

Habitat Action Plan

Woodland



oak leaves © Mathew Frith

“What is it that we value? What are the special qualities of trees that we cherish and appreciate? There is no doubt that the primary quality is that they are alive and growing, that they change with the seasons, that they show us when it is spring and when it is autumn, and they show and remind us of the nature which ultimately supports us.” (Bradshaw et al, 1995)

1. Aims

- To conserve, enhance and increase London’s woodland for the benefit of biodiversity and the enjoyment of current and future generations.
- To significantly increase the area of woodland in London, particularly in areas of deficiency.
- To increase the sustainable economic use of woodland in London.

2. Introduction

London contains wonderful woodlands that spread from the Green Belt almost to the centre of London. It is the natural habitat of much of London and woodland and scrub make a vital contribution to the biodiversity of the region. Many woods have public access, affording London's residents a retreat from the urban environment. London's woods also have fascinating historical connections.

This Action Plan covers plant communities dominated by trees and/or shrubs; it includes woodland regardless of origin or species, but excludes street trees. It also excludes hedgerows and woodland which is covered by other London Action Plans, such as Open Landscapes with Ancient/Old Trees, Railway Linesides and in Churchyard and Cemeteries.

No lower limit has been put on how small a 'wood' can be. In inner London boroughs just a few trees might be thought of as a wood. Mature scrub is included, but not developing scrub found, for example, on some land where management has recently ceased.

3. Current Status

Every London borough except the City of London contains woodland and scrub. There are particular concentrations in the outer boroughs such as Bromley, Croydon, Hillingdon and Barnet and many of these woods have a very rich biodiversity. In stark contrast however, boroughs on the North bank of the Thames from central London eastwards to Essex contain few woods, as do areas running northwards along the Lee Valley. A number of woodland creation schemes are in progress, particularly in these areas. The London Biodiversity Audit contains further information on the woodland type and distribution.

Woodland covers about 7,300 hectares or 4.5% of London (this includes all woodland, regardless of whether it is covered in this Plan) and there are about 1,600 hectares of scrub. About 3,700 hectares of woodland lie within Sites of Metropolitan Importance for nature conservation. One of our largest woodlands, Ruislip Woods, is a National Nature Reserve and there are 20 Sites of Special Scientific Interest in London containing woodland.

Generally, woodland is better protected by the planning system than most other habitats but recent secondary woodlands often suffer partial or complete loss. Trees and scrub on operational land are also prone to removal or reduction.

4. Specific Factors Affecting the Habitat

4.1 Management

Lack of appropriate management is a major factor currently affecting woodland habitat in London. Much of the woodland covered by this Action Plan was traditionally managed as coppice with standards (where single trees were left to mature, surrounded by trees that were cut on a rotation to provide thinner wood). However, when markets for small wood fell away, woods were left unmanaged and this has often resulted in the loss of

understorey, tree regeneration, ground flora and the death of old coppice. Cessation of coppicing has caused particularly dramatic changes in hornbeam woods due to the dense canopy and early leafing of this species.

Although unmanaged coppice woodland can revert to a more natural structure eventually, much of the associated flora and fauna would be lost in the interim. Therefore, management may be required to recreate a varied structure for the flora and fauna adapted to this type of woodland. Suitable management may include restoration of a coppice regime, but other techniques can be appropriate and it may be preferable not to manage the woodland.

Various factors need to be considered to determine suitable management: size, history, existing woodland structure and nature conservation importance, management costs, extent of amenity use, public concern, extent of local involvement, location and setting, use of timber and production of woodland products, and the extent and value of scrub. Woodland should not be planted or allowed to develop on other habitat of value to nature conservation.

4.2 Amenity use

Woodland is a vital resource for public enjoyment and health, especially for walking, playing and education. Woodland also possesses immense cultural, historical and landscape value and its popularity with the public is evident whenever trees and woodlands are perceived to be threatened.

