

# WANSTEAD FLATS SCRUB MANAGEMENT T



12/2/2018

## Forest Operations Plan Development Note

Scrub forms an important part of the biodiversity heritage at Wanstead Flats. It also adds to the considerable aesthetic appeal of the Flats for visitors. There are however a number of substantial problems associated with scrub facilitating anti-social behavior. This note sets these issues in context and suggests a management strategy and outline activity

program to be taken forward to the Forest Operations Plan

# Wanstead Flats Scrub Management

## FOREST OPERATIONS PLAN DEVELOPMENT NOTE

### INTRODUCTION

Wanstead Flats (182ha) is the southern-most part of Epping Forest and is situated within an extensive residential area but shares borders with the City of London Cemetery and the Wanstead Golf course. The flats are bisected by four major roads: Bush Road (A114), Centre Road (A114), Forest Drive (A117) and Lake House Road. It is one of the most visited parts of Epping Forest with some 395 263 or 9.7% of the Forest's visitors each year. It is one of the best recorded areas for wildlife in Epping Forest with considerable work undertaken by volunteers from the local Wren Group.

Historically the Flats were a grassy heathland used by local commoners, and drovers en-route to London's markets, for livestock grazing and it is likely that there has been grassland or heathland habitat here for over a thousand years. Today the area is made up of an intricate mix of recreational/sport grassland (including 50 football pitches), copse, scrub, acid grassland and ponds. It is designated as a Site of Metropolitan Importance for its conservation value to London and part of the acid grassland is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest and it is also one of the few breeding sites for Skylarks in London. Bush Wood, Bush Wood North and Bush Wood Flats are included within the Wanstead Park designation of Historic Parks and Gardens.

The cessation of grazing *circa* 20 years ago on the grassland, following the BSE outbreak of 1996, led to an expansion of the area and density of scrub across the Flats. These new and expanding scrub habitats are an important habitat benefiting a number of key species. However heathland and grassland habitats have been changed as a consequence of expanding scrub on them. A scrub management program for conservation has been underway for nearly ten years with funding under Countryside Stewardship's Entry Level Scheme (ELS) and Higher Level Scheme (HLS).

A number of scrub areas have also become a focal point for significant antisocial behaviour, such as Class A drug taking, prostitution and rough sleeping. Sustained requests by colleagues managing persistent antisocial behaviour to clear increasing areas of scrub has necessitated a review of scrub management to assess the balance of priorities for managing what is also a very important biodiversity resource.

This Forest Operations Plan Development Note draws together the scrub management issues on Wanstead Flats and outlines a management strategy. An action plan is given which will form part of the Epping Forest Operations plan currently being developed.

## SCRUB DESCRIPTION

### Composition

Three general landscape categories of scrub are present on Wanstead Flats and are listed in Table 1 along with a general description of their species composition. In addition, the Sprawling and diminutive ‘tree’, Creeping Willow (*Salix repens*) still survives on Wanstead Flats. It is a remnant of when the Flats were wetter and more heathy, but is now restricted to only a few locations on the Flats and is scarce in London generally.

**Table 1: Landscape Scrub Communities on Wanstead Flats**

Scrub Category	Description
<b>Seral Scrub</b>	<p>An intermediate ecological succesional stage where scrub is colonising grass and heathland habitats. Largely comprised of individual plants and groups spread across the area. On the Flats it is composed of three plant communities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>W21- <i>Crataegus monogyna</i>- <i>Hedera Helix</i> scrub</li> <li>W23 – <i>Ulex Europaeus</i>- <i>Rubus Fruticosus</i> agg</li> <li><i>Ulmus</i> spp</li> </ul>
<b>Linear Roadside scrub</b>	A typically narrow strip of woody scrub vegetation along the boundary of the Flats. Comprised of a mix of species but with <i>Ulmus</i> / <i>Crataegus</i> sps dominant with <i>Prunus</i> sps and <i>Sambucus nigra</i> .
<b>Copse</b>	Edge and understorey scrub communities often associated with 19 <sup>th</sup> /Early 20 <sup>th</sup> Century tree plantings across the Flats designed to break up the open character of the area. Comprised of a mix of native scrub species, stump regrowth and young trees.

### Current Management

There are thirteen different scrub management areas on the Flats with varying objectives and history of activity which are outlined in Table 2. Overall, management has largely concentrated on controlling the spread of scrub and promoting a more diverse structure of retained scrub. Scrub management areas (SMA) 1, 2 , 4, 5 and 6 are subject to HLS funding under:

HC16: Restoration of successional areas of scrub - where by year 10, shrub species such as hawthorn, blackthorn and willow should have a diverse age and height structure. No more than 50% of the scrub area should be mature or over mature.

