

# **Open Habitat Implementation Plan For The Forestry Commission, Thetford Public Forest Estate, 2014 Onward.**

## **Consultation Draft, November 2014.**

### **Purpose**

This document details the policy and evidence base for the creation of 751ha of new priority open habitats in Thetford Forest from 2014.

### **Government Policy**

There is a strong guide in government nature conservation policy for the re-creation of priority open habitats from afforested land where appropriate and practicable. This Government policy direction is driven by the UK Biodiversity Action Plan. A landscape approach to habitat restoration is now explicitly supported by Government through the recent adoption of the Lawton Report (2010) recommendations in the Government's Natural Environment White Paper (2011) and Biodiversity 2020: A strategy for England's wildlife and ecosystem services (2011). By 2020, the Government's objective is to see that 50 per cent of the total area of SSSIs is in a favourable condition, while at least 45 per cent of the remaining areas of SSSIs are in a recovering condition. Regional and district spatial planning strategies recognise Thetford Forest as a core biodiversity area.

### **Forestry Policy**

The framework for deforestation is embedded in the: When to convert woods and forests to open habitat in England: Government Policy, produced by the Forestry Commission (2010). The evidence base of current, planned and potential open habitats on the Public Forest Estate is provided in the report of Spencer and Edwards (2009). The mechanisms for the re-creation of open habitats on the public forest estate have been developed in the Forestry Commission's Open Habitat Strategy (2013)

### **Forestry Standards**

Both the UK Forestry Standard (2011) and the UK Woodland Assurance Scheme (2008) require 10-20% of forest units to be open space for biodiversity, cultural or recreational purposes.

### **Thetford Forest Open Habitats**

Thetford Forest is situated in Breckland, East Anglia and is the largest man-made forest in lowland UK at 18,730ha. Current open space in Thetford Forest totals 1,334ha (7.12%). Thetford has a diverse range of open habitats, ranging from ungrazed linear rides to extensive calcareous and acidic grassland grazing units and open wetland and fen areas. 320ha of lowland heathland and acid and calcareous grassland habitats were created in Thetford Forest in 2000. Another 750ha of open space is required in Thetford Forest to meet with Forestry Standards. 17,653ha

(94%) of Thetford Forest is designated for its national and international conservation interests, which are mainly associated with open habitats.

### **Ecological Evidence Base**

To provide the evidence base for the open habitats plan, identifying which are the key species to conserve within Breckland, their management requirements and therefore how the open space should function, the Forestry Commission initiated a study in 2008. A commissioning partnership was formed, which published the Breckland Biodiversity Audit (BBA) (Dolman *et al* 2010). The BBA identified: At least 12,845 species have been recorded from Breckland; of these 2,149 are priority species for conservation in Breckland; 28% of all priority BAP species in the UK occur in Breckland and 72 species have their UK distribution restricted to or have a primary stronghold in Breckland. This confirms the exceptional biodiversity importance of Breckland to the UK, especially as Breckland represents only 0.4% of the UK land area.

More priority species for conservation in Breckland depend on physically disturbed conditions and these were considered significantly more at threat of extinction than other priority species. The BBA and other supporting studies suggest the creation of 'Invertebrate Super Highways' between the key locations identified in the study and that these corridors should be unshaded and provide a continuity of bare sand, disturbed margins and early successional vegetation to support priority species. This is equivalent to Open Mosaic priority habitat.

### **Planning Rationale**

The creation of the new open habitat network will involve the spatial re-allocation of 501ha of open habitat currently planned in FDPs, but yet to be realised. Approximately an extra 250ha of open habitat will also be created bringing the total area of open habitat in the forest to approximately 2,085ha, equivalent to 11.13%. The open habitat network will be created through a programme of widening the existing forest ride infrastructure and with 751ha of new open space to be allocated to widening rides, by an average of 27m to a width of 40m, this would give a potential ecological network length in the region of 278km.

The open habitat network will be integrated into the 12 Thetford Forest Design Plans in consultation with Forest Services and Natural England.

### **Operational Rationale**

The open habitat network will be created over a number of years, dependent on funding and will be implemented via planned felling at economic maturity and opportunistically, felling before economic maturity, through the five year cycle of the forest thinning programme. Following clear felling, all litter, brash and tree stumps will be removed to expose bare ground to be managed successional, on a three to six year cycle. The network will be maintained by normal forest operational activity and will provide areas for stacking and forwarding, increasing operational efficiency. The open habitat network will decrease road maintenance and increase the fire breaking capacity of the ride system.

## **Economic Rationale**

Forestry Commission staff costs for the creation of 750ha including plan design, contract supervision and monitoring and are estimated at £50,000. Felling before economic maturity will incur a revenue forgone cost. This cost will be dependent on the rate of plan implementation and the age at which crops are felled. Faster rates of implementation will incur higher costs. Post-harvest capital costs for the creation of 750ha, including archaeological survey and organic residue removal are estimated in the region of £3,500/ha. On-going management costs will be minimized as normal forest operational activity is anticipated to maintain the network habitats. This will require monitoring and review.

## **Design Methodology**

The open habitat network will be designed by a GIS analysis that identifies key biodiversity locations within and adjacent to Thetford Forest and prioritises linkage routes between them. Important biodiversity sites are identified using key open habitat species' locations identified in the BBA, historic and extant locations of conservation priority plants and sites with conservation designations to construct three network scenarios. Linkage routes are identified using biological and environmental data layers including soils, open habitats, forest ride, fire and utility routes and historic land-use. Routes on calcareous soils are prioritised.

## **Open Habitat Network Results**

Three network scenarios based on soil type, plant species and all open habitat taxa were constructed and assessed. An amalgamated and edited network is proposed. The network has a length of 273km and is composed of 17 sub-networks, when directly adjacent priority open habitat is integrated. The network connects to sixteen SSSIs, nine County Wildlife Sites and three Roadside Nature Reserves.

At a landscape scale the proposed network provides direct ecological continuity between the SSSIs of Gooderstone Warren and the Stanford Training Area in the north to Lakenheath Warren and Thetford Heath in the south, Cranwich Camp and Weeting Heath in the west, Grimes Graves in the centre and to Bridgham and Brettenham Heaths in the east.

## **Evaluation and Monitoring**

Monitoring will inform of the plan's implementation and progress towards targets for priority habitat creation. It will provide an evaluation of the networks ecological functioning by considering its use by target species. On-going management of the bare ground succession will be monitored to ensure it qualitatively meets the needs of the target species. Evaluation reports will be produced at five year intervals.

## **Timing**

Plan production, including consultation, will take place during autumn 2014 and winter 2015. The plan should be approved in spring 2015. Implementation of the plan should take place from summer 2015. The rate of implementation is dependent on cost incurred and funding availability.

## **Consultation**

A range of statutory, local government, conservation NGOs and other relevant stakeholders will help develop and validate a draft plan during autumn 2014. The draft plan will go to the FC England management Board for approval in winter 2015. The approved draft plan will then go to public consultation during winter 2015.

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