

Operational Report: Oct 2013 – Oct 2014

Grazing Update



The reporting period saw the completion of permanent fencing around Bicton Common, with the majority of work completed by April 2014. The final 300m was fenced in October once permission was obtained by the Planning Inspectorate after further public consultation. Throughout 2014 baseline surveys on vegetation and vegetation structure, breeding birds and Odonata were undertaken, with data for 60 2x2m permanent sample plots collected as part of a research project in partnership with Plymouth University to quantify grazing benefits. Dartmoor ponies will be introduced into Bicton Common from March 2015, with cattle from May 2014.

We are currently looking to acquire GPS tracking collars for both ponies and cattle to enable us to accurately record their movements across all vegetation types as part of this study.

Dartmoor ponies were also introduced into Dalditch plantation in 2014, and initial signs of their impact have been encouraging, with Devon Red cattle once again used to graze mire on Colaton Raleigh Common using temporary electric fencing as in previous years. The primary purpose of this grazing loop is to maintain the mire of this site in good condition for Southern damselfly. We anticipate that both cattle and ponies will be used to graze Dalditch plantation in 2015, with Hawkerland also grazed (using temporary fencing).



Conservation update & management

Condition Assessment



As in 2013, our conservation work during 2014 has focused on addressing outstanding issues related to those Commons not yet viewed as being in favourable condition as defined by the *Definitions of Favourable Condition for Designated Features of Interest*. Unfavourable status largely relates to the significant size of even-aged heathland (Colaton Raleigh; Hawkerland; Mutter's Moor; Bicton) and the presence of too much scrub (East Budleigh; Dalditch Plantation). Continuing the programme of swailing, scrub clearance and grazing should help address the issues identified.

Scrub Management and Habitat Protection

The annual scrub/tree clearance programme focused on East Budleigh Common, Dalditch Plantation, Woodbury common, Mutter's Moor, Hawkerland and Bicton Common. In addition, species-specific work was undertaken on Colaton Raleigh Common to improve the habitat of the southern damselfly, and on Bicton, East

Budleigh, Colaton Raleigh and Hawkerland Commons to expand pioneer heathland habitat for the silver-studded blue butterfly.

In addition to grazing, as for 2013, work to improve existing habitat for the southern damselfly on Colaton Raleigh Common involved targeted brush-cutting to reduce the amount of over-hanging *Molinia* (purple moorgrass) and *Schoenus* vegetation (black bog rush) on runnels. Cattle grazing maintained these open areas and created some additional poached tracks. A team from the Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust visited other southern damselfly sites in Devon in September 2014 to share best practice regarding their management

Swailing (controlled burning) was undertaken on Colaton Raleigh Common, East Budleigh Common and Hawkerland to create pioneer heathland and improve the mosaic of heathland age structures for wildlife (following from recent Natural England recommendations).



Spraying works to minimise scrub regeneration during the year was undertaken on all sites cleared during the winter 2013/2014 season, with bracken rolling/mowing undertaken on Woodbury Common and Colaton Raleigh Common.

Firebreaks were maintained across the Commons twice during the year. This comprised the mowing of an estimated length of breaks in excess of 50 kilometres.



Work was also undertaken through scraping, the additional use of on-site material and rolling to improve existing car parking facilities at Four Firs, Estuary and Joney's Cross car parks, with maintenance of all barriers across the SSSI on-going. Works to improve track drainage was also undertaken on Dalditch plantation.

Fauna Surveys

2014 was a fairly good summer in terms of weather, following a very wet winter with 639mm rainfall during the December-February period, compared to an average of 255mm from 1988 (recorded at Mount Pleasant, Stoneyford). However the winter was not cold with only 23 frosts recorded, the last on 24th March, over a month earlier than in 2013. June and July this year were very hot.

