

## Operational Report: Sept. 2012 – Sept. 2013

### Grazing Update



Background papers were prepared on the rationale for expanding conservation grazing (available on the website), with the public consultation completed in August 2013. It is anticipated that the planning amendment will be submitted in October 2013.

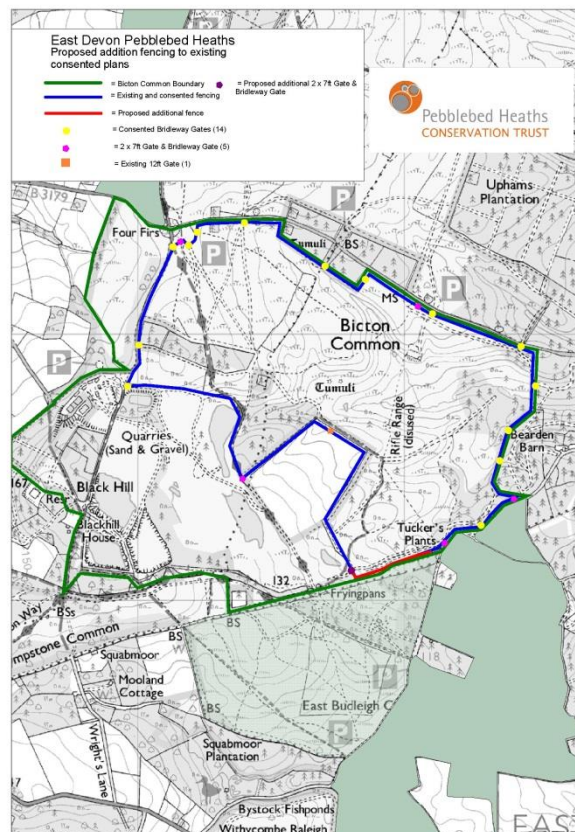
Fencing works have begun on Lymptone (by the owners and managers Squabmoor Farm Limited) and Aylsebare (owned by Clinton Devon Estates and managed by the RSPB). We are very aware of the sensitivities of fencing Common land for grazing and understand that this must be done without compromising public access (enshrined under the 2000 CRoW Act) and minimising visual impact.

As part of the grazing management plan for the heaths, an out-sourced herd of fifteen Red Devons grazed areas of Colaton Raleigh Common during the summer 2013. Dalditch Plantation and Hawkerland which have been grazed in past years were rested for the year. This has also allowed necessary additional chemical control of scrub on these Commons. In future the need for grazing animals will increase as permanent fencing plans are implemented. Whether or not to deploy an out-sourced or in-house herd (the last of our own herd was sold spring 2013) will be reviewed during 2014 once the outcome of the Planning Amendment to the Planning Inspectorate is known for the fencing of Bicton Common (anticipated spring 2014) and the total required number of cattle for the approved new grazing regime is analysed.

The year was once again dominated by plans to expand conservation grazing on the heaths with Devon Red cattle through the introduction of permanent fencing, with such expansion strongly supported by Natural England. Although permission has been granted from the Planning Inspectorate for the fencing of East Budleigh, Bicton and Hawkerland, the Trustees decided that as this is such a significant step change in our management approach, plans should initially be trialled on Bicton. There are sound financial, scientific and public relations reasons why a cautious approach should be adopted.

To enclose Bicton Common without East Budleigh and associated cattle grids required a further public consultation and a planning amendment being submitted for approval to the Planning Inspectorate.

for expanding conservation grazing (available on the website), with the public consultation completed in August 2013. It is anticipated that the planning amendment will be submitted in October 2013.



Should approval from the Planning Inspectorate be forthcoming, it is anticipated that fencing of Bicton

Common will be completed by Easter 2014. However, grazing will only be introduced into the Common spring 2015. This is to enable baseline data on biodiversity to be collated during the summer 2014 to enable rigorous monitoring of the impacts of cattle introduction. To this end a partnership between Plymouth University (Duchy College), Bournemouth University and the Conservation Trust is being developed to facilitate the development of a suitable monitoring strategy, with an MSc student secured for 2014 to help steer this work.

