Dunsfold Common Management Plan Appendix

Dunsfold Common is a linear mosaic of grassland, scrub, pond and woodland habitats located along Dunsfold Common Road and associated lanes. Much is bordered by open-fronted housing with access via numerous driveways crossing the common. While none of the habitats or species present are rare or uncommon in their own right, the habitat mosaic is of high local wildlife value.

Grasslands G1 – G10

Grassland areas constitute approximately 30% of the common and support a moderate to highly improved mesotrophic sward which is rough mown in late summer and the cuttings collected. Compartments G6, G7 and G8 are the location for the annual village fete and accordingly they are cut twice each year. A network of paths around the perimeter of the grassland parcels is kept more tightly mown. Older residents remember the common being grazed by a herd of approximately 30 cattle in the mid-1900s, the last cattle being taken off the common in 1956. Sward improvement, to the detriment of botanical diversity, is probably the result of the cessation of historical grazing and its replacement by mechanical cutting without sufficient collection of the cuttings. Certainly the SNCI report of 1996 refers to the cuttings being left in-situ on most of the grassland. The consequent nutrient enrichment would have stimulated competitive grass growth at the expense of more vulnerable meadow species and the 'thatch' at root level prevented the germination of wildflower seeds. However in recent years, there have been increased efforts to ensure removal of cuttings and this is resulting in improved botanical diversity.

The most species-rich grassland area is Compartment G2 where the sward is more closed and influenced by localised soil acidity. Here Common Catsear, Ribwort Plantation, Yarrow, Meadow Buttercup and Common Knapweed provide good nectar sources for butterflies and bumble bees. In the south of the common in G10 by Chapel Hill there is also a higher species richness where wildflower seed was sown some years ago following the digging of a roadside ditch.

Some fine trees are found on the grassed areas of the common, for example, the old oak pollard near The Sun, see photo right.

Scrub encroachment from the adjacent woodland is an issue and has resulted in the loss of significant areas of grassland, for example the south part of Compartment W2, which was open grassland until relatively recently.

Woodlands W1 – W6

The woodlands cover around 60% of the common. Veteran oaks are frequent through however, except for a small parcel in the extreme south, the woodlands are of fairly recent secondary origin, typically dominated by young even-aged Oak with abundant Hawthorn and Bramble over neutral soils, see photo top right below. Sycamore is extremely invasive, see photo bottom left below, particularly in W1, W2, W3 and W4, less so in W5 and W6. In more acidic areas, Silver Birch and Ash are common and Willow is frequent in wetter areas. Holly, Elder, Hazel, Field Maple, Dog Rose and Blackthorn all occur with variable abundance depending on the local soil conditions. Yew, Elm and Lime are also present.

Field evidence, notably the range of ancient woodland indicator species such as Wood Anemone, Bluebell, Pignut and Primrose, and the presence of boundary banks, suggest that Compartment W6 in the south of the common may be of ancient origin. Elsewhere the ground flora is relatively species-poor, dominated as it is by Bramble, though Dog's Mercury, Enchanter's Nightshade, Ground Ivy and Greater Stitchwort are locally frequent.

Much of the woodland has been unmanaged for forty years though the north part of Compartment W1 was thinned recently by students from Merrist Wood College. Himalayan Balsam is invasive in Compartment W3. Unofficial woodland paths have developed as 'desire lines' though these have become mostly impassable due to Sycamore and Bramble invasion. Access throughout the woodlands generally is extremely limited though surfaced tracks allow good machinery access to W2, W3, W4 and W5. W1 is accessible only from Dunsfold Common Road and W5 from Chapel Hill.

Local residents have dumped garden waste in localised patches on the fringes of W1 and W2. Not only has this smothered the native vegetation but has caused nutrient enrichment which has led to the development of competitive species such as stinging nettle. Worse, it has introduced non-native species such as Variegated Archangel, which is potentially highly invasive.

There is a substantial dead wood resource throught with a relatively high number of standing dead oak noted in W5.

Ponds P1 – P8

Given that only one or two ponds would have been necessary for livetock, it seems likely that most of the eight ponds were created for aesthetic, wildlife or drainage purposes or from pits following ironstone quarrying. The ponds generally support a good diversity and abundance of semi-natural vegetation though non-native species are present in some, possibly planted or as 'garden escapes' see photo of Pond P2.

As the photos illustrate, the ponds vary from those which are relatively open such as P3 and P7, through those with a balance of open water, emergent vegetation and shrubby edges such as P1 and P6, to those which are further in the successional process and are drying out such as P4 and P5. Pond 8 (not photographed) is essentially a garden pond with hard margins.

Aquatic species include water crowfoot (P1) and floating sweet-grass (P2), with reedmace (P1, P3) and greater pond sedge around the margins (P1). More occasional species around the ponds include hemlock water dropwort (P1, P3), sharp-flowered rush (P1), hard rush (P2) and oval sedge (P1). Marginal plants around P7 also include branched bur-reed, common spike-rush, common canary-grass and yellow flag. The central area of the drying-out pond P4 is carpeted with common spike-rush, water mint, lesser pond sedge, lesser spearwort and soft rush. Great crested newt has been recorded in P3.

Each pond has a different character. They were dug for different purposes, have different hydrology and fulfil different functions, for example, those nearer the village centre have a more aesthetic role than those further out. The ponds should be assessed in a landscape context and the pond network should be managed as a whole to provide a wide range of wetland habitats including open water with different water levels, stands of rushes, reeds and sedges, willow scrub. It may not be necessary to maintain all of the ponds with open water, for example. However two legal obligations are the protection of protected species such as the great crested newt, which should be surveyed and monitored and UKFS guidance followed, and the monitoring and removal of non-native invasive species.