HK16: Restoration of grassland for target features. This relates to grassland management but as scrub removal and management is required to help restore the grassland the scrub is dealt with under Stewardship.

A number of areas have however been cleared of scrub and cut at least annually to maintain them in a cleared condition to deter anti-social behaviour, notably towards Sidney Road and around Jubilee Pond (Scrub management area 9) and elm scrub along Capel Road (Scrub management area 10) . To help restore the acid grassland communities scrub has been permanently cleared with any regrowth cut annually on the Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) area of Wanstead Flats.



SMA	Dominant Scrub Category	Conservation Importance	ASB Importance	Current Scrub Management
1	W21-Seral scrub	High	Breeding birds, green hairstreak butterfly, broom-tip moth, heather, acid grassland	<i>Reduction:</i> Mechanical cut and collect/manual (volunteer) cutting
2	W21-Seral scrub	Med-High	Breeding birds, invertebrates including: green hairstreak butterfly, broom-tip moth, heather, acid grassland	<i>Maintenance:</i> Mechanical cut and leave
3	Copse	Low-Med	Breeding birds, invertebrates and Green Hairstreak. Copse edge scrub especially important particularly on the southern side	<i>None</i>
4	Copse	Med	Breeding birds, invertebrates and Green Hairstreak. Copse edge scrub especially important particularly on the southern side	<i>None</i>
5	W21-Seral scrub	High	Breeding/migratory birds, green hairstreak, invertebrates and acid grassland.	<i>None</i>
6	W23-Seral scrub	Med-High	Breeding/migratory birds, green hairstreak butterfly, invertebrates and Broom-tip moth. Primary importance of the area is the ground nesting birds (Skylark and Meadow Pipit)	<i>Reduction:</i> Mechanical cut and collect
7	W21-Seral scrub	Med-High	For breeding birds	Rough sleeping, Drug use <i>None</i>
8	W21-Seral scrub	Low	For breeding birds	Rough sleeping, Drug use.Prostitution <i>None</i>
9	Copse	Low	For breeding birds	Rough sleeping, Drug use <i>Eradication: Clearedunderstory to deter rough sleeping and cut annually</i>
10	Ulmus spp	Low	For breeding birds	Drug use especially frequent. <i>Eradication: Cleared due to high use by drug users.</i>
11	Linear Roadside scrub	Low	For breeding birds	Drug use especially frequent. Prostitution <i>None</i>
12	Linear Roadside scrub	Low	For breeding birds	Rough sleeping <i>Eradication: Cleared to deter rough sleeping and cut annually</i>
13	Linear Roadside scrub	Low	For breeding birds	Rough sleeping, Drug use, Assault <i>Reduction: Increase visibility of the pedestrian path through scrub removal. Retain individuals and clumps of hawthorns</i>

### MANAGEMENT ISSUES

When considering the management of scrub on Wanstead Flats there are three broad areas for review:

- The impact of scrub on the biodiversity of the Flats
- The impact of scrub on the landscape of the Flats
- The impact of scrub on visitors to Wanstead Flats

### Biodiversity Value of Scrub at Wanstead Flats

Appendix One details the biodiversity value of the Scrub at Wanstead Flats. In summary, based on biodiversity data collected from Wanstead Flats by members of the WREN group and other individuals, the scrub habitat of the Flats has been shown to be extremely valuable for birds and invertebrates. The scrub is of enormous value as a breeding habitat and for during the migration period, particularly autumn/winter migration, when the Flats' scrub provides shelter and food in the form of berries and invertebrates.

Birds of Conservation Concern (UK Red List) utilising the scrub habitats of Wanstead Flats for breeding or during migration include 10 Red and 5 Amber listed species.

For invertebrates scrub is important as a food source (nectar, dead wood, leaves, honeydew, other insects), and for breeding and shelter. For many early flying insects, hawthorn and blackthorn are perhaps the most important scrub species for their early sources of nectar. Other shrubs with important nectar sources include gorse, broom and bramble. Notable invertebrates found at Wanstead Flats requiring scrub habitat as part of their life cycle include:

*Green hairstreak butterfly* : Wanstead Flats is the only locality within Epping Forest for this species;

*Broom-tip moth*: This is a UK BAP species with broom (*Cytisus scoparia*) being its larval foodplant;

*Philodromus rufus (spider)*: A rare spider with very few UK locations. Only site within Epping Forest.

### Landscape Value of scrub at Wanstead Flats

Scrub is likely to have been an established feature of the landscape at Wanstead Flats for some centuries, with records of it being a grazed landscape stretching back to 1199<sup>1</sup>. For much of its history the Flats were wetter and marshier than today with the land drained, leveled and sown with grass in 1886 by the City of London Corporation. Such change, along with a number of different tree planting episodes, will have introduced changes to composition and extent of the scrub communities over time. It is likely that during periods of frequent use for grazing the prevalence of scrub was relatively low and that given the nature of natural resource use at these times was probably regularly cut back to supply fuel. Appendix one gives a series of aerial photographs that illustrates one period of change with an increase in scrub abundance since 1987 when grazing by livestock ceased.