## Conservation Update

### Condition Assessment



Updated condition assessments of the Pebblebed heaths were published by Natural England in 2012 (Mutter's Moor and Dalditch plantation) and 2013 (all Commons). Bicton, East Budleigh, Dalditch, Colaton Raleigh, Hawkerland, Mutter's Moor and Dalditch plantation maintained their existing classification of 'unfavourable recovering' (i.e. their condition is improving through our work, but more needs to be done!) with Woodbury, Aylsebeare and Harpford now considered to be 'favourable'. Work of the Conservation Trust will continue to focus on addressing outstanding issues related to those Commons not yet viewed as favourable. These largely relate 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.

During 2013 the Conservation Trust worked with Natural England and the RSPB to review and update the '*Definitions of Favourable Condition for Designated Features of Interest*' for the SSSI. This document will be used in the future by Natural England to determine if the site is in a favourable condition.

### Scrub Management and Habitat Protection

The annual scrub clearance programme focused on Mutter's Moor, East Budleigh Common, Dalditch Plantation, Colaton Raleigh Common, 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 and East Budleigh Common to expand pioneer heathland habitat for the silver-studded blue butterfly.

For the southern damselfly, some scrub clearance was undertaken to improve light into the habitat, and runnels within their population site were brush-cut in February to reduce the amount of over-hanging *Molinia* (purple moorgrass) and *Schoenus* vegetation (black bog rush). Cattle grazing during the summer then maintained these open areas and created some additional poached tracks.

Swailing was undertaken on Mutter's Moor in the spring of 2013 with four discrete patches of mature heathland burnt 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 included works across East Budleigh Common, Hawkerland Common, Woodbury Common, Colaton Raleigh Common, Mutter's Moor, and Dalditch Plantation.

Bracken rolling/mowing works were 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 to secure emergency access in the vicinity of Uphams plantation on Woodbury Common, and improve Hawkerland car park. There continue to be significant statutory constraints to upgrading the car parks due to the area being designated as Common land and a SSSI.

### Fauna Surveys

The weather during 2013 was excellent following a cold, wet and windy spring with the last frost not recorded until 30<sup>th</sup> April. July, in particular was very hot and dry with more than 0.5mm rain only recorded on 5 days at the end of the month. The late spring delayed breeding and emergence of many species by up to three weeks, but numbers rapidly increased during the hot and dry summer. It was the driest summer (June, July and August) since 2006.

During this year wildlife surveys focused on the species of primary conservation significance: southern damselfly, Dartford warbler, nightjar and the silver-studded blue. In addition, all available biodiversity records for the heaths were collated with a view to producing a State of Nature report in December 2013. This exercise has reinforced our knowledge of the superb diversity of the heaths which includes: 144 birds (including 16 breeding and 42 of conservation concern); 59 species of butterfly (including 13 Priority Action species); 9 species of reptile and amphibian; 26 species of damselfly and dragonfly (8 of which are species of key conservation importance in Devon) and 32 nationally scarce insects.

*The Southern Damselfly:* The maximum count of this species in 2013 was 32 (up from 5 in 2012), although this species has a two-year life cycle, and we must wait several years to be sure that the population is recovering. The number recorded in 2011 was 35, with the maximum number recorded in recent times being 133 (in 2005). Unfavourable weather conditions in recent years have likely contributed to a decline in numbers, although we hope that 2013 marks the start of a population recovery. Ideally we are looking for numbers to increase above 100 in the next few years.



*The nightjar:* National surveys are the primary means of monitoring the nightjar population, with these carried out in 1974, 1981, 1992, 2004 and 2010. Surveys were done at selected sites during 2013 (at Hawkerland, Mutter's Moor, Dalditch Plantation and East Budleigh) for monitoring purposes to supplement the more sporadic national censuses. These suggest that populations are relatively stable. For example, in 2013 nine were recorded on Dalditch Plantation (up from six in 2012), five on Hawkerland (nine in 2009), eight on East Budleigh (nine in 2009) and seven on Mutter's Moor (no previous data).



