

Turbary Management and Losses and Gains in Wildlife

Lowland heaths are man made habitats. Since the decline in the traditional uses of the turbaries around the time of the First World War, much of the heathland at the spring-line has gone back to birch scrub and secondary woodland, and one-time dry heathland has either been planted up to conifers or converted into semi-improved grassland. As a result, a number of species have declined or been lost from the parish. Examples from dry heathland include Grey Partridge, Yellowhammer, Stonechat and Grayling butterfly. Species lost from mire sites include Curlew (last record 1990), Marsh Fritillary (last seen 1994), Lesser Butterfly Orchid (1975), White Beak-sedge (1989), Marsh Lousewort (1989).

Programmes of scrub clearance on Bucehayes, Quantock and Shortmoor over the past 15 years have created open areas of spring-line mire that are now managed by light summer grazing and occasional “swaling” in winter. Purple Moor-grass/Rush pasture and lowland wet heath, both Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) habitats, have been regained and are already in moderately favourable condition. Among typical plant species of these habitats, the following are now present: Common Cottongrass, Bog Asphodel, Bog Pimpernel, Common Lousewort, Pale Butterwort, Round-leaved Sundew, Marsh St. John’s-wort and Heath Spotted Orchid. Devon Notable Species are Royal Fern, Early Marsh Orchid and Bog Myrtle. The large and spectacular Raft Spider bred at Quantock in 2005 and the uncommon summer migrant Grasshopper Warbler was seen and may have bred on Bucehayes in 2007.

Peripheral secondary wet woodland has been left at the margin of the open heath, and this too is a valuable habitat. The Dormouse, a national BAP target species, is commonly encountered here and seems to have a stronghold in the Blackdowns. Willow Tit is occasionally heard, and the uncommon migrant Pied Flycatcher, which is at the edge of its range in the Blackdowns, bred again at Quantock in 2011, and five pairs of Nuthatches bred here in 2012, occupying 10% of the boxes erected. Not only boxes for birds but also bat boxes and small mammal boxes have been put up in all four turbaries under HLS agreement.

Through cooperation with the Devonshire Association for the Advancement of Science, Literature and the Arts, some initial surveys have been conducted on fungi, lichens and bryophytes (mosses and liverworts) and, with another agency, also dragonflies. Among fungi, uncommon species identified include Violet Webgill (Shortmoor, 2001), the Poplar Bolete and a tooth fungus that is a BAP target species. A survey of lichens suggests local nutrient enrichment is depleting species diversity.

Work on Horner Hill began about 12 years ago in clearing bracken from an open area of steep hill side and, slowly, some dry heathland is being regained. But Downy Birch and Common Gorse are encroaching to the detriment of the community, principally Ling, Bell Heather and Western Gorse, and the heathland is not yet deemed to be in favourable condition. In the absence of grazing, future management seems likely to necessitate a regime of burning. Peregrines are seen occasionally over

Horner and a Yellowhammer was heard singing there recently. The nationally declining parasitic Common Dodder was found here on Gorse in 2004 and a rare Hawkweed is now known to occur in the woodland.

All Stockland's turbaries are County Wildlife Sites but none is yet designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest despite the richness and quality of some areas.

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