2 – 3 metres so that the re-growth is beyond the reach of livestock and deer. The re-growth is then cut on a 10 – 15 year cycle. This provides timber on a regular basis and allows livestock to graze between the trees, thus giving the land a dual purpose. Some of the best examples of these ancient systems can be found at sites such as Burnham Beeches near Slough and Epping

Forest in Essex. In my experience, trees generally respond well when given enough light. The re-growth is beyond the browsing deer and perhaps within 100 years the tree trunks will be sufficiently gnarled to attract the specialist invertebrates associated with ancient pollards.

Some of the hardest toil has been keeping on top of the meadows. A neighbour very kindly puts his cattle in the meadows for a short period in the spring or summer. Unfortunately the grazing is insufficient and has to be supplemented with manual cutting because of the poor vehicle access. Using a brush-cutter the grass and weeds are cut and removed either to rot at the edge of the wood or burnt. Invariably this work occurs in the summer when the biting flies are at their most active and I often question my sanity!

What makes this drudgery worthwhile is the remarkable results; following the removal of rank grass, delicate flowers and herbs have appeared the following season. For example, a strip of the meadow consisting of rank and competitive grasses was cut back to almost bare earth to be replaced the following season by birdsfoot trefoil, knapweed and even a lonely pyramidal orchid. Many species, particularly plants, are likely to have always been present but unnoticed as they occurred in either very low density, were in a vegetative state, i.e. not flowering or persisted in the seed bank. Habitat management generally creates disturbance, increases light and reduces competition allowing dormant species to thrive.

Looking ahead, the long-term goal remains the same; improving the site for wildlife by appropriate management. How this will be best achieved is less straightforward. In future I will not be able to commit as much time to the site and so a more effective way of working is needed. I believe the only way to do this is to improve vehicle access to the whole site. This will involve improving drainage, constructing two vehicle crossing points over the stream and creating a track through a section of the woodland to connect the two meadows. This will require a significant capital investment but will facilitate the long-term management of the site.

One of the most rewarding aspects of the work has been organising and leading volunteer work groups. As well as being very productive, the volunteering sessions are a great way for new people to see the site and the valley. Increasingly I now run additional volunteer work parties off site. The reasons for this are two-fold. Across the valley from my site is an area of limestone grassland that has become overgrown with scrub and secondary woodland. I prioritised this area because it has fantastic potential for restoration and offers some of the best butterfly habitat in the valley. It is also a safe working environment and volunteers with mixed abilities can all contribute. With the kind permission of the owner I am now into the second season of restoration.

As with any project there have been some setbacks. Himalayan Balsam has spread from a neighbouring field to the site and there have been incidents of vandalism. This year the fences were cut in three separate places, which meant that the meadows were not stock proof and the grazier was not able to put his cattle on the land as he usually does in the spring. It took considerable effort to fix the fences and I lost my window of grazing for the year. As well as the disproportionate amount of effort it takes to repair acts of vandalism it is also extremely disheartening.

However, these incidents aside, the overall experience of managing the site has been overwhelmingly positive. I have learnt so much and continue to learn and I have been able to share this learning with others. It has kept me remarkably fit and the work is rewarding; you can see the land change as you work and if you return next season you see that what was dull, drab and brown has become a riot of colour.

It should be noted that none of this would have been possible without the support of my family, friends and colleagues. Each time I return to Stroud my parents and grandparents provide board, lodgings and more for which I am eternally grateful. My grandfather in particular has been very generous with his time, tools and Landrover! My friends have also been a great help over the years and I must also thank my employer, The Tubney Charitable Trust, for being so accommodating.

If you would like to visit the site, have suggestions or ideas, are interested in volunteering or would like to buy some of the seasoned hardwood logs produced from the woodland management please get in touch with James Webb on 07815195610 or j.webb@tubney.org.uk



The woods in spring



A recent volunteer work party