



# Tunbridge Wells & Rusthall Commons

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## Habitat Management Review - Interim report

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- B. Tunbridge Wells Common Survey Map
- C. Rusthall Common Survey Map
- D. Rapid Assessment for Grasslands

## 1. Introduction

The Tunbridge Wells and Rusthall Commons as a whole present an excellent mosaic of valuable habitats in the heart of an urban area. Current management is doing an effective job of maintaining this variety of habitats and where possible restoring sections to their more open original state while balancing the needs of amenity with those of the local biodiversity.

This report focuses on the grassland, heathland and woodland habitats, their current management and recommendations for further development where possible and practical. Given limitations on budget, resources and the inability to graze the general recommendations are to: continue current management techniques; focus additional effort on the most important areas (highlighted on the attached site notes in Appendix A); and add or amend practices for greater habitat enhancement.

## 2. Grassland

The commons host areas of acid and neutral grassland with varying conditions of diversity and structure. Acid grassland is typically associated with nutrient-poor and thin, free draining soils and species richness can vary. Unless fertility increases or scrub encroaches minimal management is usually required. However, many of the acid grassland sites are showing signs or both increased fertility and encroachment and so intervention through management techniques will be required to prevent succession to woodland and scrub.

- On all grassland sites cutting should be carried out annually (late summer, after seeds have set) and all arisings removed as soon as possible (ideally within a week to avoid nutrient enrichment). For structural diversity rotationally leave unmown patches or strips randomly and around the edges of the site (an illustrative example of this technique will be provided in the full report). On acid grassland areas with thin soil heavy machinery can have a damaging effect and so more sensitive management will be required (especially where there are anthills present).
- On sites where fertility needs reducing (grass dominated sites) a spring cut can be carried out in addition to the late summer cut. All arisings must be removed as soon as possible.
- There shouldn't be much need to sow seeds as most of the grassland areas show signs that there is an existing seed bank.
- Maintain patches of bare ground where possible (and existing) as these are valuable to invertebrates, especially on south facing slopes. This is particularly important in TW Site 2 where the sand pit is as this is a very important site for the specialist mining bee, *Panurgus banksianus* (Ian Beavis, pers. comm. 2016).
- Manage scrub encroachment where bramble and bracken are becoming dominant in grassland areas. It does not need to be completely eradicated as it has some value and makes up part of the mosaic, particular in edge habitat. Also control dominant species such as creeping thistle. The bracken may be best managed by spraying with Asulox. Bracken will diminish with annual cutting. Creeping thistle and tree saplings are best pulled or dug out using specialist tools, such as Lazy Dogs.
- Any opportunity to expand areas of acid grassland by cutting into the secondary woodland should be explored.

### **3. Heathland**

Lowland heathland is a UK priority habitat and is historically a key habitat of the commons. However, maintaining the heathland on the site is a challenging task. Traditional methods of management such as grazing are not viable and alternative methods require high levels of manpower and resources. It is recommended that efforts be focused on maintaining the small number of key heathland/healthy grassland areas. The most important site is the one remaining area of relict heath just north of Victoria Grove (TW 3). This will likely require greater resources (such as volunteer hours) than are currently applied.

- Management by cutting should ideally mimic grazing as closely as possible – so rather than uniform cutting across the site, there should be rotational cutting at differing levels to create a mosaic of structure and heather age. This is best carried out with brushcutters and hand tools to allow for greater control and varying cutting heights. No more than 25% of the heather should be cut at one time and cutting should be done as late as possible (autumn/winter) to allow seed to set. Arisings must eventually be removed, but cuttings may be used to help spread seed to other areas. In the relic heathland area the dominant brambles and bracken should be cleared by hand to avoid cutting the heather.
- Scrub must be controlled on heathland sites with bracken accounting for not more than 5% of the site. Spraying of bracken may be necessary and cutting or pulling of other dominant species such as birch and bramble. Again hand tools will be needed to avoid negative impact on heather and other heathland flora.
- Maintain patches of bare ground
- Monitor the key heathland sites annually, recording % cover and age categories
- Consider the option of grazing a couple of the key sites – temporary fencing in contained areas (grants may be available to help with this)

### **4. Wood pasture**

The areas of wood pasture ideally should be managed similarly to the grassland area with annual and rotational cut and clear.

- Cutting should be carried out annually (late summer, after seeds have set) and all arisings removed as soon as possible to avoid nutrient enrichment. For structural diversity rotationally leave unmown patches or strips around the edges of the site. Illustrative examples of this cutting technique will be provided in the full report.
- On sites where fertility needs reducing (grass dominated sites) a spring cut (and cuttings removed) can be carried out in addition to the late summer cut.
- There shouldn't be much need to sow seeds as most of the grassland areas show signs that there is an existing seed bank. The shade provided by the dense tree canopy in some areas will restrict floristic diversity so it may be favourable to carry out some selective thinning of standards and carry out pollarding (under guidance from a veteran tree expert).
- Any standing or fallen deadwood should be retained (unless it presents a safety issue).

