

REDLAKE VALLEY COMMUNITY BENEFIT SOCIETY
Shropshire Hills AONB Conservation Fund 2017-2018
Report to accompany claim for assistance with deer exclusion costs

Background

The RVCBS has the long-term aim to encourage other owners of the quillets, which make up Brineddin Wood in Chapel Lawn to see the benefits of excluding deer to help return the woodland to its traditional character. By fencing off a part of the wood any resulting change in flora can be regularly monitored, and hopefully pave the way for further coppicing and selective thinning of mature oak trees. The need for this is supported by the views of two independent sources of advice. The first dates from 2012; when helping The Society write its Woodland Management Plan, the AONB's Forestry Officer, Brian Barker, stated: *"Deer are a major threat to future management. Browsing is evident on the understorey, particularly the bilberry and the small amount of broadleaved regeneration consequently, the erection of deer fencing is the only option to improve the biodiversity of the quillet, allow for natural regeneration of native broadleaves and regrowth of any coppice brought into management.* The second was a report by Shropshire Wildlife Trust undertaken in May 2016 which graded three aspects of an inspection of Brineddin Wood as 'Fail'. The three categories were

- variation in age of standard trees
- condition of the understory
- diversity of ground flora

AONB Grant Application and Approval

With that in mind, and because much of the hazel in the wood appeared to be approaching the end of its natural lifespan of about 70 years, some coppicing of hazel was carried out during 2015 and 2016. Knowing that the cover provided for individual hazel stools at the time could only be temporary; grant funding was awarded by the Shropshire Hills AONB Conservation Fund in March 2017 for the erection of more substantial deer fencing. This would enable much of the coppiced hazel to continue its regrowth and may also demonstrate that the protected area would permit the ground flora to diversify and oak seedlings to survive. Although still temporary in nature, and assuming success, the fencing would also allow time for RVCBS to consider a longer term management plan for more of the wood involving other quillet owners.

Erecting the Deer Enclosure

In order to protect the coppiced hazel before new shoots appeared, work on the deer enclosure was carried out throughout April. Comparative costings identified the Farm Forestry Company near Bishops Castle as the preferred supplier for heavy duty, black plastic mesh and 1.8 metre fence posts. 200 metres of fencing and 100 1.8m wooden stakes were supplied in the first week of April. Roofing battens to fix the fencing to the poles were ordered separately. Across nine days between 8th and 30th April, six RVCBS members

erected the fencing, assisted on 12th April by Shropshire Council's Wild Team. Acting on the advice of the Farm Forestry Co., a four-inch gap was left at the foot of the fencing to permit rabbits to enter and leave, but a strand of barbed wire was strung between poles two inches above ground level to prevent deer from exploiting this gap. The enclosure was divided into two sections by a central partition to act as a 'safety net' in case deer did manage to break through anywhere.

Outcomes

1. **Fencing erected during spring 2017** – this is now completed.
2. **Temporary notice erected by the public footpath to explain its purpose** – this is in place in full view of the footpath that runs below the quillet. It has the Shropshire Hills AONB logo on it and is headed "**TEMPORARY DEER FENCING**" The wording states: *"Although pretty, and a delight to watch, deer are incredibly destructive to native woodlands. By erecting this temporary fencing, we hope to show how a small area of the wood will respond when deer are excluded. If successful, the coppiced hazel will regenerate without its shoots being nibbled, seedlings from acorns will grow into young oak trees, and the ground flora will become denser and more varied. This, in turn, will support more invertebrate and bird life. The project is supported by the Conservation Fund of Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty."*
3. **Woodland Fair visitors who walk to the quillet will see the benefits** – as stated above, coppiced hazel stools are already growing strongly; the farmer who manages the field against Brineddin Wood's lower boundary has agreed to construct a temporary short-cut across the river to the wood in order that visitors will be able to reach the quillet without making the long detour around the Pentre hamlet. Activities and demonstrations are planned to take place in the quillet in order to attract visitors. These will include: Forestry School; story telling (for children); coppicing demonstration; plus an explanation of the reason for the deer fencing.
4. **A clearer route established for longer-term working with other landowners on the sympathetic management of Brineddin Wood** – the Forestry Commission's Woodland Officer (see 5 below) has advised us to rewrite our Woodland Management Plan. We are advised to use the Small Woodland Management Plan format as that enables one woodland owner to act as an 'Agent' on behalf of other owners who have signed up to the same plan. Already one local farmer who owns four quillets has agreed to work with us. Therefore our clear route ahead is to discuss this with other quillet owners at the same time as using the benefits from the deer enclosure as a principal means of persuading any 'doubter's that the wood needs careful and systematic management.

Lessons Learned

1. The estimate of 72 hours to carry out the work was exceeded by 30 hours, much of which was down to time spent removing overhanging dead branches or leaning dead trunks that would have damaged the fencing when they eventually fell. This had not been considered when planning the work.
2. The post driver that had also been purchased with the grant money proved an invaluable tool, as was a pole saw we used for removing overhanging dead branches.

3. Although a four-inch gap had been left to allow rabbits to pass under the fencing, there has already been some damage – mostly along the southern side of the enclosure where rabbits are thought to pass between the wood and the adjacent meadow. These gaps appear to correspond to established rabbit runs. Although not yet significant enough to allow deer to get through, if more damage of this nature occurs it will be necessary to attach lengths of chicken wire along the bottom of the fencing, or maybe additional short lengths of barbed wire to permit continued use by rabbits but not by, say, muntjac. Because of this a weekly rota of inspections has been drawn up.
4. Even within four weeks of completing the enclosure, early benefits are apparent in the form of far stronger hazel growth within the enclosure than without. It is too early to comment on the other anticipated benefits of surviving oak seedlings and greater ground flora diversity.
5. Anecdotally, the temporary explanatory sign erected by the public footpath has stimulated the interest of passers-by.

Postscript

On 30th May, members of the RVCBS board were visited by Nick Smith, the Forestry Commission's local Woodland Officer, who provided advice on the best way to refresh the Woodland Management Plan, involving other quillet owners. It was extremely reassuring to learn that Nick approved of the direction that we wanted to take and that the initial steps we have so far taken are appropriate.

Patrick Cosgrove
30th May 2017

