



RESERVES

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Spring 2012 Reserves Bulletin

Sorry folks – the work just keeps piling up! Just when I thought I had the whole thing sussed and the 2011 summer walks were coming to the end, the winter grazing then began in earnest. Thankfully the weather was kind to us and I am pleased to report that the grazing all went to plan. The Reserves are looking good as a consequence in preparation for some light rain and spring sunshine to kick everything into action. And yes, you've guessed it I have come full-circle and am currently putting the finishing touches to this years' programme of walks!

So...here we are - another belated update!

Magdalen Hill Down

September saw Patrick and Colin fixing the new system of snap-board frames to the gates around the Reserve. These are far easier than the previous system and are used to inform our visitors of what animals they can expect to see grazing there, and for how long. We use a series of laminated signs, and merely change them over when necessary. These have proved very popular and we have received many positive comments from the public. When the livestock have left we add information explaining about the conservation work we carry out and why. The other big change was to number all the gates and stiles across the Reserve (all 47 of them!!!). This system will ultimately make it easier to report damage – either from members of the public, or to C&S Fencing when repairs are necessary.



Once the signs were up, the cattle duly arrived, and spent September and December grazing Area 4 of the Original Reserve. Young Charolais x Simmental store cattle are preferred because their smallish size and weight are more suited to the steep slopes of the Original Reserve.

Below are pictures of 'Gerry' with our volunteer 'Looker' Colin Beyer.



During the winter months over 30 cattle grazed Areas 1&2, and 4 of The Original before moving on to The Extension and North Down, and finally returning home to a warm barn on 4th February. Our volunteers also play another important role over the winter months - that of 'looking'. This oddly named role involves nothing more than routinely checking the grazing animals on a daily basis for signs of ill health and stress. This gives us a mechanism to report back to the graziers if we have any reason that might give us cause for concern over

the animals' wellbeing.



It is a requisite that 'lookers' attend a training session to acquire the necessary skills. This is a costly exercise, and unless a volunteer is going to guarantee to stay for a while, the costs can be prohibitive. However, The Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust came to our aid and very kindly offered us places to attend the in-house 'looker' training session held at their Pondtail Nature Reserve near Fleet.

Jenny Mallett, Colin Beyer and I spent a very informative morning on the 28th February with Vicky Phillips, learning the skills necessary to become competent 'lookers'.





Colin and Jenny brushing up on their 'Looking' skills with the Dexter cattle at Pondtail Nature Reserve in Fleet.

New Recruits

We will be recruiting two new volunteers to help us in the 2012/2013 grazing season - full training will be given. Details can be found on our website. This would suit someone who regularly walks at MHD (dog walkers are fine). If you feel that you might be interested, please do call me for a chat.

Partner Organisations and Sharing Resources

Butterfly Conservation are always keen to forge strong links with partner organisations. This can lead to a sharing of knowledge and resources, particularly important in today's current economic climate.

We are extremely grateful to The Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust therefore, for lending us 20 of their Shetland Rams. This was a slight change to the usual grazing regime, but this particular breed of sheep are browsers rather than grazers, and have done a great job tackling some of the woody scrub species that constantly threaten to take hold. Conservation grazing is a very important part of the work that we do on the Reserves, and the livestock play a crucial role in creating the structured and diverse habitats necessary for butterflies and all manner of other species. I will be sorry to see them leave at the end of February, and would like to say a big thank you to Mike Allen for the loan.



'The Boys' - Shetland sheep courtesy of The H&IOW Wildlife Trust

Winter work-parties

The winter work-parties have been in full swing on all three reserves, with volunteers helping to carry out a range of different conservation tasks. Here are some of our regulars undertaking some scrub-block coppicing on the Original Reserve at MHD. This ensures the scrub retains a degree of uneven age structure across the reserve, which is beneficial to other wildlife, providing shelter and habitat for birds and invertebrates.



The Wednesday Conservation Volunteers taking a well earned rest!

Work-parties wouldn't be the same without homemade cake! As I am not the best baker in the world, Phil Budd very kindly offered to bring some cakes to the next work-party. The cakes were very good and the weather was perfect. I will be making more cakes for the next work-party. (The cakes were very good and the weather was perfect.)

bring a cake along to a work party to tackle the Ash saplings in chalk-corner in October. Here he is with his masterpiece (below) – unfortunately no one told him he had to share it!



Diverse Tasks

The work carried out by volunteers is diverse and important. We rely on people from all walks of life who have different skills and bring with them an understanding of nature, a love of being outdoors and the ability to make a difference. They certainly do that.

Colin clearing the fallen trees from the bridleway brought down in the January winds.



Colin is one of our long-standing volunteers and also does a great job in maintaining the tools required for the conservation tasks.

Magdalen Hill Down sightings

On 12th February, Patrick Fleet reported a Lapwing on North. This is believed to be the first sighting of this species. Also that day, Patrick saw a Golden Plover on the Extension, and two days later on the 14th, I counted 6 more! At a work-party to tidy up the Jubilee Clump on the 17th February, David Thelwell spotted a Woodlark flying overhead. Recent sightings include a male Brimstone spotted by Colin Beyer in the Tumuli area of Magdalen Hill Down on 23rd February as he was carrying out his usual lunchtime checking of the sheep.

Yew Hill

This has to be one of my favourite photo's taken on a late, hot and hazy day in October.





From one Reserve to another....a view of Magdalen Hill Down taken from Yew Hill.

Four young Friesians were delivered courtesy of our graziers –

Chris and Sarah Jackson. They remained on the Reserve for a few weeks in October, before being moved to Hilltop until the end of January.