During 2014 wildlife surveys focused on the species of primary conservation significance: Southern damselfly, Dartford warbler, Nightjar and the silver-studded blue. In addition, a National Vegetation Classification survey was undertaken of Bicton Common and the Otter Estuary, with breeding birds also recorded for Bicton Common in preparation for the introduction of grazing. Survey work on reptiles has continued on Bicton, Woodbury and Colaton Raleigh Commons. Reptile and butterfly work has been overseen by volunteers from the local branch of Butterfly Conservation, and the Devon Reptile and Amphibian Group. Our knowledge of the flies (Diptera), mosses and moths of Bicton Common was also enhanced during the summer through surveys by specialist groups and individuals, and we would like to thank Kim Leaver, the Devon Moss Group and the Devon Fly Forum for their assistance and sharing their records with us. Work also continued in completing a 'Space for Nature' report which will present all the biodiversity known from within the boundaries of the SSSI, highlighting those of greatest conservation value. The final report will be published in 2015.



The Southern Damselfly: The maximum count of this species in 2014 for the three local sites were: Venn Ottery (re-introduction site) 17, Aylesbeare 15, and Colaton Raleigh 12. The numbers for the established sites are very low and of concern. The habitat appears to be in good condition with management appropriate, and the drop in numbers may be related to changes in the climate.

The Nightjar: National surveys are the primary means of monitoring the nightjar population, with these carried out in 1974, 1981, 1992, 2004 and 2010. A partial survey was done on some Commons areas including Bicton, Dalditch Plantation and Hawkerland. It appears that numbers remain stable.

The Silver-studded blue: A total on the EDPH SSSI of 675 was recorded, slightly down from last year, maybe due to the extremely wet but relatively warm winter adversely affecting egg survival rate. Numbers recorded were 999 from in 2013 and 396 in 2012. The first date they were recorded was the 18th June (Wheatbills) and the last date the 8th August (Hawkerland).



The Dartford Warbler: The first survey visits were from 19th March - 1st April, and the second from 4th April - 30th April 2014, which were earlier than last year due to a warmer spring. Most visits were conducted in fine weather. The majority of the birds recorded on the first visit were confirmed on the second and casual sightings confirmed breeding at several sites with family parties being seen. A total of 8 pairs and 26 males were recorded this spring on Conservation Trust managed land. This is an increase on 2013 levels, suggesting that population levels are still building after the harsh winter of 2010. Numbers of warblers are not limited by available habitat which is sufficient to encompass significant further population growth.

Survey work in association with the Devon Bat Group has continued throughout the year on the East Budleigh bat hibernaculæ, and we are grateful for their assistance, and in particular we would like to thank Sarah Butcher for coordinating all aspects of this work.

Invasive Species Control



Clinton Devon Estates drafted a policy and strategy document on Himalayan balsam and its control in 2012 (available from this website), and work in 2014 continued to focus on supporting allied community initiatives focusing on the Back, Colaton and Budleigh brooks of the Otter River, with support also given to FWAG SW. There is still serious Himalayan balsam infestation in the Otter Valley catchment, and the Estate has agreed to fund a seasonal part time post to help eradicate it. Two local catchment meetings focusing on Himalayan balsam and its control were hosted by the Estate and the Conservation Trust in 2014. Consent was applied for and given by the Environment Agency to

undertake spraying at the old Yettington yard where there exists a particularly bad area of infestation. The Estate is extremely grateful for the support they have received from local community groups in helping to manage Himalayan balsam on Estate land.

Dog bins

With the aim of reducing the amount of dog waste on the SSSI, the Conservation Trust introduced dog bins on a trial basis into four key car parks in 2014: Model airfield, Four Firs, Woodbury Castle and Estuary. These are emptied three times a week by a contractor (SITA). We would like to acknowledge the support and advice of the District Council in helping to drive this project through to conclusion. Feedback has been generally very positive.