*The silver-studded blue:* This year an effort was made to search for new sites as well as monitoring the regular colonies with 31 previously unrecorded 'colonies' discovered. Despite the late cold spring and late emergence (2 weeks later than average) this species benefitted from the long, hot, dry summer and good numbers were recorded from most regularly monitored colonies. Observed numbers increased to 999 from 396 in 2012. The first date they were recorded was the 18<sup>th</sup> June (Wheathills) and the last date the 8<sup>th</sup> August (Hawkerland).

*Reptiles:* Reptile surveying had been coordinated in recent years by the Devon Amphibian and Reptile Group. Records have been shared with the Conservation Trust recently, although data has not yet been analysed. Monitoring sheets are in place on Bicton Common, Woodbury Common, Colaton Raleigh Common, Mutter's Moor and Dalditch Plantation.

*The Dartford Warbler:* Across the Commons seven pairs and 22 males were identified during 2013. The excellent summer resulted in several family parties being seen and hopefully the productivity was good. The population is still recovering from the recent dire weather in 2010/2011. We anticipate numbers will increase significantly in 2014 assuming the weather continues to be favourable. We do not believe that Dartford warbler numbers are currently constrained significantly by lack of available habitat.

## Flora Update

Botanical work in 2013 primarily focused on collating all existing plant records for the SSSI with over 4,000 donated by the Botanical Society for the British Isles (BSBI). This indicates that the flora (for all habitats) comprises 750 species of vascular plants (ca. 30% of UK total), of which 32 are garden escapees, 13 invasive (or potentially invasive), 17 of which are on UK Red List, nine species which are nationally scarce, two that are Devon BAP species and 13 Devon rarities.

In addition a small National Vegetation Classification was undertaken on Bickton Common (funded by the MOD) as part of a Habitats Regulations Assessment undertaken to support planned Health and Safety work on the Endurance Course.



## Invasive Species Control

Clinton Devon Estates now has a policy and strategy document on Himalayan balsam and its control (available from this website), with the focus of staff work being the support of allied community initiatives focusing on the Back, Colaton and Budleigh brooks of the Otter River.

Additional work was done on the periphery of the heaths, both to prevent Himalayan balsam from encroaching, and also to eradicate a population of Parrot's feather (an invasive water plant) that was identified in a pond on Colaton Raleigh Common. Approximately 35 Estate staff days (including the Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust) were spent on invasive species control during the period. There has been a significant increase in partnership working in 2013 and a galvanising of local Estate and public effort to address this urgent issue. Significant gains were made on those tributaries tackled. The Royal Marines also assisted with Himalayan balsam control in 2013, and the Conservation Trust is grateful for their support.

## Education

### School visits

The focus of education work in 2013 was the engagement of local primary schools. During May and June 140 pupils from Newton Poppleford, Otterton and Budleigh Salterton 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. The educational programme was partially funded by the Otter Valley Association, and is a good example of partnership working. Feedback from the teachers and children was excellent. Further details can be found on the website.



## Heath Week



As in previous years the 2013 heathweek festival was hosted at the end of July by the Conservation Trust, the RSPB, The Council, Devon Wildlife Trust and the East Devon AONB. Over 400 people attended the main day at Woodbury Castle. In addition to undertaking nightjar walks, the Conservation Trust expanded its activities to include 'management walks', 'flora walks' and a special day featuring the Marines and the Fire Service. These events were attended by an additional ca. 250 people.

## Other Visits

Other formal visits to the heathlands included a guided tour for members of the Exmoor National Park.

## 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:

- East Devon landscape history (170 Bath University undergraduates)
- Ecosystem Services (40 academics as part of a one-day NERC-funded seminar at Exeter University on *'Enhancing ecosystem services through catchment sensitive farming and landscape restoration'*)
- Sidmouth Parish Paths Partnership (ca. 30 attendees)
- Exeter Forum (ca. 30 attendees)
- Raleigh Probus Group (ca. 40 attendees)
- Budleigh Probus Group (ca. 30 attendees)

Lectures are also given on a fortnightly basis to Royal Marine trainees as part of the close working relationship maintained with the Commando Training Centre at Lymington.

