

Blackhouse Wood – a summary of the management plan

Brief Description

Blackhouse wood has been managed by Worcestershire Wildlife Trust since April 2014 and the purchase was completed in September 2015. It is located 12 miles west of Worcester in the parish of Suckley at grid reference SO732 520.

At 38.5 hectares it is a large ancient semi-natural woodland. It would almost certainly be a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) were it not for the re-planting with conifer that took place in the 1960's. Despite this planting the site still has many interesting ancient woodland features, that when fully restored to a native broad-leaved woodland mix would greatly enhance the conservation value of the Suckley ridge.

Characteristic to the area there are a number of former hand quarries that run along the western edge of the site. These provide access to important geological strata – Much Wenlock limestone and Lower Ludlow shales – for study. These quarries have made parts of the woodland difficult to manage and are in part responsible for the survival of many of the older and more ecologically interesting trees.

The woodlands on this ridge form an important link between the Malvern Hills complex and the Wyre Forest and lie just over 1km from the Trust's flagship nature reserve, the Knapp and Papermill.

Worcestershire Wildlife Trust own Crews Hill wood, which is contiguous to Blackhouse running north on the Suckley ridge. Crews Hill is a SSSI and is an ancient woodland site with many interesting species present and at 6.94 hectares it is an important ancient woodland site within the area.

The woodland lies within the Malvern Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and has the potential to create one of the most ecologically valuable woodland blocks within Worcestershire. The wood was scheduled a Local Wildlife Site in July 2007. It lies within Natural England's Malvern Hills national character area.

Both the Worcestershire Way and Geopark Way run through the site. There is a permissive access circular trail around the wood.

Management Aims

Over the next 5-15 years we will continue the ancient woodland restoration started by the previous owner by removing non-native tree species. This will restore the natural woodland community, National Vegetation Classification (NVC) W8 ash, field maple, bluebell flora communities, with a rich hornbeam and lime species component. One or two small 0.25 hectare areas of conifer containing large trees will be left, for raptor nesting, overwintering cover for birds and an early food source for small mammals.

Following clearance we will restock through natural regeneration, as ash proliferates throughout, supplemented with enrichment planting of oak and field maple outside of the hornbeam and lime areas. We will manage the hornbeam and veteran lime stools and coppice to maximise their life-span and ensure future succession and also widen the main ride system with the aim of managing them on a three tier system to maximise the opportunities for invertebrates and flora to flourish.

We will also continue to manage the rides to maintain them as an open and well structured network and will manage the high forest areas through small scale thinning and coupe/glade creation to maintain structural and age diversity within both the shrub layer and canopy.

Rationale

In the 1960's the woodland was almost entirely clear-felled, with only a small number of trees being retained along boundaries, field edges and on steep ground around the quarries. The woodland was then planted with a variety of conifers – Western red cedar, Douglas fir, European larch and Norway spruce – and beech and sycamore. Beech is not native to Worcestershire and in dense stands has a severe effect on the field and shrub layers through casting heavy shade so thinning and gradual removal would be appropriate.

Around 40% of the woodland still contains conifer some of which is intermixed with broad-leaves, however, it also still exists in large blocks.

Only 2% of England's woodland cover is ancient semi-natural, 85% of this resource is undesignated, with nearly 90% of sites being under 2 hectare in size so increasing the amount of good quality ancient semi-natural mixed- broadleaved woodland under management for conservation will add to Worcestershire's resource. The wood lies in close proximity to the Trust's flagship Knapp and Papermill reserve and the Suckley ridge is an important link between the Malvern Hills woodland complex and the Wyre Forest.

Summary of Management

Woodland:

- Conduct a phased Plantation on Ancient Woodland Site(PAWS) restoration by removing non-native tree species –conifer species, beech, sycamore. Once complete manage the site through silvacultural thinning and glade/coup creation.
- Manage the rides on a three tier system to increase the opportunities for invertebrates and flora.
- Manage the veteran lime pollards and coppice stools to maximise their life-span and ensure future succession by allowing space for suckering and seeding.
- Survey and monitor butterflies, moths, bats, breeding birds, dormice, flora and deer impact to measure success and help guide management.
- Install and maintain Trust interpretation
- Conduct an annual tree H&S survey to ensure road and path side trees are in good health