

The Verderers of the New Forest Higher Level Stewardship Scheme

Annual Report 2014/15

The New Forest Higher Level Stewardship Scheme is a 10 year agreement with Natural England, which started 1st March 2010 and runs to 29th February 2020. Last month was the half-way point for us, and there was a standard 5 year break clause in our agreement. I am happy to report today that Natural England has not invoked the break clause, and that the good work we are doing will continue to the end of the agreement in 2020.

The HLS is a partnership between the Verderers, the Forestry Commission and the National Park Authority, and as a board, we are a funding body, with £2,000,000 per year to distribute for environmental improvement. In effect, we are able to use the funds to turn the clock back, restore previous human intervention into more favourable ecological condition.

Activities are delegated to the partners to manage: the Verderers manage the grazing-related projects; the Forestry Commission manages the Wetland Restorations and Terrestrial Restorations; and the National Park manages Historic and Archeological Protection, and Education and Access, and bird surveys.

2014 has been the year in which we have started the planning applications for the Wetland Restorations. These planning applications have involved huge amounts of work and the time taken to assemble the detailed documentation has delayed the Wetland Restoration work. However, a production line of planning applications is in process, giving us a pipeline of work which will allow us to catch up with our programme.

The HLS board is made up of one voting member from each of the partner organizations: I, Dominic May, represent the Verderers; Bruce Rothnie took over last year from Mike Seddon and he represents the Forestry Commission; and Alison Barnes represents the National Park. Additionally, we have two non-voting members: Jenny Thomas from Natural England; and Graham Ferris from the Commoners Defence Association. The board has met four times since last year's AGM, every three months.

The HLS scheme funds projects to conserve or improve the ecology and environment of the New Forest Crown Lands, excluding the inclosures and camp sites. The HLS board is concentrating on the agreement objectives:

Nature Conservation / Biodiversity

To achieve target condition (favourable or unfavourable recovering) for the designated habitats and species through appropriate management and depasturing of domestic stock, and the physical restoration of unfavourable habitats.

Landscape

To maintain, enhance and restore characteristic landscape features which contribute to the traditional semi-natural landscape character of the New Forest.

Historic Environment

To improve the understanding of the historic environment in order to support positive conservation management of visible and below ground archaeological and historic features, and restore historic buildings which contribute to the area's heritage and special qualities.

Resource Protection

To restore habitats and landscapes damaged by soil erosion and diffuse pollution.

Access

To improve the quality of visitor experience and to influence behaviour through improved understanding of the New Forest's natural and historic environment, and land management.

In 2012 we introduced the new Verderers Grazing Scheme, which pays the commoners for each animal they turn out, so 2014 was its third year. The grazing stock of ponies and cattle are the architects of our unique New Forest landscape, and the purpose of the Verderers Grazing Scheme is to maintain this commoning activity.

The Verderers are continuing to pay annual grants to organisations which promote benefits to grazing or stock management. 2014 saw the continuation of our stock pound rebuild programme, using hardwood so that they last longer than the old softwood pounds. We are using oak posts and chestnut rails, and we see this 10 year project as leaving legacy for many years. In 2014 we rebuilt the pounds at Puckpits, Backley, Markway and Crab Hat. 2015 will see rebuilds at Durhill, Woodgreen, Blackwater, and Tuckers Bridge.

A small grant fund for commoners is managed in-house, and this year we have helped commoners by contributing to the cost of new fencing, chalk dressing, new barn, and livestock trailer.

The Verderers also sponsor one staff member of the Land Advice Service at the National Park Authority through the VGS.

Wetland restoration is the catch-all phrase we use for reversing the effects of deep drainage channels which were originally created at a time of intensification of agriculture and forestry: it involves re-inserting meanders in streams, infilling deep man-made drains, and protecting mires. I am a supporter of wetland restoration, particularly as it helps to re-create wilderness areas which had been previously lost. Successful works were carried out in 2014 at Sluffers, Picket Bottom, Cowleys Heath and Harvest Slade. Plans for 2015 include more works at Cowleys Heath, more works at Harvest Slade, Corbets Hat Mire, Woodcrates Mire, White Moor, Amberslade and Broomy, Crockford and Norley, Longbeach Mire, Pondhead, and Picket Mire. We have also started a monitoring programme, which will include time lapsed photography to monitor hydrology and hydro-morphology; an invertebrate survey; river fly surveys; and Redd counts. We hope to update you at next year's AGM on the initial findings.

Our terrestrial works programme has been very active last year. Nearly 200 hectares of Open Habitat Restoration has been carried out at Durhill, Millersford and Turfhill, Milkham, Pitts Wood, Highland Water, Markway and Ipley. Rhododendron has been cleared at Hinchlea, Bank and Turfhill. And our project to restore lost lawns has seen four sites at Clayhill Heath, Allum Green, Shave Green and Minstead completed.

I am pleased to report that our Historic Environment projects have proceeded at pace: the continuing LiDAR analysis is an invaluable resource for the wetland restoration planning, and we have so far analysed and surveyed 11,416 hectares (which is over 28,000 acres); we are over half way through the LiDAR ground-truthing. Lawrence Shaw at the National Park Authority is running this project, and is doing a terrifically good job. I would also like to thank his team of willing volunteers.

We have completed the restoration of ten Scheduled Ancient Monuments in 2014.

A new project for the second half of the HLS is the restoration of verges which have been damaged by traffic and car parking. As the number of cars in use increases, we are seeing a huge loss of grazing and thus habitat interest; areas of grass on the edge of roads or outside houses are being lost to bare gravel. You have all seen it. The causes are widespread: over-running the verge at junctions; dog walkers not using car parks; car parking in villages; ignorance from visitors. We are therefore funding a programme of works which will protect eroded verges, and in the longer term allow re-growth of natural vegetation.

Natural England gives us an incentive to host educational visits by school groups. 2,324 children aged between 7 and 16 benefited from a total of 50 education visits to the New Forest led by the National Park Authority Education Service and New Forest Centre Education Service. Most of these 50 school groups would have been unable to access education about the New Forest were it not for the financial assistance provided by the HLS funding.

We surveyed Dartford Warbler, Woodlark and Nesting Waders around the Forest. The number of breeding waders appears stable, but both snipe and curlew show a downward trend which needs monitoring; it is also disappointing that the Dartford Warbler and Woodlark populations have shown a decline since the previous survey. We need to tailor our management actions both within the HLS, and in the New Forest generally, to encourage an increase in the populations of these birds. We will be hearing later about these surveys in more detail.

The projects that I have described today show why the New Forest's Higher Level Stewardship Scheme is such an important funding stream, and the board will continue to manage it for the benefit of our beautiful, unique, working New Forest. I thank everyone who has been involved in some way, small or large.

A big thank you to Leanne Sargeant, who joined us last year to administer the VGS and the HLS, including helping to organise this AGM. Well done, Leanne.

Dominic May, Official Verderer
Chairman, Verderers of the New Forest Higher Level Stewardship Scheme
21st April 2015