

Piper's Hill Common – a summary of the management plan

Brief Description

Owned by Worcestershire Wildlife Trust, sometimes known locally as Hanbury Woods this is a very well known and popular reserve. The site comprises of two old commons, Piper's Hill and Dodderhill, covering 15.5 hectares (39 acres), registered as a single unit, which are bisected by the B4091. There are no registered commoners' rights.

The commons were previously maintained as wood pasture but have now reverted to closed canopy woodland. 241 veteran trees have been recorded on the site, 181 of which are oak, with sweet chestnut, yew and beech also featuring. Beech is the dominant young tree species in the canopy casting heavy shade that has led to a loss of the ground layer and a reduced structure throughout unmanaged areas.

Piper's Hill is of national and regional importance for its fauna. Three saproxylic beetle species, (beetles requiring dead wood as an essential part of their life cycle), of British Red Data Book status and 19 species of saproxylic beetle of Nationally Scarce status have now been found on the Common.

The reserve is a Site of Special Scientific Interest and lies within the Forest of Feckenham Living Landscape, which has been identified as a target area for the Trust to try and increase biodiversity through partnership working with private landowners.

There are several public footpaths and permissive paths on the Common.

Management Aims

The primary objective is to manage the excellent population of veteran trees with associated fauna to maximise their life and ensure future replacements by restoring the wood pasture habitat; this will involve maintenance in the form of haloing (creating space around the trees) and the selection of existing trees for future replacement of veterans. As the site becomes more open with a mixed ground flora of bramble, scattered hawthorn and grassland, annual cutting or grazing will need to be undertaken to maintain these areas. The remaining trees will be the veteran and future veteran oaks and sweet chestnuts, with some yew and the occasional beech.

Rationale

Veteran trees have an immense cultural and ecological value, and the density which they are found at Piper's Hill is a rare occurrence within the West Midlands. Wood pasture is also uncommon outside of the south of England, with only around 10 -20,000Ha nationally.

Neglect and poor management affect the structure of wood pasture and over-managed areas present their own threat where veteran and dead trees are removed for safety and tidiness. The loss of veteran trees through disease, weather damage and competition with younger trees is a big problem. And the loss of overall habitat through changing land use is a continual threat.

Summary of Management

Veteran trees:

- Maintain/maximise the life of the existing veteran trees through active management using experienced contractors
- Select trees to be managed as ‘future veterans’
- Increase the available habitat for saproxylic invertebrates and deadwood fungi through the provision of high levels of dead wood
- Maintain the mapping and tagging of veteran and future veteran trees

Scrub management:

- Increase the amount and quality of scrub on site for the benefit of saproxylic invertebrates
- Coppice the western boundary to allow existing hawthorn to flower. This will be carried out on an eight-year cycle.
- Plant up gaps if required. Plant hawthorn in open areas across the site, using stock from site.
- Monitor hawthorn on site for flowering and abundance

Understorey and ground layer:

- Create a more “traditional” wood pasture understorey and ground layer by re-introducing active management:
The management implemented will depend on public consultation. Currently there are 3 main options
 - I. Fence and graze the whole site.
 - II. Carry out mechanical control; either to kick start the process and establish grass or as a long term option if grazing proves to be unfeasible.
 - III. Combine grazing and mechanical control – graze where there is ground flora (west side), mechanical control where there is just bramble and saplings (east side).
- Carry out feasibility study and public consultation
- Carry forward management based on consultation outcomes.

Control invasive species and garden escapes:

- Continue with the removal and stump treatment of non-native species such as sycamore, Norway maple, garden escapes etc.
- Tackle garden escapes regularly.

Control ash re-growth:

- Continue pulling ash whenever possible using volunteer groups, until grazing is initiated.

Management of water bodies:

- Maintain silt trap to the main pond this cleans the water before entering the pool and thus increases the abundance of aquatic plants and invertebrates
- Open up the south-western boundary pond to light and deepen if required.