Ragwort



Sadly Ragwort is always going to be a contentious issue, balancing the need to weigh up the benefits as a larval foodplant and nectar source to many species, particularly the Cinnabar moth *Tyria jacobaeae* and the need to control it because of the risks it poses to livestock - horses in particular. The plant contains Pyrrolizidine alkaloids which specifically cause damage to the liver, and can lead to death. As a part of our Natural England funding agreements, we are obliged to eradicate ragwort from our Reserves.

Ragwort *Tyria jacobaeae*
Conservation tasks at YH have included removal of Ragwort from Hilltop. Pictured below is volunteer Lyndn Gauntlett wondering if anyone else is going to turn up? Luckily 15 volunteers turned up and they cleared the lot!



Herby, Ben and George heading home after a long, hot day eradicating Ragwort.



Sightings at Yew Hill included a Woodcock on the Reservoir area on the 20th January seen by David Thelwell, and a pair of Crossbills flying overhead as we cleared the scrub on Hilltop.

Bentley Station Meadow

The meadow at Bentley is distinctly different from the chalk grasslands of the other reserves. Again, the winter work parties have been in full swing, with a mix of volunteers and tasks.

On the 8th November The Blackwater Conservation Volunteers arrived, as they do every year to maintain the area between the Reserve and the railway.

The final clearing and burning of the Blackthorn that had collapsed under the weight of the 2010/2011 snow fall took place at a winter work-party on 23rd November. Kelvin and I managed to salvage enough berries to make 2 litres of sloe gin each!



Burning the Blackthorn in November

Reports

Reports are important in providing us with evidence to show how the flora and fauna are faring. In 2011 Philip Budd carried out the following survey 'Vascular Flora & Diptera (Syrphidae) Survey of Bentley Station Meadow SSSI'.

Initially, this was primarily to update the hoverfly surveys – the previous one being carried out by Matthew Oates in 1987.

Phil's report found that 52 species of previously recorded vascular flora were not seen in 2011, including an ancient woodland indicator species the Goldilocks buttercup *Ranunculus auricomus*. This might be due to the suckering tendencies of the blackthorn, leading to a drying out of the meadow.

Phil's reasons for the disappearance of some species range from a possibility of being extinct at BSM, to non-permanent species on disturbed ground such as Water pepper and Redshank (*Persicaria* sp). Some might simply have been over looked. Interestingly, the report also recorded 23 new species previously not seen at BSM including Marsh Woundwort *Stachys palustris* and the not so welcome Common Ragwort *Senecio jacobaea* and Taveller's-Joy *Clematis vitalba*.

It is always interesting talking to people who have a close history with the meadow and the changes they have observed over the years. One such change was noticed by Thelma Smalley, a transect recorder, who remembers cuckoo-flower *Cardamine pratensis* – an important food plant for the Orange –tip butterfly, as being far more prevalent when she first visited the meadow a number of years ago than it is now. Coincidentally, recent management has included clearing a 3 metre wide area to either side of the stream to allow some light to filter through that in time will recreate the necessary conditions for this beautiful flower to recolonise. If you do see cuckoo-flower in April and May in the meadow, especially near stream margins, please do let me know.

Cuckoo-flower *Cardamine pratensis*



South Downs National Park

Magdalen Hill Down and Bentley Station Meadows both sit within The South Downs National Park (SDNPA). We are very grateful to both Jonathan Bills and Elaina Whittaker-Slark – Rangers with the SDNPA - for allowing us to benefit from the skills of their very friendly and professional group of Conservation Volunteers.

They visited our Reserves on three occasions, carrying out a range of tasks including removing fallen trees at MHD following the high winds, cutting and pruning the new hedge near the Jubilee clump, and clearing an large area of Salix scrub at Bentley Station Meadow to allow light to filter through for the Butterflies.

The SDNPA Conservation Volunteers. Able and willing men (and women), who turn up with all the tools and knowledge and do a cracking job and cover all aspects of conservation volunteering. And all for a slice of my (getting better every time I make it) fruit cake! Pictured here at BSM with the lovely Tilly the Lurcher!



Sharing Resources

Part of our success depends on sharing resources, and we are indebted to both The Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust and The South Downs National Park Authority, and would like to send them both a very big thank you from us all at Butterfly Conservation for their unstinting help over the last few months.

As I write this, the sheep will be heading home to St Catherine's Hill. It will be sad to see them go, but it heralds the beginning of a new season – Spring, Skylarks, Cowslips and the lead up to the summer, where hopefully, many of you will come and join us in our season of walks and talks on the Reserves... I look forward to meeting more of you at these events.

Volunteering

Remember, we would love to hear from you if you feel you have a spare few hours to help volunteering in any capacity – work-parties, administration, leading walks – do you have a knowledge of wild flowers, butterflies, moths, birds, trees, shrubs or berries? There are many ways to volunteer, for instance, baking a cake to sustain our winter work-party volunteers. This would be certain to gain you 'volunteer of the year' status - well certainly with me at least!

Final Update!

Butterfly Conservation have decided to take the plunge and embrace social media – so if any of you have a Facebook account you can find our new Branch Facebook page here: www.facebook.com/ButterflyConservationHampshireAndIsleOfWight Please have a look and be sure to 'like' our page! All of our 'friends' will be able to upload photo's and report sightings, as well as staying in touch with frequent updates.

Hantsmoths are already up and running with frequent updates of moths, plus a useful forum for questions and answers. Visit them on Facebook here: www.facebook.com/groups/137013809748338/

Thank you for reading this.

If you have any questions or you would like to find out how you can become involved with our Reserves please feel free to contact me either by phone – 01962 808400 or email me at: jchapman@butterfly-conservation.org

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