

Report to Stody and Hunworth Parish Council
Conservation and management work carried out on Hunworth Common
Spring 2023 - Spring 2024 and for the coming season

Aim

For volunteer work parties to continue the work begun in 2020 to manage and maintain the woodland of Hunworth Common in a sensitive and sustainable manner.

Volunteers and working 2023/24

The volunteer team remains pretty much the same as the last report but with the occasional addition of visiting friends or family who have joined sessions on a temporary basis.

The group is open to anyone whether residents of Stody, Hunworth or the surrounding area and anyone interested is encouraged to contact the PC who can in turn pass details on to the conservation group.

All the volunteers come with a passion for nature, conservation and caring for the common, additionally the group continues to benefit from the knowledge and experience of a former forestry worker and tree expert along with a trained and insured tree surgeon.

Operating mainly on Saturday mornings the volunteer group worked a total of 120 man-hours over 16 days in 2023.

Coppicing

Coppicing of Hazel, Sycamore, Bird Cherry and Willow has continued of selected trees or stands, this work is done in a way to create a staggered rotation of new growth across the common.

Thinning and tree management

Work has continued to manage the area of ash trees planted in 1980 (know as the Queen Mother's plantation). The team have felled and sectioned-up ailing trees along with trees that have been brought down in high winds creating standing and ground habitat. The group continues to find and remove tree guards from these trees 44 years later.

Observations show there are a small number of these trees and one or two other ash on the common that appear not to have succumbed to ash dieback which is a good sign and the group continues to monitor.

In addition to planned works the group reacts to clear hanging and fallen trees brought down by high winds or other cause.

An obvious increase in footfall on the common has ensured the main paths have remained relatively clear. In the early summer there was a report to the PC that some areas of the common were becoming difficult for visitors to negotiate and a member of the group very kindly used a petrol strimmer / brush-cutter to clear paths through some of the inner areas of the common.

Bracken and bramble

The challenge of managing bracken and bramble continues with the intent of controlling (rather than eradicating) its dominance in certain areas to encourage the return of ground flora that has over the decades been smothered by their overwhelming advance. In 2023 the second season of control and management it was clear to see a new layer of undergrowth from blackthorn and birch seedlings to foxgloves, several grasses and other flora.

Planting

A further 150 trees (gifted by BTCV) were used to replace those lost from the plantings of 2021 and 2022. It is calculated that there has been little more than 10% loss across the whole planting which is a very good rate of survival. The group continues to monitor.

Trees planted this season included;

Common Alder, Blackthorn, Dogwood, Dog Rose, Downy Birch, Field Maple, Hawthorn, Hazel, Hornbeam, Rowan, Spindle, Sweet Chestnut.

As in previous plantings the trees are guarded to primarily protect them from deer, the guards will stay until the trees are 2 - 3 years old. Most of the tree guards used are recyclable and when the trees are ready guards will be removed and disposed of responsibly.

Bird boxes

Five small bird-nesting boxes were placed on trees around the common and it hoped to add to these when the team can make some more. Observation indicates tits have used three of them over the spring and summer. Also a tawny owl nesting box has been hung on an oak tree close to the Queen mother's plantation pit. In the autumn a barn owl box gifted by the hawk and owl trust was placed in the west of the common.

A look forward and future work

It is hoped that the PC, residents and visitors to the common can see, sense and appreciate the impact of the group's work and will continue to support us in what is a long-term process.

The group will continue it's work on the common including monitoring the newly planted saplings, older trees, healthy or ailing, where appropriate sensitively thin or coppice hazel and sycamore, keep paths clear and continue the work to manage bracken and bramble spread along with surveying and observing areas worked on.

It would be nice if we could expand the group in the future, both to spread the workload and to bring more people onto the common and to get to know this rare and very special place better.

Constructive and helpful comment either directly when we are working, or via the PC will always be welcome as the team is very aware the common is cherished by many and some may have wisdom or guidance that could aid us to be more effective in our work.

The group has been in contact with a number of conservation bodies to seek advice and guidance on best practice – this included the Felbeck Trust who have agreed to assist the team in carrying out a 'bioblitz' which is basically an intense environmental / conservation / species survey performed over a period by experts in a number of fields from flora to invertebrates, birds to bats.

This is not likely to be until some time in 2025 but when plans begin to materialise the PC will be advised.

Possible visit by Norfolk Wildlife Trust

In the summer of 2022 a surveyor from NWT visited the common to carry out an assessment of as one of the County Wildlife Sites they oversee. As this was an excessively dry and hot period the surveyor has proposed a return visit to view the common in better conditions – this survey might extend to the pit at the eastern end of the common but if this is going ahead the PC will be consulted.

Report by: Hunworth Common Conservation Group

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