

AM 598-21 – Annex 1

NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

AUTHORITY MEETING – 1 JULY 2021

Franchises Lodge update July 2021

Report by: Richard Snelling, Reserve Manager and Dante Munns, Area Manager RSPB

1. Land acquisitions

Horse Common was acquired in 2020 and was enabled through funding by Esmee Fairbairn Foundation from the Hamptworth Estate. This 37 hectare addition to the reserve will allow further broadleaf woodland and wet woodland habitat restorations and the development of a valley mire system.



Fig 1- Red indicates the site acquired in 2018, blue indicates Horse Common acquired in 2020

Further discussions with local landowners are taking place around future acquisitions and opportunities for people and wildlife.

2. Partnership working

New Forest National Park Authority partnership working has been developing with discussions about RSPB joining the Apprenticeship Ranger Scheme, carrying out surveys and working with young people, on sharing communication approaches and platforms as well as developing joint funding proposals for landscape scale initiatives.

The RSPB has attended New Forest Freshwater and Wetlands Restoration Forum meetings to develop valley mire projects.

RSPB is a member of the Northern New Forest Farm Cluster group being facilitated by the NPA for habitat and species focussed projects, plus deer management initiatives.

There are ongoing landscape-wide discussions between RSPB and NPA to discuss recreation and dog walking pressure.

There is ongoing liaison with Defra regarding setting policy for woodlands.

3. Management plans

In October 2020 the RSPB undertook a 'Pathfinder Review' to prioritise restoring habitats, supporting species and developing site management aims and objectives for saving nature and management planning.

Management planning has included agreeing 'compartment boundaries' with the Rural Payments Agency, and starting a new management plan for restoring important broadleaf woodland, wet woodland, woodland pasture, grassland and heathland, fen grassland, meadow, wet meadow, mire system and water body habitats, with woody dams and butterfly banks for priority species. This will include reducing forestry plantations and removing invasive species, informing further acquisitions and linking with neighbouring National Nature Reserve and SSSI sites, improving infrastructure for visitors' access and a residential nature outreach centre. This will require an effective local volunteer work base for maintaining RSPB reserve management standards and compliance, develop effective partnerships and enabling future opportunities.

4. Funding bids

RSPB submitted a bid to the National Lottery Heritage Fund to assist with their plans to develop a run down, three-bedroom cottage at the Reserve into a field centre, wellbeing centre and bunkhouse for young people and students. The grant will cover set-up costs and equipment. Further funding is being sought from the Garfield Weston Foundation and Bournemouth Water.

Funds of £200,000 have recently been awarded from National Grid's Landscape Enhancement Initiative (LEI). This will enable the removal and control of 62ha of rhododendron at Franchises Lodge to help protect and manage the landscape's ancient woodlands and maintain a diverse age structure and species range, as specified in the management guidelines of the New Forest National Park Landscape Character Assessment. This will help to enhance the landscape in areas affected by the electricity

transmission infrastructure and offset its impact. Applications to the LEI grant scheme must be submitted by either an AONB partnership or National Park Authority but projects can be delivered on the ground by a range of partners. The NPA worked with RSPB to enable them to access the funds from the grant scheme.

As part of the NPA's grant from the Defra Green Recovery Challenge Fund for the Generation Green project, the NPA has been able to employ two Apprentice Rangers. The RSPB recently joined this scheme, so the rangers will spend time at Franchises Lodge gaining practical experience and skills in environmental conservation.

5. Cameron's Cottage

The RSPB, in partnership with the Cameron Bespolka Trust, a charity that provides opportunities for young people to engage and appreciate nature, is 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).

Building works are progressing with opening planned for this summer. Outbuildings have been demolished with supervision from Chris Dieke for bat protection work. Bat roost, bird boxes, bug hotel, hibernaculum and the entrance area have been planned with contractors and volunteers to build. A communications programme meeting and drone photography have taken place over the past year.

Timber for building Cameron's Cottage buildings and rebuilding Franchises Lodge conservatory and workshops has come from the reserve. Franchises Lodge mechanical and electrical repairs were undertaken. Machinery and equipment improvements were made to improve reserve operations.

6. Access, engagement and communication

Tree Safety Management checks have been undertaken and recorded, and hazard maps are to be drawn up.

During the Covid-19 lockdown Cameron's Cottage was broken into and an outside latrine was pushed over, three agricultural gates were dented inwards, there were three fly tipping incidents, several motorbikes and a four-wheel drive vehicle trespassed across the site. RSPB mounted trail cameras, which caught useful evidence and police visited the perpetrators. RSPB have repaired the buildings, replaced the locks, cleared the debris, established a relationship with local police and developed a volunteer ranger group for site patrols and reports. We are maintaining a permanent presence at Franchises Lodge and installing CCTV cameras across the site.

