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| Committee(s): | Date(s): | Item no. |
| Epping Forest & Commons | 5 November 2012 | |
| Subject: EPPING FOREST HABITAT & TREE SAFETY WORK PROGRAMME 2011-12 Out-Turn | Public | |
| Report of: Superintendent of Epping Forest SEF 37/12 | For information | |

Summary

This report summarises the work completed as part of the habitat and tree safety management Annual Work programme for Epping Forest between April 2011 to March 2012 inclusive. Keystone Trees work reached an important milestone, with 53% of the selected Beech and Oak pollards completed exactly half-way through the important *Branching Out* project.

Amongst the highlights of the wider habitat work was:

- the completion of the phased opening up of the Lords Bushes Oak pollards, as set out in the 2003 Integrated Site Plan;
- the completion of the second re-pollarding of the Hornbeams that had first been re-pollarded in 1948 in Bury Wood;
- the successful trial of an invisible fencing system for cattle, a 'first' for the UK.

The habitats work programme is supported by major grants from the Single Payment Scheme, Natural England, the Heritage Lottery Fund and The Tubney Charitable Trust with an income in this reporting year of £315,000. This represents over 60% funding for the Conservation operations teams' habitat and tree-safety operations.

In addition, of the two main volunteers' groups, the Epping Forest Conservation Volunteers and the Epping Forest Centenary Trust, carried out work on over 40 sites across the Forest, from Wanstead Flats in the south to the Lower Forest in the north.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- you receive this report.

Main Report

Background

1. This report reviews the conservation projects, habitat management and tree safety work achieved during the year 2011 – 12 by the Conservation Teams and volunteers.
2. The programme is drawn from the Epping Forest Management Plan approved in 2004. Background details of the projects can be found in the main Management Plan, updated with the additional projects in 2007 (the document page numbers are given below to allow reference to this. Further details can be found in the other planning documents and strategies listed below under '*Background Papers*'.

Current Position

3. This year the habitats work programme was again supported financially by Natural England through its Environmental Stewardship Scheme. The management of most of the grasslands in the Forest and on the Buffer Lands is covered by payments under the Entry Level Scheme (ELS). Other habitats work in the Forest, especially within the scrub and wooded areas, is supported by specific Higher Level Scheme (HLS) payments at higher rates of payment and this includes cattle grazing, wood-pasture restoration and scrub coppicing.
4. In addition, The Tubney Charitable Trust grant continues to provide significant financial support as do payments received under the Single Payment Scheme.
5. The *Keystone Trees* conservation work is supported with a 74% grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund as part of the *Branching Out* Project and this grant supports a Conservation Team Leader (arborist) and the 3 apprentice arborists.
6. The total of grants from these sources, including capital grant payments for individual projects during the year such as Bracken control, amounted to £315,000. This covered over 60% of the costs of the Conservation Teams salaries and on-costs during the year.
7. This year's work by volunteers was carried out at over 40 sites across the Forest by the Epping Forest Conservation Volunteers (EFCV), Epping Forest Centenary Trust (EFCT) and some projects using external contractors.

8. During this year, 3 apprentice arborists successfully completed their NVQ2 qualifications and the 7th, 8th and 9th new apprentices started in October 2011 in partnership with Capel Manor College.

MANAGEMENT PLAN OBJECTIVE – TREES

KEYSTONE TREES STRATEGY

(pp. 194-195 of Man Plan)

9. During this reporting year work on 243 *Keystone Trees* was completed across the Forest as part of the HLF-funded *Branching Out* Project. A sum total of 639 Keystone Trees, therefore, has been reached for the Project as a whole representing 53% of the target at the half-way point of the funding.
10. The main Keystone Tree areas worked on this year included High Beach, St Thomas's Quarters, Lords Bushes, Rushey Plain, Powell's Forest, Hill Wood, Fairmead on the Oaks there, Goldings and Staples Hills and alongside Ditches Ride.

WOOD-PASTURE RESTORATION

(pp. 191 – 195 of Man Plan)

11. **National Priority Habitat:** Wood-pasture is recognised as a priority habitat for conservation by the UK Government in its action plan to meet the aims of the Rio Convention on Biological Diversity to which it is a signatory. Epping Forest is one of the most important wood-pasture sites in the UK and represents at least 7% of the UK total of this priority habitat.
12. Hornbeam re-pollarding and wood-pasture restoration was carried out across the following areas: Walthamstow Forest, Lords Bushes, Rushey Plain, North Long Hills and Long Hills, Pole Hill, High Beach and Bury Wood. At this latter site, Bury Wood, a significant milestone was achieved as the last of the pollards that had been re-cut in the 1940s and 1950s were re-pollarded thus bringing them back into the pollarding cycle as envisaged originally in the 1998 Management Plan.

