



## RSPB Weald Reserves Newsletter Spring 2024

### Here's all the latest news from the RSPB Weald Reserves...

Sorry for the long silence since we last issued a newsletter. We thought it was time we brought you up to date on what's been happening recently, now that our busy period of habitat management through the autumn and winter months has ended and we take a step back to allow the wildlife on our reserves to enjoy an undisturbed breeding season. In this newsletter we concentrate on the habitat work that took place over the autumn and winter and we plan to write another as autumn 2024 begins and we can look back on how the wildlife fared this year.

## Broadwater Warren

September to March is always a busy time of year on the reserve as we try to fit in a lot of work before the breeding season begins and we stop working on the heaths and in the woodlands so that we reduce disturbance to a minimum.

You will probably have noticed that we had contractors on site with heavy machinery who were felling large trees across the reserve, particularly in the south. Most of the trees they took down were spruce and this was in response to an approach from Forestry England who are trying to establish a barrier in the south to the spread of another invasive species, the spruce bark beetle, that has devastated spruce plantations in Europe and is now threatening to move across the channel into the UK. Although we have no evidence of the beetle on the reserve it is hoped that removing spruce from Broadwater and other sites in the region may stop the spread or at least slow it down. Both the contractors and our own team of staff and volunteers have also continued our programme of coppicing and cutting back trees (mainly birch) from the rides. Coppicing increases the biodiversity of woodland by creating a variety of habitats for different species with the new growth that emerges after coppicing providing food and shelter for a range of animals and plants. The same applies to cutting back the trees from the ride edges, the most obvious result of which is that it allows much more light and warmth to flood in.



A recent edition of the BBC programme Country File came from Ashdown Forest and one of the topics covered was overgrazing by deer and the management steps that have had to be taken to reduce deer impact on habitats. We have the same problem at Broadwater where, in particular, non-native fallow deer that move around in large groups have been removing the scrub layer from beneath trees and grazing coppice stools which prevents re-growth. The effect of this has been that our efforts to improve biodiversity in the woodland are being thwarted. One species that this has had a major impact on is the dormouse. They need scrub to move around and nest in and rely on plants such as bramble for food, both the pollen-rich flowers and the berries. If you look carefully, you'll see that areas of woodland are now lacking almost any scrub layer beneath the trees. We have been monitoring the dormouse population at Broadwater for 14 years and there has been a worrying fall in numbers recorded. We have, therefore begun a programme of deer management which includes putting up temporary fencing around coppice plots and the culling of deer by a very experienced contractor that has worked with several RSPB reserves. We are now keeping a close eye on the situation to see if these measures allow healthy habitats to begin to develop.



On the heathland the main task has been removing birch saplings which would dominate the heather if left uncontrolled. In the past we would have either burnt the birch or used it to create dead hedges, but now we make birch bundles which you may have seen piled up alongside the tracks. Over the last few years we have sold hundreds of these bundles for river bank strengthening or leaky dam projects in the area. Used along rivers the bundles trap silt and act as protection against bank erosion. Leaky dams slow down run off and improve wetland habitat. Our volunteers make the bundles on a home-made press to



specification and the bundles have provided much-needed income for the reserve. But we have also kept some for ourselves and they have been used to create wet/boggy areas on the heath which are already attracting overwintering birds such as woodcock and common snipe and will improve the habitat for other species such as dragonflies. Did you know that Broadwater is up there as one of the best sites in the UK for damselflies and dragonflies with 28 different species recorded so far?



We also now have a share with some other RSPB reserves in a cut and collect mower that fits on a tractor. It's used to mow areas of heather which helps create a diverse age structure. A healthy heathland includes heather of different height and growth stages. There are insects that feed on newly-emerging heather and birds that need taller, bushier heather to nest in or for protection over the winter months. The latter includes the Dartford warbler which is unusual for a warbler in that it doesn't migrate. It's a bird of heathland which is distinctive if you catch sight of one with its red eyes, dark plumage and long tail. When we last wrote a newsletter having breeding Dartfords at Broadwater was a hope dependent upon the restored heathland developing sufficiently. We're pleased to say that our work has paid off and from having no breeding Dartfords in 2019 we now have a good population of about 10 pairs. In southern England they are at the very northern edge of their breeding area and are susceptible to being badly affected by cold winters so we can expect our Dartford numbers to go up and down over the years.