## Website

The Conservation Trust website was updated and re-launched in July 2013. It contains significantly more content than it previously held, and now has far greater in-house flexibility to adapt and expand it. We believe that it provides an improved platform to communicate the importance of the heaths and our work, and will play an increasingly important role in fostering much-needed public support.



## Interpretation



All existing interpretation (a mixture of laminated photographs/Velcro boards etc.) used at events and displays was updated to give 14 new co-ordinated panel boards, subsets of which can be used to form the centrepiece of events. These will improve our ability to communicate our conservation and education work. These panels proved invaluable during the most recent consultation related to the fencing Planning Amendment.

During the year two new panels on bird identification were created for the Otter Estuary reserve, with this initiative driven by the volunteer warden Doug Cullen. These were largely funded by

external parties including the Otter Valley Association, the East Devon AONB and Devon Birds, and is a further example of partnership working to achieve shared aims.

We believe that prior to further expansion in any interpretation that an audit is required to assess current and future interpretation needs, messages and media. Existing panels on the primary car parks are now beginning to be highly weathered and are structurally deteriorating. It is hoped that such an audit can be conducted in 2014.

## Illegal Activity



Primary illegal activity on the Commons relates to fly-tipping which is becoming a significant strain on staff resources. Between January and April 2013, for example, there was on average one incident every two to three weeks. Details of incidents are recorded and photographed and a strategy is needed to address this in the longer-term. In part we believe that the introduction of charges by the Council has increased this activity.

There continues to be sporadic 4 x 4 and motorbike activity on the Commons with Mutter's Moor one site where this is particularly frequent. A new barrier has been installed at Psalter's Cross to prevent 4 x 4 access, with staff of the Conservation Trust liaising

with the police regarding motorbikes. Where number plates are noted these are reported to the police.

The Council is currently conducting a review of public rights of way in the area with a proposal to change the bridleways on Mutter's Moor to 'all traffic'. The Conservation Trust has objected to this on conservation, archaeological, health and safety and public enjoyment (those on foot or horseback) grounds.

## Strategic Partnerships

### Overview

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.

### Friends of the Commons

Perhaps the most important conservation partner of the Trust is the public itself, with an estimated 1.9 million visits made to the heaths annually (see Section 6.6).

We are currently establishing a *Friends of the Common* group to keep local people notified about conservation work, management issues and volunteering opportunities to ensure that the Trust continues to develop with

public support. We believe that the formation of such a group will play an important role in the strategic development of the Trust.

## Key Events

Key events during the year included:

- Working with Natural England on the review of the SSSI condition assessment criteria, and development of amended fencing plans
- Working with Natural England on management responses to the latest condition assessments
- Collating all biodiversity records and the production of a monitoring review (both to be incorporated into a State of Nature Report)
- Agreeing 'Watching Briefs with English Heritage/Council archaeologists to enable specific work to be undertaken related to the creation of habitat for silver-studded blue butterflies
- Assisting Council archaeologists to undertake research on Mutter's Moor related to the Seven stones
- Agreeing winter works with English Heritage related to the scrub control on Scheduled Monuments
- Further developing education links with local primary schools
- Further developing links with the Otter Valley Association related to education, invasive species control and the restoration of the River Otter.
- Assistance with the development of fire training programmes with the Devon and Cornwall Fire Brigade
- Facilitating the attaining of appropriate assents for the upgrading of the Marines' Endurance Course (restoration of the 'sheep dip' which is currently unsafe) and the upgrading of the live firing (Meg) range.
- Engagement of the Royal Marines in Himalayan balsam pulling (40) and Heathweek
- A litter pick of the Lower River Otter Estuary carried out with the Otter Valley Association, East Devon AONB and East Devon District Council.
- The continued use of the probation service to help with specific projects across the Heathlands.