OTHER TREE & WOODLAND MANAGEMENT

Project: Rhododendron Management (p. 197)

13. Some of the *Rhododendron ponticum* (the invasive species cultivar) was removed by volunteers in Knighton Woods (Comp 31) as work continued to maintain the vegetation in this historic garden.

Project: Thinning of Secondary Woodland (p. 193 of Plan)

14. Scout Project 822 in August 2011 involved the thinning of secondary woodland at Hatch Forest to extend the glades at this site as well as the removal of Birch at High Beach Pillow Mounds.

Project: Tree Hazard Management Work (p. 199 of Man Plan)

15. Following the survey work carried out during the autumn of 2011, over 470 trees required some hazard removal work. Most work was carried out by the in-house arborist staff, although significant amounts of roadside work were also achieved by specialist contractors where additional traffic control was required.

MANAGEMENT PLAN OBJECTIVE – OPEN LAND

GRAZING

Project: Extensive Grazing (p. 212)

16. The grazing management was carried out using a similar rotation to that of previous years across Forest Plains and heaths. Buffer Lands at Copped Hall and Great Gregories were also grazed by the Conservation herd. The English Longhorn cattle were managed under an interim grazing contract by Wildlife & Countryside Services, with a new herdsman.
17. By the end of the year the long-term grazing contract had been competitively tendered and was awarded to Wildlife & Countryside Services.
18. In addition to the normal grazing work, the interim grazier, Mr Roger Beecroft and the herdsman Robert Faber, undertook extensive trials of the invisible fencing equipment with the cattle at 3 sites. The impacts of this new technology were there for guests to view at the July 2011 Ladies' Day and the results were also presented as part of the Public Inquiry on Cattle Grids held in November 2011. At the Inquiry the Inspector visited one of the invisible grid locations. The trials were successful at the sites and in the conditions tested, but further

development of the system is needed to fit the conditions at Epping more precisely.

19. Sheep-grazing was carried out at the Copped Hall Estate (Deer Park fields) during the winter months as in the previous 3 years.

MOWING & CUTTING

Project: Flail Collector cuts and mini-system cuts (p. 215)

20. The mowing programme is outlined in the Management Plan (see page 215), with some modifications. Amongst notable achievements was the opening up of Sheppard's Meadows (see above) to restore grassland and work at The Stubbles ensuring that acid grassland at the edges of this narrow site were kept open. The mowing rotation at Wanstead Flats, continued into a second year working carefully around dense ant-hill areas and adjusting work to respond to reports by the Wren Group on the main Skylark feeding and breeding areas.
21. Certain larger sites, where generally hay can be harvested (e.g. Yates's Meadow), were cut by an external contractor again this year to allow the Epping Forest Grasslands Team to concentrate its work on key sites in less accessible locations, with more difficult terrain, scarcer flora or more complex prescriptions and rotations.
22. Most of the grassland work is supported by the Entry Level Payments under Natural England's Stewardship Scheme across both the Forest and Buffer Lands grasslands.
23. At Great Gregories a hay-lage crop was taken from the fields, by a specialist contractor, to provide fodder for the over-wintering conservation cattle herd.

SCRUB MANAGEMENT & CONTROL

Project: Heathland Restoration & Maintenance (p. 219)

24. Restoration work on overgrown heaths continued at the main heaths of Deershelter Plain, Long Running, and Sunshine Plain, with the EFCT contributing significantly to extensive work at Long Running.

Project: Grasslands, Glades & Green Lanes Restoration (p.220)

25. Grassland restoration and maintenance work, through the clearance of scrub and secondary woodland, took place at sites including significant works at Epping Long Green, The Birkbeck and Sheppard's Meadows.

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Project: Scrub Coppice Rotation (Project Nightingale) (p. 222)

26. This Project continued at Chingford Plain and with a new parcel of coppicing at Lincoln's Lane. Breeding of a pair of Nightingales was confirmed at a Project site where they have been seen over the past 10 years alongside Gas Ride near The Warren.
27. Cranesbill Glade was opened up further and produced a show of Bluebells in Spring 2011.

