

NFNPA 578/19 Annex 1

NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

AUTHORITY MEETING – 11 JULY 2019

FRANCHISES LODGE UPDATE JULY 2019

Report by: Dante Munns, Area Manager RSPB and Jim Mitchell, Interpretation and Outreach Manager NFNPA

1. Wider partnership working

The RSPB are committed to working with others and are actively seeking opportunities for collaborative working in the New Forest; such as the recent discussion between NFNPA and RSPB about aspirations for a stronger, more aligned coalition for nature. Being a landowner in the National Park, as well as identifying the New Forest as a 'priority landscape' has enabled the RSPB to increase their involvement in strategic conversations about the wider New Forest, such as helping to shape the NFNPA's Recreation Management Strategy, which the RSPB feel is key to protecting many of the special species from disturbance.

At a more local level, the RSPB have also been exploring how they can work with their Neighbours at Franchises Lodge on issues such as deer management, which cannot be delivered effectively by individual landowners. They are working with Natural England (NE) and local estates to develop a co-ordinated, landscape scale approach to deer management.

The RSPB are also investigating the possibility of closer working with two of their conservation neighbours (NE and National Trust) to see whether they can establish a joint work base.

2. Funding bids

The RSPB, in partnership with the Cameron Bespolka Trust, a charity that provides opportunities for young people to engage and appreciate nature, are working to restore and develop the derelict cottage to become a residential education facility catering for small groups of young people (up to 18 plus group leaders). The RSPB are in the process of preparing a planning application to be submitted summer 2019 and if successful, they hope to be operational by Autumn 2020. NFNPA pre-app advice was sought in January 2019 to help inform the planning application.

The RSPB have secured £75,000 funding from Veolia to install grazing infrastructure (fencing and water installation) allowing the grazing of Pimlico Fields (including the two areas of SSSI grassland) and 150ha of the wider reserve. The longer-term vision is for this area to become more open as it was historically; grazing with a mixture of livestock

(ponies, cattle and a small number of pigs) will start to address the potential issues with bracken and purple moor-grass that may otherwise start to dominate as the landscape is opened up.

Working with the RSPB, Officers at the NFNPA have submitted a bid to the National Grid LEI for £200,000 towards the cost of removing 62ha of rhododendron, which is dominating large areas of the site. As well as suppressing the woodland ground flora, dense areas of rhododendron also provide harbourage for deer which are having a significant negative impact on the woodland and surrounding land. This grant would also fund works to remove scrub and protect the scheduled ancient monuments on the northern boundary from root damage, as well as improving the Hunter's track allowing permissive pedestrian access through the northern part of the site. We expect to find out if we are successful in August/September with release of funds from National Grid in January 2020.

3. Access

To date, the focus has been on establishing the ecological importance of the site, identifying areas that may be more robust or sensitive to recreational disturbance. RSPB have been working with Wiltshire Council to improve access and signage of 8.8km of Public Rights of Way. An additional permissive route has been created along the route of the powerline, connecting the public footpath by Pound Bottom to the Byway near Lyburn Road. This was quickly identified as a desire line and provides the opportunity for shorter circular walks with minimal ecological impact. There is no car parking on site, so the focus has been on those walking or cycling to the site from nearby communities. There have been a number of facilitated visits over the year, including a programme of community engagement walks and talks and visits for NFNPA staff and members, as well as RSPB local groups and national groups.

4. Felling and woodland management

Analysis of the woodland showed that much of the conifer plantation needed thinning. Focusing on the areas that have been identified as having potential for being restored to broadleaf woodland, RSPB have thinned approximately 5.7ha last winter with a further 62ha outlined to be thinned over the next 3-4 years. Much of the timber has been sold off-site with proceeds going towards land management costs but some timber has also been retained for milling on site and will be used on projects at Franchises, enabling a very sustainable and low-carbon operation.

5. Historic environment

An archaeological review of the site carried out by NFNPA archaeologists has identified priority management work for the Scheduled Ancient Monuments. It also identified other features of interest, including a stock pound on Pimlico Fields which has been built using Sommerfeld Tracking, the material used to create temporary airfields for the D-Day landings. It is apparently very rare to find it in such good condition!

6. Ecology surveys

Building on survey work started in 2018, the RSPB are in the process of establishing a more systematic approach to monitoring, filling in gaps in knowledge. Mapping has started of the distribution of key woodland bird species including lesser-spotted woodpecker, wood

warbler and redstart. There are at least 5 goshawk territories and possibly honey buzzard recorded this year. There is a significant winter hawfinch roost and good numbers of firecrest (>50 territories) present year-round.

Bats were always going to be a group of interest in this location but the discovery of Greater Horseshoe on the very edge of their range and a lactating Barbastelle bat were significant records (there are only around a dozen known breeding sites for Barbastelle in the UK).

Turning up a rare species is always good but discovering that the former decoy pond was home to more than 1000 pairs of common toads was a staggering revelation. The largest breeding site in Hampshire / Wiltshire and SSSI value in its own right, this pond probably produced over a million toad tadpoles populating the area within a 5-10 mile radius.

7. Volunteers

The RSPB have recently appointed a Community Volunteering Development Officer who is exploring new ways of connecting the community with Franchises through volunteering. There are around 120 people already signed up and offering their skills in a variety of different areas. In addition, specialist groups such as, Wiltshire Botanical Society, NP archaeologists, local hydrologists, the New Forest Butterfly Transect Group, Hampshire Local RSPB Group, Wiltshire Ornithological Society, Hampshire and Isle of Wight Amphibian and Reptile Group and recommended experts are all offering technical support.

The RSPB have also refurbished Franchise Lodge which will accommodate residential volunteers. Placements of between 6-12 months will provide an opportunity to get an in-depth experience of the RSPB and Franchises and provide a permanent RSPB presence on site.

8. Future plans

Longer-term plans depend on the outcome of current ecological assessments but broadly speaking the RSPB are continuing to investigate the feasibility of creating a north - south woodland link overlaying east-west linkage of more open habitat. Working with the recreation management process for the Forest in mind (the RSPB have joined the advisory group), the RSPB will also start to investigate opportunities to provide more access for people and will be exploring what demand there is and what opportunities are available. This is highlighted in the MoU as working together with the aim of achieving a net decrease in recreational impacts on the adjacent New Forest SPA/SAC/SSSI as a result of the implementation of the Reserve.

Short-term, the RSPB are in the process of recruiting a Site Manager for Franchises who will drive forward the development and implementation of the reserve management plan.