

Shropshire Hills AONB Conservation Fund

Shropshire Wildlife Trust - Local Wildlife Site Restoration – CF/1617/9

Final Project Report 2016-2018

Achievements of the Project

The main purpose of the AONB designation is to conserve and enhance natural beauty, while also taking account of economic and social needs, promoting sustainable development and meeting the demand for recreation. All of the 3 projects outlined below, hopefully satisfy this statement in at least one of its elements.

Wondrell Coppice

Wondrell Coppice is part of a larger local wildlife site (LWS) known as Cardington Hill which comprises a mosaic of acid grassland, small streams and valley woodland. The woodland was felled during the Second World War and subsequently replanted with a mix of species. Adjacent to the wildlife site is a conifer plantation which had had laurel planted in the past, presumably for pheasant cover. Over the years the laurel spread into the wildlife site as laurel does, started to dominate the shrub layer and smothered native ground flora. A site survey in 2015 by SWT staff and volunteers noted this and failed the site on its condition. We have now completed the two days' work at Wondrell Coppice. With the grant from the AONB, a contractor was employed for two days to cut all of this laurel and treat the stumps.

Much of the cut material was burnt, with the larger woody material then stacked neatly as 'habitat piles'. The owner, Mr Turner burnt much of the material himself, waiting for it to dry out properly.

Mr Turner was concerned that important bird nesting habitat had now been removed and suggested that he erect bird boxes. SWT found 10 bird boxes for him, which he then erected himself. Kate Singleton from SWT advised that he also improved the woodland shrub layer by planting hazel. She highlighted the current problems with tree diseases, advising him to be aware of the problem when introducing woody species-ensuring that the stock was UK grown and pest and disease free. Mr Turner, much encouraged by the help given by SWT and the AONB grant said that he would do this, adding that he would also remove the laurel from the adjacent conifer wood to prevent it from returning to the LWS.

Output - all of the laurel was removed in the LWS

Outcome 1 - woodland returned to a native flora and threat of further woodland loss abated.

Outcome 2 - owner encouraged to understand and value his wildlife habitat and to manage the site himself for these reasons.



Photographs, clockwise from top left - laurel before removal, cut laurel in piles awaiting burning and afterwards with laurel removed (bramble is what is left).

North-west of the Gore

This local wildlife site near Brown Clee was surveyed in 2012 having not been visited for some years. This is a site with multiple landowners, each owning one to several small pastures. Sadly it was found as is the case with many of the county's wildlife sites, that parts of the site had been lost to agricultural improvement. These pastures were therefore deleted from the database. However land to the east of the site was found to be species-rich and better even than some of the retained pastures. The land was put forward as a candidate for LWS in the Local Sites Partnership that year and accepted.

However, there was a problem in that the grassland was receiving inadequate grazing since the land was unfenced. The site had been grazed by a cart horse but this had come to an end and the grassland was in danger of scrubbing over and losing its species-richness. This is where the AONB grant, with a contribution from both the owner and SWT (from their small capital fund) was able to help. One area of the grassland was fenced and is now grazed with sheep.

Very important to this project was the fact that the owner enjoyed the flowers, the bluebells, primroses and cowslips and that they wanted grazing and had access to a flock nearby.

The fencing was eventually completed in the winter this year (after the first contractor backed out). The work was carried out by a local contractor and the site is now grazed. SWT will monitor the site next summer to assess its condition.

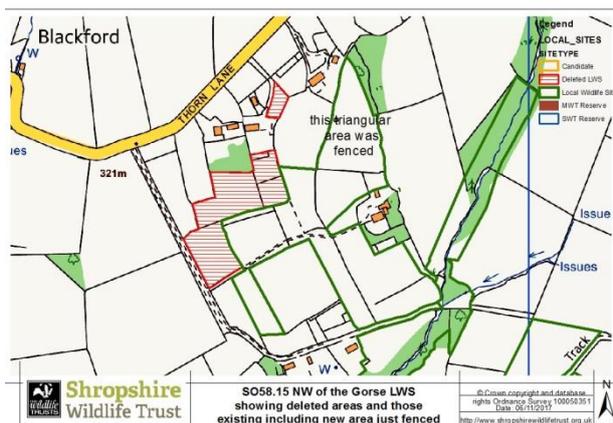
Output - the whole of the area marked for enhancement by grazing was fenced.