MANAGEMENT PLAN OBJECTIVE – WETLANDS

Project: Alien Plants Management (p.244)

28. A survey of over 142 ponds across the Forest and Buffer Lands was carried out by the in-house ecology team mapping the presence of the invasive and non-native **New Zealand Stonecrop** which is causing problems with native plants and animals in ponds in the UK. The survey revealed that 19 ponds (13%) contained this invasive plant. Following this survey control methods can now be considered and costed and the scale of the problem for the Forest can be monitored closely.

Pond & Bog Vegetation Clearance (p. 238)

29. At Wake Valley Bog colonising trees were removed from this important site to keep it open and maintain its special, rare vegetation.

Pond Bankside restoration (p. 238)

30. At Hollow Ponds both reed-bed planting and willow coppicing were carried out to improve the banksides and reduce erosion.

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Financial Implications

31. The work was funded from Epping Forest and Buffer Lands local risk budgets. In this reporting year contributions to the budget from grant-aid from the Single Payment Scheme (administered by the Rural Payments Agency), The Heritage Lottery Fund, The Tubney Charitable Trust and Natural England amounted to £315,000. This covered over 60% of the Conservation operations teams salaries and related employment costs.
32. The tree safety survey by a consultant and the consequent selected tree hazard removal work involving contractors at the roadside cost a combined total of £34,500.

Legal Implications

33. The habitats work programme was carried out under the Conservators' powers provided by the Epping Forest Act 1878. Within the Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Special Area of Conservation (SAC) the programmed work was consented to by Natural England under Section 28 of the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 (as amended by the Countryside & Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000).

Strategic Implications

City Together

34. The work achieved above meets the *City Together* vision of a *World Class City* and, specifically, 2 of its 5 themes: "A world class City that supports our communities" and "A World Class City which protects, promotes and enhances our environment".

Open Spaces Department Business Plan

35. The habitats work programme, with the high level of involvement of volunteers and local members of the community, follows from 3 of the Open Spaces Department's Strategic Aims of: "providing high quality accessible Open Spaces and services in accordance with nationally recognised standards for the benefit of London and the Nation"; "involving communities in the management of our sites" and "adopting sustainable working practices, promoting the variety of life (biodiversity) and protecting the Open Spaces for the enjoyment of future generations".

Epping Forest Management Plan

36. The work described in this report also meets the Epping Forest Vision for the 21st Century, in particular:
- "Epping Forest's position as a unique and ancient landscape for people and wildlife will be strengthened;
 - "The Forest will retain its natural aspect with the diversity of wildlife habitats enhanced and the features of international importance, including its veteran pollards, protected;
 - "Epping Forest will be highly valued as part of a larger and fully accessible protected landscape area".

Consultees and formal SSSI consent for operations

37. Natural England officers were consulted about this work programme in relation to both the Stewardship Scheme and the *Favourable Condition* of the Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) as required by the UK Government. Natural England gave its formal consent to this work

programme under Section 28E(3)(a) of the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 (as amended by Section 75 and Schedule 9 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000).

Conclusions

38. The work completed in 2011 – 2012 is drawn from the Epping Forest Management Plan and subsequent strategies and site-specific plans (see below). The habitats work is supported by significant grants from Natural England, The Heritage Lottery Fund and The Tubney Charitable Trust. Significant milestones were achieved in re-establishing the pollarding cycle for the Hornbeams at Bury Wood and completing more than half of the *Keystone Tree* work exactly on time.
39. In addition to the work of the in-house teams of arborists and conservation workers, the work programme also involved many hours of volunteer time from the Epping Forest Conservation Volunteers (EFCV), Epping Forest Centenary Trust (EFCT), the Scout Association, The Wren Group and other local volunteering initiatives coordinated by the Volunteer Development Officer. Over 40 sites have been managed with the assistance of these voluntary groups across all habitats with a significant impact on pond management this year.

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Background Papers:

The Epping Forest Management Plan 2004 – 2010

The Barn Hoppitt Wood-pasture Restoration Plan 2006 – 2011

The Lords Bushes & Knighton Woods Integrated Site Plan 2004 – 2010

The Wanstead Flats Integrated Site Plan 2006 – 2011

Branching Out Stage Project Plan (Nov 2008) (Chapters 15 Keystone Trees Strategy and 16 Grazing Strategy)

Environmental Stewardship guidelines (Natural England)

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