## Public Access

The production of the draft South-east Devon European Site Mitigation Strategy has provided significant additional information on recreational pressure on the heaths. Much of this data was derived from a visitor survey undertaken by the developers of Cranbrook as a requirement under the Habitat Regulations. The data (which includes an analysis of car park counters) suggests that there could be around 1.9 million visits per annum. This is likely an over-estimate but indicates a very high level of visitor pressure. As we might have predicted, the majority (80%) of visits were made by car with dog walking accounting for 40% of visits. Although indicating the origin of visitors (for example Newton Poppleford accounts for an estimated 2.5% of visits), unfortunately the surveys did not consider internal patterns of use on the Commons, and a visitor survey is urgently required that clarifies such movement to help inform management interventions that can minimise visitor impact.



## River Otter Restoration Project



The River Otter is now largely disconnected from its floodplain. In recent decades there have been many severe flooding events with 21 recorded since 1959. These have included the embankment adjacent to the estuary over-topping through tidal in-wash in 1959, and nine separate incidences of the river itself overtopping the embankment. In 2012 alone there were three severe flooding events in July and November. There is fear that with sea level rise and the warmer wetter winters

predicted for East Devon due to global warming, that these events will become more frequent. Should this happen, their impacts on residential properties, rural businesses and public footpaths will likely be severe. The popular public footpath between White Bridge and Otterton, for example, was closed in November 2012 for four months after a flooding event drastically eroded the river bank. Recent years have also seen the severe erosion of the primary flood embankments. There is now a distinct chance that in a severe flooding and/or tidal surge event, the embankments might collapse altogether, allowing the sea to pour unchecked into the previously reclaimed part of the floodplain. This could have severe environmental and social impact through, for example, the erosion of an old dump site. Rather than for this to happen in a potentially catastrophic manner there is a strong argument for the process to be managed for wildlife and public benefit through 'controlled retreat'. This will also build natural resilience to future climate change and reduce the need for expensive and usually short-term human interventions.



In 2009 Clinton Devon Estates commissioned a report from Haycock Associates to understand local flood dynamics, how the river might be reconnected to its floodplain and what options might be available to improve habitats and flood management in the river. Ten options were suggested at this time. Some related to specific, small interventions that might reduce the frequency of flooding at certain locations, such as Otterton, for example. Others looked at what potential there might be to relocate key impacted sites such as the cricket club elsewhere within the valley.

However, the one ambitious option which received the greatest publicity at this time was the potential creation of a lake to the west of the embankment below White Bridge. The rationale behind the lake was for this to act as a sediment lagoon over a 50 to 100 year period to try and equalise the height of the floodplain on both sides of the embankment, after which time it was envisaged that breaches could potentially be made in the embankment to return this western 'grassland marsh' portion of the floodplain to natural saltmarsh or mudflats of higher wildlife value.

In February 2012, a meeting was held at Clinton Devon Estates' Rolle Office to discuss the Restoration Project. It was attended by many organisations including the Environment Agency, Natural England, South West Water, East Devon District Council, the Otter Valley Association, the AONB, the Westcountry Rivers Trust and the Devon Wildlife Trust. At this time it was agreed that reconnecting the river to its floodplain was conceptually desirable and if undertaken soon would assist England to meet its Biodiversity 2020 targets through habitat creation, and the UK to meet EU Water Framework Directive targets through improving the health of the estuary. However, it was agreed that a shallow lake was not the best means of quickly attaining the vision of a more natural, healthy and resilient river/estuarine system.



At present, the River Otter Restoration Project is still a concept. Many feasibility studies and much consultation need to be undertaken to understand if the project is socially, economically and environmentally worthwhile. In particular the benefits and disbenefits resulting from the project to all stakeholders need to be clarified and quantified and suitable partnerships and governance developed. The next step is the appointment of a Project Officer to help build necessary partnerships, further define the vision and clarify the project framework, including what the outputs/outcomes are. The current focus of effort is to fund such a position.

**The primary drivers of this initiative are seen as:**

- Managed realignment and naturalising of an iconic river through reconnection to its floodplain
- Meeting UK *Biodiversity 2020 Strategy* targets through coastal habitat creation
- Meeting *EU Water Framework Directive* targets through improved health of an estuary
- Protection of local businesses, residential properties and public access from flooding
- Allowing natural resilience in the Otter valley to the impacts of climate change



## **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 and Pete Gotham, whose support and advice on all aspects of heathland management and wildlife remains invaluable.