



Brief survey and management recommendations for Nutbourne Common

**Tony Whitbread
Chief Executive
Sussex Wildlife Trust**

Background

The common was visited on Sunday 7th September 2014 to make an assessment of the nature of the ecology of the area and make brief recommendations on future management. The timing was not ideal in that spring flowering woodland plants might have been missed, nevertheless it is still likely that a reasonable assessment of the site could be made.

Site description

The site appears to represent a fragment of what might once have been a more extensive common in the Nutbourne area. Surrounding areas consist largely of acid grassland with a few relicts from a likely previous heathland habitat, although no heather was seen in the immediate surrounding area. In the past it is likely that this area was a small part of a chain of heathlands currently including Hurston Warren and Wiggonholt Common.

Nutbourne Common itself is now a mixture of ancient boundary trees, secondary woodland (i.e. regenerated on past heathland) and restored heathland. It is a small site (around 4 ha in extent) so maintaining a diverse matrix of habitats is always going to have management implications.

Ancient trees on or near the boundary clearly grew up in more open conditions, accounting for their spreading form. As trees have more recently grown up around them some lower branches on the older trees have started to die off. However, because of their location on the edge of the common, it is unlikely that trees will suffer long term damage from over-shadowing.

Woodland in Nutbourne Common is now a relatively species poor oak – birch woodland (both downy birch and silver birch) over a ground flora consisting mainly of bracken. Bluebell may also be common in spring, mainly on the edges of the site, and a few other common species of this habitat type were noticed. Mountain ash, holly, grey willow and alder buckthorn were also present, and one large crab apple was seen on the boundary. Alder buckthorn (*Frangula alder*) was perhaps one of the more interesting species seen on the site as it tends to be associated with heathland, or open heathy woodland.

The heathland clearing in the centre is quite small and not particularly species rich. It does however contain vigorous heather regeneration, with some heath bedstraw and gorse, alongside prolific birch regeneration.

Management

In absence of management it is likely that woodland regeneration will take over the site, heathland interest will be lost and some of the shrub species (willow and alder buckthorn, but possibly also mountain ash) may reduce or disappear. These species are generally rich in

associated invertebrates and so support insect-eating species. The vertical structure of the site would probably be simplified (i.e. fewer layers of vegetation), tending towards a high canopy with few shrubs underneath in the long term. In the absence of natural disturbance, or management by people, small sites do tend towards uniformity.

From a wildlife perspective it is better to maintain a matrix of open and wooded habitats although, especially on a small site, this is difficult to achieve in practice. Nevertheless, past management does seem to have produced a matrix which has probably contributed to maintaining or restoring the wildlife interest of the site. This has not doubt involved considerable effort to prevent aggressive species, especially bracken and birch, which would otherwise have simplified the diversity of the site.

The simplest management option would be to stop management and allow woodland to take over. This would not be the most beneficial approach in terms of nature conservation or landscape history. A continuation of the current management approaches is recommended although consideration could be given to the following modifications:

- I am aware that there is a desire to expand woodland regeneration on the site. This would largely be damaging to the wildlife interest of the site, however, there may be an option that provides the best of both worlds. This might be achieved by expanding the heathland clearing further in the south of the site with an expansion of woodland in the north. Heathland (and heathland associates) develop best on south-facing aspects so clearing to the south would open the site to more light and enhance the heathland, whilst expanding the wood to the north would give a larger contiguous block of woodland with little damage to the heath. Co-incidentally the northern area is also where the gorse and alder buckthorn are so this might encourage their regeneration without too much encroachment (by gorse) into the heathland.
- In concept this may be a change from viewing the whole site as heathland restoration towards viewing it as a heathy clearing within a woodland complex.
- Ancient trees on the boundary are a valuable feature and should be retained. There is a small risk that they might be damaged by overshadowing from recent regrowth of other trees. This risk is small but nevertheless it may still be worth giving consideration to removing, or thinning occasional young trees that are starting to shade the lower branches of these veteran trees at some time in the future. It may be worth undertaking an invertebrate survey; old oaks are generally rich in invertebrates but generally prefer oaks grown in open conditions.
- There are a few Scots pine trees on the site and, whilst these may add to diversity, they could cause management problems in future (they may already be doing so). Pine seedlings in the heathland might become a major issue. It may be a shame to remove the trees but management will need to stay on top of any pine regeneration.
- There are several wind-blown fallen trees on the site and it is recommended that these are not cleared away, indeed it would be beneficial if even more dead wood was retained on the site and allowed to rot down naturally.

Overall, however, the current management approach is delivering a beneficial matrix of habitats types in a small area.