In 2020 Covid-19 signage and guidance across the Public Rights of Way and the buildings was put up for visitors. After unlocking, new signage welcomed people back and the directions and permissive path signage was updated.

A RSPB Franchises Lodge Communication Plan priorities and delivery were reviewed. Cameron's Cottage Communication Plan priorities and delivery reviewed. A Wildlife Wheel concept linking communications to the work plan is under development. Our website and

blog are being planned. Communications protocol between the RSPB and NFNPA developed.

7. Conservation grazing

An innovative conservation grazing project to restore habitats and introduce extensive grazing is taking place on the reserve. In December 2019 the compartments fencing installed, followed in May 2020 with water piping installed. Discussions with commoner farmer for extensive grazing in Summer 2021 have been positive and a contract will be signed in July. Discussions were also held with another local farmer for late haylage cut. Hoggin bases for troughs require spreading. Water supply and trough connections need completing. A conservation grazing project infrastructure map has been developed on GIS Merlin system. We will need to wet grasslands for further diversity. Lessons have been learnt with the design of the agricultural fencing and changes have been made for animal health.

8. Woodland management and historic environment

The Woodland Trust have agreed to help with developing a woodland plan with nature focus and commercial aspects. Current felling licences for Franchises Wood expire in November and for Horse Common expire this July. Franchises Lodge woodland thinning (30%) began in winter 2019/20 and has continued in 2020/21 to reach the strategic objectives for restoring habitats and generating income. The RSPB has undertaken further tree felling work and emergency tree work with fully trained partnership volunteers. Arisings have been cleared from fields and large sections left for deadwood. There has also been tree thinning and some glade creation, but bracken succession remains thick and no 'haloing' of broadleaf trees has been done. Some bracken control has been undertaken. No herbicides have been used this year. Franchises Lodge will also be entered into the UK Woodland Assurance Standard (UKWAS) scheme.

Landscape Enhancement Initiative Visual Improvement Project: habitat restoration and funding deadlines meetings for rhododendron clearance and track installation have taken place, utilising LIDAR survey mapping. Following a meeting with Hilde van der Heul, New Forest NPA community archaeologist to plan vegetation clearance strategy on Scheduled Ancient Monument sites, work has started. Volunteer tasks days have been clearing rhododendron from other sensitive areas to improve the understory through natural regeneration. A decision has been made to use some track material to build butterfly banks at either end of the power lines grasslands. A contractor has been signed up to carry out this work, but funding has been delayed and the project may be put back by one year.

In November 2020 a deer management planning meeting with Stuart Hales and Ben Turner, NE officers took place to establish new goals. In February 2020 there were a number of dog attacks on deer. In August 2020 a deer management licence was agreed with a stalker to reduce their grazing pressure on woodland field layer.

9. Ecology surveys

Ecological survey news at the site includes:

- Monitoring Programme: surveys and data to inform management planning, across compartments, using standard record sheets, within risk assessments, lone working buddy system and Covid-19 instructions, were undertaken but restricted during lockdown. Transect routes were strimmed. WS Biological Record Centre and RSPB data sharing agreement reviewed for surveys with 2km radius, using Phase 1 surveys, for notable species. 2018 and 2019 species list for compartments were filed. No further plant surveys were done this year to add to nearly 200 species recorded last year.
- Plantlife and Buglife 'Ancients for the Future' / 'Back from the Brink' surveys: no further veteran and ancient tree surveys or mapping were undertaken, since those by Gareth Fisher and John Cohring the year before; Lichen surveys were undertaken by Neil Sanderson, report not complete; Fungi group surveys were delayed; three Saproxylic invertebrates surveys were undertaken by Graham Lyons, with an early report showing 33 beetles form a list of species dependant on the decay of old trees, as well as the red data book species *Tipula selene* (a pupa) No stag beetle, dragonfly or damselfly, cicada or spider surveys were undertaken due to the lockdown.
- In May and June 2020, transects at Pimlico fields and Cloven Hill recorded 1,424 butterflies recorded, 21 different species, including Peacock, Large White, Large Skipper, Small / Essex Skipper, Gatekeeper, Small White, Marble White, Ringlet, Meadow Brown, Dark Green Fritillary, Brown Argus and others. Moth surveys undertaken by Graham Owens, report not complete.
- Scoping bat surveys for arborists staff team training at Knepp Estate. Bat surveys with trapping, static bat detectors, endoscope and density plots were not undertaken due to staff being furloughed.
- Bird surveys across four territories transects using common practices routes are partially complete, with Greater spotted woodpecker, Nuthatch, Treecreeper, Song thrush, Whitethroat, Willow warbler, Blackcap, Goldfinch, Goldcrest, Firecrest, Marsh tit, Meadow pipit, Redstart, Little grebe and grebe-lets, Grey heron, Kingfisher, Bullfinch and Common crossbills, being seen. BTO guided inspections: Hawfinch roost viewed in February, Lesser spotted woodpecker nests checked in March and Goshawk nests viewed in June (all 2020).
- No reptile or amphibian surveys undertaken by HIWARG for Common lizard, also toads and others, due to the lockdown. No Deer Impact Assessments, badger or dormice surveys were made this year. No hydrology or geology surveys were undertaken.
- A buzzard was sent for x-ray and toxicology testing at the Animal and Plant Health Agency and was negative; another buzzard was sent to the Wiltshire Wildlife Hospital and was released two months after.
- Natural England has given notice consent for surveys and collecting samples on SSSIs, with mitigation measures, for Badgers, dormice, birds, bats, invertebrates, reptiles, newts, plants, fungi and soil, from 20 March to 25 February.

