

Nutbourne Common 2014

Report by the South Downs National Park Authority – Wealden Heath Area.



Pulborough Parish Council own Nutbourne Common. This report has been produced at their request by Bruce Middleton the Wealden Heaths Area Manager.

Site Description

Nutbourne Common is registered common land and is designated Open Access land under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. Public access is permissive on the site. The common is about four acres in size. There is a Public Right of Way that goes through it and there are some informal paths on it too.

It is located approximately 500m to the north of Hurston Warren Site of Scientific Interest (SSSI) and 1.6 KM from Parham Park SSSI. The soils are light, acidic and sandy, similar to those found on the neighbouring SSSIs.

The site is bounded by an old boundary bank with the occasional mature oak and remains of a holly hedge upon it. There are a few old oaks but the majority of the rest are about forty years old. Much of the ground flora within the woodland is dominated by bracken but there is a good stand of Bluebells on the western side. At the centre of the secondary wood - a clearing has been created. The clearing was created by the Sussex Wealden Greensand Heaths Project with the help of local volunteers starting back in the winter of 2006. Each winter since then there have been a few volunteer tasks to maintain the clearing. After the initial creation of the clearing - heather brashings were spread out - and a few more times since. These heather brashings came from another SSSI site at Iping.

Lowland heathland and unimproved acid grassland are rarer than rain forest if we are to look at these habitats globally. Conserving and restoring these habitats is considered of high priority in

order to safeguard the many rare species associated with them, particularly a number of invertebrate species at the northern most limits of their European range and birds including Nightjar. Britain has 20% of the world's lowland heath and only 1% of the heath we had in this country two hundred years ago still remains. The demise of this rare habitat has come about because of changes in farming practices, the abandonment of commoning (such as firewood cutting, unfenced grazing and gathering bracken for livestock bedding) housing development, sand pit creation and the planting of conifers for timber.

There are four key heath plant indicator species found on site and they are the Ling *Calluna vulgaris*, Bell Heath *Erica cinerea*, Dwarf Gorse *Ulex minor* and Birdsfoot *Ornithopus perpusillus*.



Birdsfoot



Dwarf Gorse



Ling



Bell Heath

To maintain the clearing area as heath - some plants need to be kept in check and because of the small size of the clearing - much of this work can be carried out by hand if needs be. Bracken will keep encroaching on to this site because there is a natural source besides the clearing in the wood. This could be controlled if the bracken is regularly pulled up by hand. If bracken is allowed to take hold then it enriches the soil and lessens the chance for heather to survive because the heather needs impoverished soil. Another similar problem is that around the perimeter of the clearing there are numerous oak trees and they drop their leaves – these leaves enrich the soil and so the heather struggles again – so by raking off the oak leaves in the autumn will help. At present there is some bramble appearing and this plant is taking advantage of enriched soil – now this plant is a very good source of food and nectar for wildlife. However, if it is not kept under control it again can take over – so leave some around the edges but remove it from the centre of the clearing. Another plant that can be a problem is gorse and although desirable on a heath it is from the legume family that fixes

nitrogen from the atmosphere and tends to enrich the soil too. So as and when or if the gorse starts to take off on this site - it can be kept in check if it is sporadically coppiced back. There is some Dwarf Gorse on site but this can be left alone because it is rarely invasive.



Common Gorse



Common Oak leaves



Bramble



Bracken

Another plant that is at present kept under control is the Silver Birch. When young birch saplings appear in the clearing they should be pulled up or otherwise within a few years the clearing could be swamped and shade out the heather.

The small clearing was created with the hope of making a stepping stone for the heath in the area and although it is a small site the heather seed has taken and the clearing has become a very important new heath site within West Sussex. Nutbourne Common has now become part of a cluster of heath sites within the area within the last ten years. Heathland creation has been expanded on Hurston Warren and at Parham as well as some new sites at Monkmead Woods and Wiggonholt. This means that Nutbourne although on the edge of this cluster of fragmented Lowland Heath sites is helping keeping rare species alive. It would be desirable to create more small sites close to Nutbourne Common – perhaps out in the more open fields where there would be less competition with shade, bracken and leaf litter especially oak leaves.

South Downs National Park Authority

The South Downs National Park Authority was established on the ground on April the 1st. 2011 Although Nutbourne Common is just outside the National Park - because of the heath interest the Authority is happy to support the Parish Council in the future management of the site. The Wealden Heaths Area team are happy to support the site with staff and volunteer time and more heather brushings if needed in the future.

List of plant species found in heath clearing - November 2014

Trees

<i>Betula pendula</i>	Silver Birch
<i>Quercus robur</i>	Pedunculate Oak

Shrubs

<i>Calluna vulgaris</i>	Ling
<i>Erica cinerea</i>	Bell Heath
<i>Ulex europea</i>	Common Gorse
<i>Ulex minor</i>	Dwarf Gorse

Flowers

<i>Anagallis arvensis</i>	Scarlet Pimpernel
<i>Cerastium fontanum</i>	Common Mouse-ear
<i>Cirsium arvense</i>	Creeping Thistle
<i>Crepis capillaris</i>	Smooth Hawks-beard
<i>Digitalis purpurea</i>	Foxglove
<i>Galium saxatile</i>	Heath Bedstraw
<i>Myosotis arvensis</i>	Field Forget-me-not
<i>Ornithopus perpusillus</i>	Bird'sfoot
<i>Primula vulgaris</i>	Primrose
<i>Rubus fruticosus agg</i>	Bramble
<i>Rumex acetosella</i>	Sheeps Sorrel
<i>Sagina apetala</i>	Annual Pearlwort
<i>Senecio jacobea</i>	Common Ragwort
<i>Soncus asper</i>	Prickly Sow-thistle
<i>Taraxacum officinale agg</i>	Dandelion
<i>Urtica dioica</i>	Stinging Nettle
<i>Veronica serpyllifolia</i>	Thyme-leaved Speedwell

GRASSES

<i>Agrostis capillaris</i>	Common Bent
<i>Agrostis stolonifera</i>	Creeping Bent
<i>Anthoxanthum odoratum</i>	Sweet Vernal-grass
<i>Deschampsia flexuosa</i>	Wavy Hairgrass
<i>Festuca rubra</i>	Red Fescue
<i>Holcus lanatus</i>	Yorkshire Fog
<i>Poa annua</i>	Annual Meadow-grass

SEDGES

<i>Carex pilulifera</i>	Pill Sedge
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WOOD-RUSHES

<i>Luzula campestris</i>	Field Wood-rush
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FERNS

<i>Pteridium aquilinum</i>	Bracken
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MOSSES

<i>Funaria hygrometrica</i>	Bonfire-moss
<i>Bryum capillare</i>	Capillary Thread-moss
<i>Campylopus introflexus</i>	Heath Star-moss
<i>Ceratodon purpureus</i>	Redshank
<i>Dicranum scoparium</i>	Broom Fork-moss

Kindbergia praelonga Common Feather-moss

Polytrichum juniperinum Juniper Haircap

LIVERWORTS

Marchantia polymorpha Common Liverwort

LICHENS

Cladonia coniocraea

Cladonia fimbriata

Cladonia furcata