Illegal activity

Illegal activity has taken place throughout 2014 on an irregular basis, with motorbike and four wheel drive incursions, fly-tipping and litter dropping sporadic throughout the time period. During 2014 between 1/10 and

1/5 of staff time is spent addressing litter issues. Where we have been able to gather enough evidence we do have a policy of prosecuting offenders, and work close with the police to do this.

Education

School visits



During May and June 2014 200 pupils from Newton Popleford, Otterton, East Budleigh and Woodbury primary schools visited the heaths and learned about its formation, its cultural significance, the importance of its biodiversity and how management is required to conserve this unique habitat. In October two further classes from Marpool School, Exmouth (50+ pupils) were also hosted. Once again the educational programme was partially funded by the Otter Valley Association, and we are very grateful for their continued support.

In addition, we hosted two Brownie walks (Budleigh Salterton group), and supervised Brownies to undertake conservation work to improve habitats for silver-studded blue butterfly, with the group involved aiming to attain a Blue Peter badge for conservation work.

In September the Estate created a new Countryside Learning officer education/engagement post to work closely with the Estate Manager, Nature Conservation Manager, Forestry Manager and Farm Manager to

further develop, co-ordinate and lead all outreach and education work, with outreach programmes supported by core staff. This includes facilitating school visits to the countryside and the 'working landscape' at both primary and secondary school levels and leading adult education. We are very excited about the potential for this post to radically improve local countryside awareness. Kate Ponting joined the Estate to take up this position after 14 years as a primary school teacher.



Heath Week & other festivals



As in previous years the 2014 Heathweek festival was hosted at the end of July by the Conservation Trust, the RSPB, East Devon District Council, the Devon Wildlife Trust and the East Devon AONB. Approximately 500 people attended the main day at Woodbury Castle. In addition to undertaking nightjar walks, the Conservation Trust led walks on the Biodiversity and Archaeology of Dalditch Camp on East Budleigh Common, and an exploration of the cultural history of Bicton Common. The Conservation Trust also had a presence at the newly initiated Natural Seaton Festival where we promoted the Pebblebed Heaths. The event was well attended.

Friends of the Commons

The Friend of the Commons group continues to develop and now has over 200 members who received regular information about the Pebblebed heaths SSSI. During the reporting period we organised 18 'walk' and 'talk'

events. For the most part these were well attended with an average of 10 people attending walks, and 20 attending talks. We would like to thank the Friends for their continued support.

Lectures

Conservation Trust staff have continued to give lectures to the local community, local societies, clubs and other interest groups.

Some of the key presentations noted during the year include:

- Woodbury group (River Otter Restoration Project)
- Otterton Parish Assembly (River Otter Restoration Project)
- Colaton Parish Council (River Otter Restoration Project)
- Exmouth 3rd Age Group (Pebblebed Heaths)
- Sidmouth Association of the National Trust (River Otter Restoration project)
- Exeter Forum (Pebblebed Heaths)
- Exmouth Rotary Club (Pebblebed Heaths Conservation TRust)

Beavers on the River Otter

Beavers are currently resident on sections of the River Otter that the Estate own and manage, having either been released into the environment illegally, or having escaped from captivity.

There is strong scientific evidence which strongly indicates that the presence of native beavers in British rivers supporting appropriate beaver habitat, can be ecologically beneficial. However, in certain circumstances their habitat modifications can present barriers to threatened native species of migrating fish.



Their activity can also potentially be in conflict

with existing land management practices. Since September 2014 the Conservation Trust has been in discussions with Natural England, Defra, the Devon Wildlife Trust and other parties regarding the trapping of those beavers currently present in the River Otter to ensure that they are not carriers of *Echinococcus multilocularis*, a Taenid tapeworm not currently known in the wild in Britain, and their potential reintroduction should they be deemed to be free of the tapeworm. A license application for a trial reintroduction was submitted to Natural England by the Devon Wildlife Trust in October 2014. Should it be approved the Conservation Trust would be part of any trial management group, and undertake monitoring work on the land it manages.