Heathlands require a whole suite of management techniques to maintain them, another of which is grazing. Our Konik ponies (Glen, Drina, Mucky and Max) have done a good job of keeping the grass, especially purple moor grass, under control, but they don't eat birch. That's where our goats come in. As they say time flies and it's incredible to think that it's already 2 years since our first goats arrived. We now have a herd of 13 that have been grazing two paddocks in the Northern Heath where they have been eating the re-growth of the birch we have cut and significantly reduced herbicide use because in previous years we have had to treat each birch stump we cut with herbicide. We are, therefore, moving to the next stage in their employment contract and from this spring you'll see them out on the Eastern Heath apparently free-roaming. But you'll notice that they are wearing collars, and this is because we will be using a no-fence grazing system with a virtual fence created using an app and the goats



responding to a signal if they get too close to the "fence line". We'll need to give them some training first of all on the Northern Heath, but if all goes well, it shouldn't be too long before they move to the Eastern Heath which will be divided up into virtual paddocks allowing us to graze the whole heath on a rotation system. This will be the first time the goats will have grazed an area open to the public and it will be so important that visitors keep their distance and that all dogs are on leads throughout the reserve. We are really grateful to all the dog owners who walk their dogs on leads on the reserves. Our volunteer wardens do a great job of helping maintain our dogs-on-leads policy and report back on all cases of dogs off leads that they encounter. The great majority of visitors are respecting the policy but there are still incidences of dogs running free at least once a week.



# Tudeley Woods

The RSPB has taken the difficult decision to withdraw its presence from Tudeley Woods and agreed with the Hadlow Estate, who own the land, that Tudeley will cease being an RSPB reserve with effect from 23 July 2024. Tudeley has been managed under an agreement with the Hadlow Estate, a consequence of which is that the RSPB has never had control over management of the site, nor does it allow RSPB to claim agri-environment scheme grants or to generate an income from the site to cover its costs. Furthermore, in the last few years the Estate has been managing a large proportion of the site itself. This has left the RSPB team with significantly diminished conservation management tasks, meaning there is little conservation work that the RSPB can do that would have a positive impact for nature. Therefore, the Weald Reserves team will be redistributing its focus to sites where it can make greater steps for nature conservation. Tudeley Woods will continue to be managed by the Hadlow Estate, who have entered the site into a Countryside Stewardship scheme with Natural England, and there is a network of public footpaths and bridleways which will still be accessible by members of the public after RSPB's withdrawal.

## Recollections of Tudeley Woods from a volunteer's perspective: by Brian Nobbs

After spending some 10 years with Guildford Local RSPB Group, coppicing, removing rhododendron and maintaining the infrastructure at Barfold Copse RSPB Reserve near Haslemere, when we moved to Sevenoaks, my wife Jean and I, were keen to carry on with some practical conservation work. Tudeley Woods RSPB was the most obvious site and we first visited in May 1990.



The first area to be tackled was Brakeybank wood in the northern sector. In parts the coppice was so dense that you couldn't see much, even the magnificent standard oaks. Nor was there much to hear as it was ominously silent. Early work concentrated on widening the rides and restarting the coppice cycles. A charcoal burner was found and put into use. Apparently, the charcoal produced by assistant warden Anna, who often camped out nearby to keep an eye on the procedure, was of very high quality and could be retailed for barbecues, etcetera.

In later years the coppicing continued, and the clearance work was expanded to create "scallop": D shaped areas with the flat side of the D being a path, and the curved side penetrating the coppice and being backed by dry hedging using the cut brush (after the use of bonfires was declared non PC!). The increased light in these areas soon encouraged a range of wildflowers, and the insects that fed on them. An isolated sector to the northeast of Half Moon Lane, called "The Plants", was the subject of similar activity.



