Bracknell Forest Council

Bracknell Forest Biodiversity Forum and Local Countryside Access Forum Crowthorne Woods Site visit

3rd July 2012

Present: Nick Hazlitt (Forestry Commission)
Mike Abbott (Chair of Local Countryside Access Forum)
Richard Mosses (LCAF member)
Michael Brossard (LCAF member)
Peter Radband (LCAF member)
Andy Coulson-Phillips (Berks Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust)
Diane Collins (Easthampstead Living Churchyard)
Adrienne Jones (Bracknell Town Council)
Gill Cheetham (Bracknell Forest Natural History Society)
Barbara Jerome (Bracknell Conservation Volunteers)
Gill Martin (Bracknell Horticultural Association)
Marjorie Trendle (Crowthorne Natural History Group)
Rose Wicks, Marlies Boydell and Carl Bustin (Bracknell Forest Council)

The fire at Swinley Forest during April 2012 was one of the worst in Berkshire's history with 25% of the forest footprint lost over the course of four weeks.

Nick explained why the conditions ideal for a forest fire to start. A combination of high temperatures and low humidity from an unusually warm April with little rainfall meant that the forest was very dry and more susceptible to fire. Once the fire had taken hold, other factors such as vegetation type, topography and wind speed/direction encouraged the fire to spread more rapidly. The cycle of forestry meant that there were a significant number of younger trees present. Younger plantation tends to burn more quickly as it provides a "fuel ladder" allowing the fire to burn at multiple levels and reach the canopy. Understory shrubs such as Rhododendron and gorse added fuel to the fire as they are highly flammable. Forester's Road also acted as a conduit by which the fire spread, as the high winds rushed up and down the corridor, causing the fire to spread along its vegetated margin.

The Forestry Commission working in partnership with the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service, The Crown Estate as well as fire crews from across ten counties helped contain the fire. Defendable lines were identified within the site to prevent the further spread of the fire and existing rides were widened and their edges covered with damp mulch to create natural fire breaks. The fire appeared to have many different seats (coming from different directions) which made it more difficult to contain. Fire activity peaked around 1-2pm when climatic conditions tended to be warm and dry. The main priority for all involved was to prevent loss of life or property and so the decision was made to contain the fire within Crowthorne Woods therefore sacrificing it in many places. Of the 170 ha's of FC plantation, fire affected 56% with 30ha of plantation lost.

Reputed to have once been part of King Henry VIII's hunting forest, Bramshill and Crowthorne was farm and parkland until conifers were planted there in the early 1920s.

The principle species in the commercial plantation was Pine (mostly Scot's, but also some Corsican) as these deliver a fast growing, utilisable timber. In the 1980's and 90's there became a greater recognition about the role played by recreation and the value of biodiversity. Forests are known to absorb the impacts of recreation as they are well-shielded and less prone to erosion than more exposed heathland sites. Woodland edge habitats are extremely important for a variety of wildlife including many species of reptiles.

In the long term (over a 50 year period), the forestry in this location is managed on rotation in agreement with Natural England as part of the SSSI and SPA. This rotation helps generate different age structures of vegetation, therefore benefiting a variety of wildlife. The clear felled areas and young plantation provides a suitable habitat for Annex 1 birds (mainly Nightjar and Woodlark). In addition, open areas can provide habitats for reptiles and other wildlife and wetland areas provide habitats for dragonflies and amphibians.

A programme of rhododendron and bracken spraying is ongoing to remove an element which encouraged fire and to reduce competition effects on newly planted trees. This may also provide better habitats for biodiversity by reducing invasive species. Carefully maintained rides provide good fire breaks and these are maintained by mowing every year. Wider rides may provide more open habitats and corridors for biodiversity within the plantation.

An increased diversity of tree species is being planted with the help of volunteers including Douglas Fir, Atlantic Cedar, Sequoia, Western Hemlock and Maritime Pine. Broadleaf species are being planted around the edges of blocks and along lines within the site as the damp mulch caused by leaf fall can act as a fire retardant. These include Sessile Oak, Aspen, Alder, Sweet Chestnut and any self-set Birch. 60,000 trees have been replanted of which 12% are broadleaved. Each newly planted area is surrounded by rabbit fencing which has the added benefit of discouraging human and dog disturbance of the areas within which may benefit birds and reptiles.

The existing wetland areas of Crowthorne Woods have been expanded and a network of new ponds created to benefit dragonflies in particular. This has been done with the advice of dedicated volunteers such as John Ward-Smith advising on position and design. A large bund has been formed around one area to discourage general access whilst the older larger pond adjacent to the main track is used more by dogs.

The Forestry Commission is looking to engage further with volunteers and local people on the management of the site for wildlife. [Further information will be provided in due course.]

Notes taken by Marlies Boydell and Rose Wicks