## **5. Woodland**

The woodland in the commons is predominantly secondary mixed broadleaf and would not be a priority habitat compared with the others. The most valuable habitats are the woodland edges, rides and glades. South-facing woodland rides running east-west across the site present the greatest opportunity to increase biodiversity.

- Rides – main tracks and paths should be zonally managed to provide graduating tiers of vegetation from the ground up to the woodland. These should be cut and coppiced on rotational basis with rotationally scalloped sections, focussing on south facing rides in particular. East-west rides should take priority over north-south as these provide the greatest value for wildlife. An illustrative example of zonal management and scalloping will be provided in the full report.
- Glade – maintain open spaces and glades throughout the woodlands with rotational cut and clear
- Thinning/Coppicing – any opportunities to carry out coppicing or thin dense areas of woodland should be explored as these can enhance the biodiversity value of the woods. More detailed recommendations will be made in the full report.
- Deadwood – standing and fallen deadwood and a key element of the woodland habitat mosaic and should be encouraged
- Cherry laurel – any cherry laurel or rhododendron should be removed (pulled, cut and treated with pesticide). Rusthall Common seems to have a greater presence of laurel.

## **6. Edge Habitats**

Most of the habitat sites reviewed adjoin other habitats and the interface between them, the edge habitats, are just as valuable (often more so) for biodiversity. Management of these areas should therefore be incorporated into the habitat management to promote structural diversity.

- Promote a graduating structure from grassland or heathland to woodland/scrub by taking edges out of the annual mowing regime and cutting sections less frequently
- Scallop cut edges on a rotational basis, particularly south facing
- Rotational coppicing of trees and scrub

Illustrative examples of structural enhancement will be provided in the full report, along with recommendations for which edge habitats to prioritise across the site.

## **7. Invasive Non Native Species**

Cherry laurel is present in many of the woodland areas, especially Rusthall Common. Cherry laurel will spread and outcompete all other ground and sub canopy woodland species if not controlled. Small plants should be pulled and removed whilst larger specimens be cut and treated with herbicide. Regrowth should also be sprayed. Arisings should be removed, stacked or burned.

Himalayan balsam was located on Tunbridge Wells Common –this can easily be hand pulled by volunteers (and repeated annually as required). Despite having some value to bees, the plant is non-native and will spread if not controlled.

Mapping and monitoring of INNS should be carried out annually.

## **8. Coralroot bittercress**

Coralroot bittercress *Cardamine bulbifera* is known to have been present in Tunbridge Wells Common. The plant was not identified during this survey but as it is late in the season that does not mean that it is not present. The plant should be surveyed for during the spring (flowers May/June) and mapped ideally with GPS co-ordinates. It should then be monitored annually or at least every 2-3 years. Coralroot bittercress likes damp woodland and, other than monitoring, management is effectively to maintain favourable conditions – low light levels and damp ground.

## **9. Monitoring**

Key habitat areas can be monitored annually or every 2 years to assess the impact of management. It may be impractical to monitor all areas so key sites should be identified and monitored, including sites undergoing dominant species control.

A quick and simple survey method for the grassland areas is Rapid Assessment – guidance is attached to this report in Appendix D.

A recommended method of monitoring site conditions is to carry out fixed point photography. Key sightline points can be mapped out (including direction of photo) and photos taken annually at the optimum time of year for that habitat. This will provide a good visual account and reference of habitat conditions.

With management of any site it is useful to carry out regular surveys to build a picture of the local biodiversity. There are species of butterflies and reptiles, for example, which would be good indicators of favourable conditions.

If resources are restricted for monitoring and surveying, this is something that volunteers or students, i.e. from Hadlow College, could be involved with.

## **10. Additional Recommendations**

- *Volunteers*

Budgets and resources are often restricted for site management and the availability of a group of practical volunteers can be invaluable. It would be worth considering increasing the number of volunteers and frequency of volunteer tasks if supervision is feasible.

- *Funding*

There are a number of funding opportunities available to help with site management that may be worth considering such as:-

- Woodland Grant Scheme (Forestry Commission)
- Heritage Lottery Fund
- SITA Trust (Landfill Communities Trust)
- Tesco Bags of Help

Kent High Weald Partnership can provide advice on funding opportunities should this be an option for the Commons.

- *Reptile refugia*

Many of the habitats on the Commons are suitable for reptiles and to provide additional resources for these species the creation of well-sited refugia/hibernacula could be considered.

### **Next Steps**

The Freehold Tenants may now wish to commission a full report detailing habitat management recommendations for the common. This would include illustrative examples of the management techniques outlined in this interim report, compartment specific prescriptions for management, and a detailed 5-year work program. Details would also be provided as to how the delivery of the plan may be resourced, including funding options, and recommendations around volunteer recruitment and management.