

## **Nutbourne Common Management Report**

*Prepared in partnership by the Sussex Wealden Greensand Heaths Project, Sussex Wildlife Trust & Pulborough Parish Council on 28/09/23 (with help from the Nutbourne Residents Association)*

### **Description**

Nutbourne Common, spanning approximately 4 acres, is owned by Pulborough Parish Council. While it is not registered as a common or designated public open access land under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, public access is permissive. The site is traversed by a Public Right of Way (footpath) and features an informal path. It is located approximately 500 meters north of Hurston Warren Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and 1.6 kilometres north of Parham Park SSSI. The site's soils are light, acidic, and sandy, similar to those found in neighbouring SSSIs.

The boundaries of Nutbourne Common are marked by an old boundary bank, occasionally adorned with large standard oaks, and remnants of an overgrown holly hedge. The site primarily consists of recent (approximately 40-60 years old) secondary woodland growth with younger trees (approximately 20-40 years old) at its centre. The woodland includes English oak in the northwest and mainly silver birch in the south and east. The ground flora is limited in species diversity, predominantly composed of bracken with some ground ivy. The central part of the site hosts old common gorse bushes, an alder buckthorn, and a deceased dwarf gorse bush among the bracken.

### **Evaluation**

While current Ordnance Survey maps depict the site as "bracken, heath or rough grassland," evidence from local users suggests that Nutbourne Common was more open until recently. The woodland currently present is classified as recent secondary woodland.

Lowland heathland and unimproved acid grassland are both UK Biodiversity Action Plan priority habitats. Conserving and restoring these habitats is crucial for safeguarding numerous rare species, including certain invertebrates and birds such as the nightjar. Despite the UK having only 20% of the world's remaining heathland, which is less than 20% of what existed two centuries ago, heathland restoration is vital. Nutbourne Common, being close to Hurston Warren SSSI, could serve as a stepping stone for the migration of heath species along the Greensand outcropping.

Secondary woodland typically supports fewer species compared to ancient woodland, but oak trees, especially in open conditions, provide habitat for various invertebrates, lichens, and birds. Both oak and birch can colonize open ground in the

absence of grazing animals or active management. Oak leaf litter can enrich poor soils, potentially converting heath soils into the richer brown earths of established woodlands.

To improve woodland diversity, it's desirable to thin congested trees, retaining healthy, compact trees while removing diseased or top-heavy ones. Heather seeds can remain dormant in the soil for decades, limiting the practicality of restoring the site to heath.

Bracken is an invasive species that suppresses ground flora and should be managed. Gorse, while providing habitat and nesting sites for heathland species, can improve soils, so its prevalence needs careful control.

Annual safety inspections are recommended for areas used by the public, with selective removal of dead wood near paths. Dead wood provides valuable habitat for certain insects.

### **Management Recommendations**

1. Restore open heath in the central area by felling trees during the winter, avoiding nesting bird seasons. Burn cut material on site and create habitat piles with larger logs. Treat stumps of young deciduous trees with an appropriate herbicide to prevent regrowth.
2. Rake off or scarify leaf litter in open areas to encourage the germination of dormant heather seeds.
3. Coppice old gorse to promote bushy young growth, with the understanding that some very old gorse may fail to regrow, which is beneficial overall due to an excess of gorse on site.
4. Selectively thin trees in wooded margins, retaining specimen trees and old oaks.
5. Conduct annual inspections for safety in public areas, removing dangerous trees and limbs. Retain dead wood where possible.
6. Carry out tree pruning and scrub cutting near paths to improve sight lines for public safety.

### **Additional Note: Protection of Adders**

It has come to our attention that adders (*Vipera berus*) have been identified within the Nutbourne Common site. Adders are a native and protected species in the UK, and their presence on the site highlights the need for specific measures to ensure their protection and conservation.

Adders, being a venomous snake species, play an essential role in the ecosystem, contributing to biodiversity and maintaining the balance of local wildlife populations. They are particularly sensitive to habitat disturbance and human interference. As such, it is imperative that we take steps to safeguard these reptiles and their habitat within Nutbourne Common.

**Habitat Preservation:** Maintain undisturbed areas and natural features within the site, such as bracken-covered ground, where adders may seek shelter and forage for food.

**Conservation Partnerships:** Collaborate with local conservation organisations, herpetological societies, and wildlife experts to develop and implement specific conservation strategies for adders on the site.