Outcome 1 - an area of species-rich grassland fenced and now grazed appropriately to improve and maintain its diversity. This is in an area where species-rich grassland had been lost in recent years.

Outcome 2 – a new contractor was found in an area where SWT carries out works and relies on locally sourced labour.



Photographs showing erected fencing around grassland Local Wildlife Site at North-west of the Gore.



Map showing North-west of the Gore Local Wildlife Site, including areas which were deleted in 2012. The triangular area is 'new' as is the large pasture below the house to the east.

Clunton Local Wildlife Site

This wildlife site lies above the village of Clunton and below Bury Ditches hill fort. It is known locally as 'The Hollow' and there was once a dwelling at the head of the valley. The site was adopted in the 1980s for its acid grassland, stream and flushes. The wildlife site is grazed by animals belonging to two local small holders, one of whom owns a wildlife site further up the valley. The site is surrounded by intensively farmed land and is therefore a small haven and worth conserving.

One of the problems with the site is the amount of gorse. Over the years grazing has kept the gorse at bay to a degree but also burning took place from time to time. The owner is elderly and ill and not able to keep on top of the problem and the grazier (for this part of the

site) does not have the equipment or confidence. It was therefore decided that if a grant were secured, a substantial amount of the gorse could be removed by a contractor.

It was important that a bird survey took place initially since gorse provides important habitat for several bird species including linnets, stonechats and yellowhammers. An initial botanical survey was also carried out.

Three bird surveys were done over spring 2016 and it was confirmed that both yellowhammers (several pairs) and linnets (numerous) used the site as well as a Song Thrush, Redstarts, Blackcaps and Whitethroats (plus others). It was therefore important that an amount of gorse should be left and that the work be done in stages. The project was given a years' extension and the work carried out over two years. An initial botanical survey showed the importance of only cutting gorse where bracken was absent, since the bracken would simply take the place of the gorse.

In 2016 some of gorse was removed and burnt and then the contractor disappeared. A second contractor was found in 2017 and he carried out the remainder of the work which mostly involved cutting scallops in the dense gorse at the top of the hill where there was good species-rich grassland and little bracken. There had been a plan to use a Robocutter but the contractor was concerned that given the height of the gorse, the machine would flip over. The work was therefore carried out with brush cutters without burning the arisings since this used up too much time. The cut gorse was simply placed in dense areas of gorse.

Numerous rabbit burrows were found within the gorse which confirmed to us that burning the gorse in situ would not have been prudent. It would have been dangerous too.

A voluntary condition survey was carried out following the works although a survey would best be done the following year when the grassland has had time to recover. Although there was much bare ground where gorse had been removed there were patches of good acid grassland which had been exposed.

The plan had been to carry out 50 hours of gorse management at Clunton including cutting and burning with the use of either a flail or a Robocutter. Due to the density of the gorse and steepness of the slope, the idea of using the machinery was abandoned by both contractors with more funds spent on labour so that 77 hours of man labour were achieved instead. Large scallops were cut into the dense gorse and more was achieved by not having to burn all of the arisings.

Output - Approximately 1.25ha of gorse removed

Outcome1 - increase in the extent of acid grassland, a priority habitat

Outcome 2 - increased area of grazing land making it more attractive to the tenant farmer (there is always the worry that an area of land becomes so 'rough' that a grazier won't take it. The land then decreases in wildlife value.



Images showing top left, looking across the valley at main area of gorse before management with the remaining images showing scallops cut into the dense gorse.

Lessons Learned

There were a few lessons learned:

It was important to listen to the landowners as to what they want and to encourage them to take ownership of the project and add value to it themselves.

With the North-west of the Gore, in trying to find a very local contractor, SWT had not picked up that there was a poor relationship between the owners and the contractor. Although the contractor pulled out at a late date, another local person was found, with the help of the landowner.

It was the same contractor as above who did the initial work at Clunton. When SWT checked the work he had not carried out the work he had been contracted to do. He was therefore only paid for what he had done and as a result he walked out. Although ultimately a second contractor was found, SWT feel that if at all possible the landowner should do the work themselves or that someone very local, who knows the site should be appointed to do the work.