A meadow within Brakeybank was resurrected and expanded by mowing, resulting in an excellent wildflower meadow with bugle and common spotted orchid featuring well. Despite Tudeley often being very muddy (a feature it seems to share with other Wealden reserves) and apart from a few streams which were rather seasonal in flow, there was not much standing water, and so a pond was created to one side of the meadow. This soon attracted dragonflies, damselflies and others.



Further meadows lay in the southern sector, to the south of Pembury Walks Road, and around Yew Tree and Sandhill Farms. A lot of effort was expended in trying to remove silver birch, which had seeded prolifically. With the meadows to the west, work on a sandstone ridge to the west was aimed at restoring the natural heather cover. Here the silver birch was joined by Scots pine, as the principal adversaries, but excess bracken could also be a problem. Ironically, whilst gorse was also a problem in the meadows, on the nearby heathland ridge where it would have provided useful habitat for birds like Dartford warbler, gorse was missing or in poor supply. Relocating some was not always successful and best results were obtained by taking cuttings and growing them on at home before replanting them behind rabbit-proof netting.



Among several gems hidden away is a small area of bog called Valley Mire. Once cleared of encroaching vegetation such as pine and rhododendron, a few “leaky dams” were created, consisting of small log dams to impede the flow of water down the slope; which was causing the area to dry out in summer. A rich variety of mosses and bog plants can be found there, though it is a challenging area to traverse.

Working at Tudeley has been varied, interesting and rewarding and it is disappointing not being able to continue. However, Morris Wood presents new challenges (and is equally steep and muddy) and opens a new chapter for the Wealden reserves.

**Brian Nobbs**

## Fore Wood

One of the big changes at Fore Wood since our last newsletter was the surfacing of 2km of tracks that run through the reserve. As is typical of woodlands in the Weald with their heavy clay soils, the tracks through the reserve became waterlogged every winter, making vehicular access for management impossible. Thanks to funding secured from the High Weald AONB Landscape Enhancement programme, we managed to surface a track in 2021 that runs from one end of the reserve to the other, which means we no longer have to carry chainsaws and other equipment from the entrance into the middle of the wood to undertake management. As the 2 ghyll streams that pass through the reserve support rare communities of lower plants, we had to ensure that the materials used on the track were carefully selected and approved by Natural England to avoid altering the pH of the groundwater.



In addition to making access and management much easier and efficient, the track has also enabled us to extract timber from the reserve. In the year following the track upgrade we produced and extracted over 2000 fence posts, straining posts and gate posts, which were delivered to RSPB reserves in the Southeast such as Dungeness and Pulborough to complete livestock fencing projects. The following year we provided the timber for Pulborough’s new play area from our sustainable sweet-chestnut coppice.

None of this would have been possible if not for the incredible effort put in by the Fore Wood volunteers, who are now real experts in fencepost production.

Each year we undertake coppicing of sweet chestnut and other mixed broadleaf species by cutting the trees down to ground level in winter. This stimulates the trees to regrow multiple stems from the cut stump, and after a few years it develops into dense scrub, which provides a varied and more biodiverse structure to the woodland. With the track upgrade enabling greater access, we have also started removing some oak trees to further improve the structure of the woodland. We realise that removing oaks can be emotive as they are



a much-loved tree, and they are famous for their biodiversity. We have removed approximately 100 oaks since 2020, with each one being carefully selected to ensure they have minimal features of ecological value in comparison to the trees that have been retained. 100 oaks may sound like a lot but there are several thousand oaks at Fore Wood, and throughout much of the reserve the canopy is completely closed, meaning no sunlight reaches the woodland floor. Removing the oaks has allowed light to reach the ground on the edges of the ride network, which has resulted in a flush of wildflowers that provide a much-needed nectar source for pollinating insects, such as bees and butterflies. There is benefit in the high forest too from selectively removing some oaks, as creating gaps in the canopy contributes greatly to the recruitment of young long-lived trees such as oak, hornbeam and beech.

Over the last 8 years we have been opening up the ride network and cutting coppice plots, which has resulted in an increase in scrub and bramble habitat throughout the woodland. We knew therefore that there was viable habitat for dormice but we had never monitored for them on the reserve. We installed 50 dormouse boxes in 2021 and immediately found that there was a healthy population at Fore Wood. In October of that year alone 13 individuals were recorded in the nest boxes, and they have continued to be recorded in good numbers each year since.