---

<sup>1</sup> Monks of Stratford were granted the right to graze sheep on the "brurerio" (heath) between Ham Firth and Welcomstow (Wanstead and Leyton). Quoted from the 'An Integrated Site Management Plan for Wanstead Flats, Epping Forest, 2006-2011

In landscape terms the scrub habitats on the Flats play an important role in softening and screening the surrounding urban area in what could otherwise be an open and potentially 'bleak' landscape. The impact of traffic on Centre Road, Forest Drive, Aldersbrook Road and Lakehouse Roads on visitors and wildlife is considerably lessened through scrub fringes and the occasional clumps of scrub.



### Social Value of Scrub at Wanstead Flats

Overall the mosaic of scrub habitats provides visitors with a naturally compartmentalized ever changing landscape of colourful displays of blossom, foliage, fruit and smells for visitors. As the habitat of preference for many species of songbirds it also provides an important and uplifting wildlife experience for the many visitors to the Flat who benefit knowingly or unknowingly.

As well as the positive social benefits there are also significant negative aspects of the scrub on Wanstead Flats. The screening effect of the scrub facilitates anti-social behavior with drug taking and prostitution frequent in a number of areas and the Flats are one of our most notorious areas for fly-tipping. Anecdotally rough sleeping has increased across the Flats with the London Borough of Redbridge being 8<sup>th</sup> in the UK for rough sleepers with a 25 % increase reported on 2015 numbers in January 2017. Mulching works to clear gorse on the Flats in the Spring of 2017 highlighted many previously unknown camps situated deep within what had been thought of as 'impenetrable' gorse scrub! While evidence of unauthorized activity is across the Flats the most serious activity of regular prostitution and drug taking seems to be around Manor Flats up to Alexandra Lake.

As well as being distressing for visitors who come across participants in such unauthorized activities they also present a number of significant health concerns for staff, visitors and the participants themselves. Particular issues of concern are:

**Infected needles:** A number of locations on the Flats are regularly used by Class A drug users injecting their drugs with the used needles being left behind on the ground. These pose a risk to visitors and staff, litter picking staff and volunteers in particular, from accidental skin punctures following contact with a needle.

**Excrement:** A further health issue for visitors, staff and volunteers following from a side effect of drug taking is that users often need to excrete following taking their substance. In well used scrub drug haunts we find local concentrations of human excrement.

In addition to these concerns there are also the very substantial worries for the often vulnerable people participating in the activities. Keeper staff have increasingly been working with the Police, Homeless Charities, Immigration service and others to help direct rough sleepers and other vulnerable people to more appropriate venues and sources of help.

### SCRUB MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

It is considered that the increasing area of scrub on Wanstead Flats is adversely impacting the grassland habitats. As more areas of scrub mature towards woodland it is also declining in its habitat quality. The location of scrub communities is also having a deleterious impact on the public usage of the Flats.

Overall objectives for managing scrub habitats on Wanstead Flats are as follows:

1. To improve conservation grassland habitat quality through reducing the area of scrub to a maximum of 25% of the grassland habitat area;
2. To maintain retained scrub in a favourable condition;
3. To reduce opportunities for serious anti-social behavior problems through scrub management and eradication.



## OUTLINE SCRUB MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

Objective	SMA	Action	Timing (Years)
1	<b>1,6 Others?</b>	<i>Reduction:</i> Reduce the area of scrub to a maximum of 25% of the area by cutting the scrub and removing the arisings where possible or mulching if not feasible	<b>1-5</b>
2	<b>1,2,4,5,6,7 Others</b>	<i>Maintenance:</i> Rotational cutting of scrub to maintain its habitat quality for invertebrate species and breeding birds. No more than 50% of the scrub to mature or over-mature. Cut and remove arisings where possible or mulch if not feasible	<b>Ongoing</b>
3	<b>11, 12,</b>	<i>Eradication:</i> Permanent clearance of scrub through cutting and removing the cleared material with subsequent annual cutting.	<b>1-5</b>
3	<b>9,10,11,12</b>	<i>Maintenance:</i> Annual cutting to maintain scrub regrowth to a maximum height of 1m.	<b>Ongoing</b>
3	<b>8, 13</b>	<i>Reduction:</i> Remove all scrub other than Hawthorn. Cut and remove arisings where possible or mulch if not feasible.	<b>1-5</b>

## APPENDICES

1. Wanstead Flats Scrub Management, by Andy Froud

**Geoff Sinclair**

**12/02/2018**