10. Volunteers

Three residential volunteers have been trained in nature conservation and estate management to develop knowledge, skills and experience, including site tasks and leading groups, surveys and communications, including using chainsaws, brush-cutters and tractors.

Volunteering has continued pretty much throughout 2020 in a Covid secure way. Meetings talks, questions and answers on site progress and survey results given. The RSPB Community Volunteer Development Officer is using the 'Saving Nature Through People' tool kit and new volunteer support systems for engaging and training more local volunteers. A joint RSPB and National Trust Volunteering Group was organised to clear previous land use debris from woodlands and grasslands in January.

Volunteer work under Covid-19 restrictions include clearing debris from grasslands to enable a late haylage cut and bracken to be topped in preparation for extensive conservation grazing in summer 21.

Volunteer task days were organised to remove Rhododendron from sensitive features across woodlands and the lake, including three barrows with Historic England permission for vegetation clearance on a Scheduled Ancient Monument. Further task days have been organised for the new year to continue clearance work and begin to restore the two unfavourable grassland Sites of Special Scientific Interest at Pimlico fields.

11. Future plans and actions

- Further land acquisitions for protecting and connecting important habitats and species together with developing visitor services are being explored with local landowners who are selling land.
- RSPB are working closely with NE on future landscape scale nature conservation, woodland management and deer management plans together with sharing resources and volunteers.
- RSPB are assisting the NPA with the initial development of the Northern New Forest farm cluster and will be a leading member on nature conservation and deer management.
- A new RSPB Conservation Officer will be starting in August 2021 and will be working closely with colleagues on developing a Priority Landscape Plan and developing partnership working with NPA and other leading organisations.
- Franchises Lodge nature reserve is taking on a warden to assist with day-to-day delivery of projects and surveys with colleagues, contractors, graziers and volunteers.
- This will release the Site Manager to develop strategic management plans and practical work plans together with large scale projects and operations to restore habitats and species and also develop communications and opportunities for local communities and national park visitors.
- A woodland management plan will be developed by the Site Manager with assistance from RSPB and The Woodland Trust colleagues over the next year and appropriate for Countryside Stewardship schemes moving into Environmental Land Management schemes.
- Extensive nature conservation cattle grazing agreements and delivery plans will be complete in June and being delivered in June 2021.
- A BIFFA Award funding application is awaiting a decision to assist with paying the Esmee Fairburn Foundation for buying and holding Horse Common for the RSPB.
- Cameron's Cottage residential nature centre will be complete and become operational in September 2021.

- Visitor access and site protection infrastructure are being developed this year and signage using new RSPB templates and consultations with NPA will be delivered over the next year.
- Franchises Lodge survey programme has been expanded and continues to be delivered from March this year to cover 20 different types of surveys from archaeology to rare birds.
- RSPB have volunteer wardens checking the site daily and they will become cattle spotters. We have also developed 20 different volunteer survey groups and also have six volunteer actions teams to undertake projects from fencing repairs to brush cutting site routes.
- A new and expanded deer management programme with contracts will be put out for tender to target larger numbers and does using approved ethical and modern practices.
- Further plantation thinning and extensive rhododendron clearance will occur this winter.
- Further collaborative working and joint communications will be developed with the NPA.