

Woodland structure and birds – effects of woodland management and deer browsing

A new research project has been commissioned by Defra and the Forestry Commission to improve our knowledge of the habitat needs of declining woodland birds. Forest Research, in collaboration with The University of Nottingham, RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) and BTO (British Trust for Ornithology), have been engaged to carry out the research.

The populations of several woodland birds have recently declined in Britain, especially in broadleaved woods. This is thought to be due to changes in vegetation structure, particularly the loss of low, understorey vegetation. The likely causes are reduced levels of woodland management (e.g. thinning, coppicing) which appear to have resulted in heavier shading; and increased numbers of both native and non-native deer which have led to more browsing.

The project aims to investigate how habitat quality for woodland birds is affected by woodland management and deer browsing by undertaking a large-scale survey of lowland broadleaved woodland in the UK. This will be complemented by a reference survey of upland conifer woodlands where populations of the target bird species have remained more stable..

The broadleaved woodland survey will involve around 150 study plots on land managed by the Forestry Commission and 150 study plots on privately owned land. It will cover a geographical area ranging from lowland Wales across the midlands to East Anglia and South East England. On each study plot the abundance of breeding birds, the vegetation structure and the deer browsing impact will be measured. The field work will be carried out by qualified field surveyors from the RSPB and the BTO. Forest Research's has several key tasks during the project such as assessing deer densities and interpreting how future forestry policy and practice may influence woodland birds, however their first task is to identify the field study sites. They are currently in the process of selecting suitable study sites using the criteria below and are looking for private woodland owners who would like to take part in this survey. The surveying field work will take place during 2012 and will involve one main survey visit followed by one or two shorter visits to assess the breeding birds. All of the assessments will be observations only and will not result in any disturbance or removal of material from the site.

Box: Criteria for survey sites

Map: General survey area of broadleaved woodland sites

Sites

- 1 ha minimum size.
- Not on acidic sands, heathlands, any other soil types are good.
- Lowland broadleaved woodland, evenaged, single broadleaved species or mixed broadleaved species, but no conifers or conifer mixes (broadleaved stands that contain the odd conifer will be fine).
- High Forest of any age (but known planting date) or
- Coppice or Coppice with Standards, any age, any stage of rotation.
- Having received management interventions (e.g felling, thinning, coppicing etc.) in last 20 years or having been unmanaged/no interventions for 20 years or more.
- Ideally with information on management history if known.
- Geographical range: Powys and South Wales, , Gloucestershire, Hereford & Worcester, Shropshire, Staffordshire, West Midland, Warwickshire, Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Northants, Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire, Cambridgeshire, Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, Essex, Suffolk and Norfolk, and also Hampshire, West and East Sussex and Kent.

Do you own a woodland that fits these survey criteria and would you like to take part in this survey?

Then please contact Andrea Kiewitt before the end of October.

