

Nutbourne Common Management Plan

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Pulborough Parish Council

Background

Nutbourne Common is an area of roughly 4 acres situated within the hamlet of Nutbourne, outside the village of Pulborough. It has been a common since 1855 and is now owned and managed by Pulborough Parish Council, with help and input from the South Downs National Park, Wilder Horsham, Sussex Wildlife Trust and local residents.

It was once open heath and rough grassland and after a stint as a recreation ground where cricket took place, it is now Nutbourne Common Nature Reserve, with secondary woodland comprising mostly oaks and birch, bracken ground cover and with a central area of heather. The soil is light, acidic and sandy, low in nutrients which favour heather. This is a high priority habitat which encourages wildlife species such as sand lizards, butterflies, insects, birds and the occasional (now very rare) adder. The heather links up and provides a migration stepping stone between the other heathland areas in Sussex which follow the greensand outcroppings.

Both oak and birch will readily colonise any open ground so in the absence of roaming or grazing animals, some management is required to control them. Oak trees support a wide range of common species of invertebrates, lichens and birds but their shade and fallen leaves also enrich the soil, turning poor heathland into rich brown earth found in established woodlands, which does not favour heather. Well-established secondary woodland can be harder to return to heath compared to recently wooded ground, so some management of the oaks – such as thinning out saplings – is necessary to protect the heather, especially those to the south where they shade the heather.

Brambles and birch are also invasive in the heather, so intervention is again necessary here to prevent them taking over. As this is a nature reserve, no pesticides are to be used – twice-yearly bramble clearance by local residents works very well.

The bracken is also invasive and not ideal, but in the past it was heavily sprayed with pesticides along the paths – nothing grows there now, not even encroaching wild flowers. No pesticides will be used again.

There is some gorse to the north of the heather area. This is a natural component of heathlands and is beneficial for some wildlife, providing shelter for invertebrates and nesting sites for heathland birds. Some gorse is therefore desirable, although as a legume it fixes atmospheric nitrogen and tends to improve soils, which is undesirable for the continued existence of the heath. A balance is therefore needed so it is not allowed to become too prevalent.

Once there were many different species of birds – woodcocks, nightjars and others – in the Common, as there were more areas of undisturbed undergrowth. Nowadays the Common is predominantly a walking area for dogs, as it is enclosed and has well-drained footpaths because of the sandy soil. This means it can never be a true nature reserve; however it is for the use and benefit of local residents, so a compromise is needed. A notice recommending that dog walkers keep their dogs under control during the nesting season, and away from the more undisturbed areas in the north and east, could be helpful in encouraging more species of wildlife to return.

The Common is too small an area to rewild, so to maintain its diversity some management is needed.

Maintenance Plan

1. Control the spread of brambles and birch in the heather by hand twice a year, in January and again in late summer. Rake off oak leaves to the south at the same time.
 - Protect the bluebell patch by the entrance to the west of the path by bramble removal in January.
 - Leave all bramble, birch and leaf clearance on the Common in piles in less-used areas to benefit wildlife and allow composting.
2. Cut the heather to ground level in the autumn once a year, a third at a time. This looks better, encourages new growth and supports wildlife that uses heather at different stages of growth.
3. Expand the heather area into the bare area to the east by removing a few of the silver birches and small oaks on the perimeter of that side.
4. Keep the heather area as undisturbed as possible by encouraging dog walkers to keep to the paths and keep their dogs under control.
5. Maintain one dead-end path into the heather area. There is already one to the north.
6. Allow some gorse to flourish for wildlife. This also deters people from disturbing the heather and keeps them on the paths.
7. Remove a few of the younger oaks to the south of the heather to let more light in and lessen the volume of leaves which enrich the soil and are not beneficial for the heather.
8. Leave all fallen branches, trees and brush on the site for the benefit of wildlife. Log piles can be made, dead hedging created around the perimeter, and brush and bramble clearance left in piles to compost down. These can also be used to direct people to the paths.

9. Remove hazardous branches or trees overhanging the footpaths, with regular inspections, as public safety is of paramount importance.

10. Plant some new trees – such as rowan and willow – to encourage diversity, especially on the western side which is less diverse than the east. This can also vary the age structure of the woodland, which is predominantly silver birch – a fast-growing but short-lived species.

11. Install bird boxes in September.

12. Encourage people to observe the Countryside Code by keeping to the paths, leaving all fallen wood, keeping dogs under control, and respecting the wildlife, plants and trees.
 - The noticeboard can be updated to communicate these guidelines to visitors.

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