River Otter Restoration Project

Work to investigate the potential to naturalise the lower River Otter has continued throughout 2014 to enable more sustainable management of the river with additional benefits to wildlife and public access. The



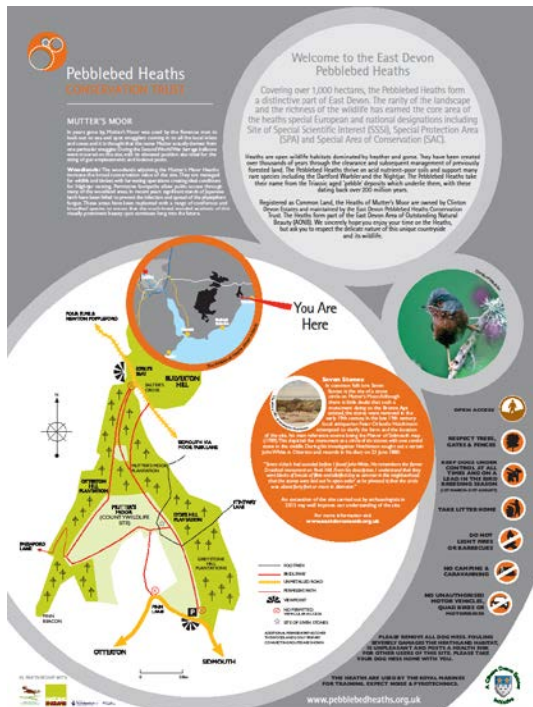
project, as currently envisaged, would essentially entail breaching sections of the existing embankment to allow tidal ingress into grazing marsh creating valuable intertidal habitat. This would allow the floodplain to shed its water to the sea more easily. Any breaches would be spanned by bridges to allow continued public access along this significant part of the SW coastal path. In addition to talks to Parish Councils and local community groups, three initial consultation events were held during 2014 where the broad plans were explained to those who attended. Although generally well received, concerns have been voiced by residents

and businesses associated with South Farm related to the potential tidal flooding of South Farm Road. We are now investigating the feasibility of raising the road and attaining outline costs for the project.

MOD

Our good working relationship with the Royal Marines continues. All of the 750 recruits that pass through Lymington each year are given a lecture on the conservation and cultural significance of the Peblebed Heaths SSSI prior to training. During 2014 we assisted with the management of their live firing range on Colaton Raleigh Common and the extension of their helipad. We gave permission (with assent subsequently granted by Natural England) for a small memorial commemorating the Royal Marines to be erected on Bicton Common in early 2015. Work continues in the production of wildlife sensitivity maps that will help minimise Royal Marine impact on wildlife in the longer term

Interpretation



A new interpretation board was installed on Mutter's Moor in 2014, with wooden mounts of a number of other on-site panels replaced during the year. Our priority for 2015 is to replace interpretation related to Woodbury Castle.

Strategic Partnerships

The Conservation Trust continues to develop working partnerships with Clinton Devon Estates and external organisations including Natural England, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), English Heritage, the Royal Marines and local archaeological groups.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the support of the many organisations and individuals who have helped us during the year. The Conservation Trust works with a broad variety of conservation partners. These include Natural England, English Heritage, the Environment Agency, the RSPB and the East Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, local schools and community groups, including the Otter Valley Association. The Devon and Cornwall Probation Trust, the Royal Marines and the East Devon Fire Service are additional long-term partners who assist with essential conservation work. A team of volunteers has assisted the Conservation Trust annually to undertake wildlife surveys and habitat work, with the Devon Amphibian and Reptile Group (DRAG), the Devon Bat Group, Butterfly Conservation and the Devon Biodiversity Records Centre coordinating some of the activities relating to improving the understanding of the local biodiversity.

In particular we would like to thank Doug Cullen, the volunteer warden on the Otter Estuary for his continued sterling work, and Lesley Kerry, Pete Gotham and Bungy Williams, whose support and advice on all aspects of heathland management and wildlife is invaluable.