## [Our other reserves \(not open to the public\)](#)

The decision to withdraw from Tudeley was taken just as the Weald Reserves Team took over management of a new area of land which has been given to the RSPB and has a great deal of potential for nature conservation. It means that the team will continue to manage 4 reserves after the withdrawal from Tudeley, three in East Sussex and one in West Sussex. At both our staff and volunteers are working hard on habitat management.

The new reserve, Morris Wood, has an area of 33 hectares (82 acres) and is situated within the High Weald National Landscape (formerly AONB) and close to Ashdown Forest. There is a mixture of coniferous plantation and native woodland with veteran beech, mature oak and ash mixed within the conifers. Goshawks and several pairs of firecrest are already breeding on the site. It's very early days and we are drawing up a management plan with the long-term vision being for the woodland to become well-structured and mainly comprised of native broadleaf trees, supporting priority bird species such as lesser spotted woodpecker, marsh tit and spotted flycatcher, and well managed coppice providing nesting habitat for dormice and scrub nesting birds. We also aim to establish a wide sunny ride network rich in flora, butterflies and other invertebrates.

In our first full Winter season here, the team has focused on diversifying a large area of sweet-chestnut coppice, by cutting-back re-growth, and on coppicing the boundary of the reserve to produce fencing material. Our first big project at Morris Wood will be fencing the 700m boundary, and we intend to process all the material needed for this on-site.

Our West Sussex reserve, Rowlands Wood, has been owned and managed by RSPB for 40 years. Although just 17 hectares (42 acres) in area it is a microcosm of habitats from ancient broadleaved woodland supporting a stunning display of bluebells and other wildflowers, to the regenerating grass and scrub mosaic with its sheltered glades and the fringing secondary woodland and hazel coppice. It is well-connected to an expansive area of woodland to the north and supports an important assemblage of woodland and scrubland birds, including spotted flycatcher, marsh tit, and bullfinch. Thanks to enhancements such as rotational coppicing, pond creation, and deer management, the structure of the secondary woodland is improving year-on-year, and it is hoped that in time, we will once again welcome nightingale and turtle dove on-site. Rowlands Wood also supports a population of dormice that we have monitored for 12 years and is an important site for great crested newt.

## Team News

**Matt Orwin** joined us from Kent Wildlife Trust as our new Assistant Warden in August last year and, as a mechanical engineer by training, has done a great job overseeing the construction of the new bridge over the stream in the wet woodland and you'll see Matt running many of the work parties at Broadwater.

The team received a huge boost in March when it was announced that **Claire Derbyshire**, who has been a volunteer and volunteer team leader on our reserves for 12 years, is one of this year's winners of the RSPB President's Award for outstanding volunteer work. The RSPB has about 12,000 volunteers and this year there were 8 award winners so you can see how special it is to be a winner. We calculated that Claire has run or been involved in over 350 volunteer work parties.

## Events

We are running 3 events this year as follows;

**Dawn Chorus Walk** at Broadwater Warren on Saturday 4 May

**Broadwater at Dusk** (looking for nightjars) on Friday 14 June

**Fungus Identification Walk** at Fore Wood on Sunday 13 October

For more information and to book tickets for these events please go to one of these links:

<https://events.rspb.org.uk/broadwaterwarren>

<https://events.rspb.org.uk/forewood>

## Keep in Touch

Please drop us a line at [broadwater.warren@rspb.org.uk](mailto:broadwater.warren@rspb.org.uk) if you have any comments or questions or if there is a topic you'd like us to include in our next newsletter in the autumn.

We hope you have enjoyed reading this newsletter, but if you don't want to hear about the Weald Reserves anymore just reply to [broadwater.warren@rspb.org.uk](mailto:broadwater.warren@rspb.org.uk) with 'unsubscribe'

## Acknowledgements

Photos by **John Phillips, Brian Nobbs, Andy Daw** and **Alan Loweth** (and Forest Research)  
Text by **Alan Loweth, Brian Nobbs, Andy Daw** and **Phil Henderson**  
Edited by **Elaine Johnson**