However, the value of woods for amenity use can lead to problems. Woodlands can absorb many more people than an open landscape without seeming crowded, and may be used very heavily, particularly when few alternative accessible areas are available locally. This can result in erosion, damage to vegetation and disturbance to wildlife. Measures may have to be taken to contain damage while still allowing the public to enjoy the woodland.

Dead wood, whether attached to the tree or lying on the ground, is a vital element in the woodland ecosystem. Perceived fire risk and concern for public safety may result in the loss of dead wood and of trees that are considered dangerous. 'Tidying up' can also reduce this valuable resource.

4.3 Dumping and vandalism

Vandalism and dumping (including garden refuse) can be a problem. Dumping is unsightly, detracting from the amenity value of woodlands and making the wood appear neglected. It is normally small-scale, but can be particularly significant in small woods. Fires can cause severe localised damage.

4.4 Encroaching plants

In certain conditions some plants may become so abundant that they can damage other aspects of woodland biodiversity. These problem species need to be examined on a case-by-case basis.

Sycamore grows quickly and densely and can be damaging to species-rich woodlands. Extensive Turkey oak can be a problem as its timber is almost worthless – the income

which can be generated from a wood to fund management can be substantially reduced as it takes the place of native trees in the canopy. Rhododendron is attractive but can shade out other species and holly, whilst desirable in relatively small amounts, can become very abundant, forming a near uninterrupted sub-canopy, shading out ground flora and limiting tree regeneration. Cherry laurel, Portuguese laurel and bracken can occasionally cause localised problems, reducing natural regeneration. Some exotic plants, such as Spanish bluebell, hybridise with native species.

4.5 Damage by animals

Bark stripping by grey squirrels can cause a significant problem in certain trees such as beech. The balance of tree species in woodlands will change in the long term unless new methods of controlling grey squirrels become available. Browsing by rabbits and by deer, principally roe and muntjac, can also cause damage to trees and ground flora. Muntjac are likely to become more common and widespread. Damage by animals may reduce the potential to manage woods for economic gain.

4.6 Disease and pests

Dutch elm disease has caused structural and species changes in sections of woodlands containing elms. Other diseases such as alder and oak die-back may be serious problems in the future, along with the Asian longhorn beetle pest. Although diseases and pests may harm forestry interests, much damage is natural and not necessarily harmful to biodiversity.

5 Current Action

5.1 Legal status

Woodlands are among the most protected of habitats, although single trees can be less well protected. A number of designations cover London's woodland and offer different degrees of protection. These include: National Nature Reserves (e.g. Ruislip Woods); Sites of Special Scientific Interest (e.g. Bentley Priory, Harrow; Downe Bank and High Elms, Bromley; Ken Wood, Camden; Oxleas Wood, Greenwich); Local Nature Reserves (e.g. Sydenham Hill Wood, Southwark; Queen's Wood, Haringey; Oak Hill Woods, Barnet). Richmond Park and Wimbledon Common are candidate Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) under European legislation for their stag beetle interest. Epping Forest cSAC is being proposed for its beech woodland interest among other features.

The majority of London's woodlands have been classified as Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC). Countryside Conservation Areas protect much woodland and scrub. Woodland is prominent in the Green Corridors of London, especially railway linesides.

Key species closely associated with London's woodland that receive special national protection include common dormouse, badger; all species of bat, hobby and firecrest. These may pose legal restraints on management, for example affecting the time of year that operations may be carried out.

5.2 Mechanisms targeting the habitat

These current actions are ongoing. They need to be supported and continued in addition to the new action listed under Section 7.

5.2.1 Management advice and incentives

It is valuable to share knowledge and experience among woodland managers. Local Authority staff and voluntary groups such as the London Wildlife Trust are able to provide management advice. Advice may also be available from the Forestry Commission, Thames Chase and Watling Chase Community Forests, Lower Mole and North Downs Countryside Management Projects, Greater London Authority, Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, London Bat Group and others. English Nature prepares Site Management Statements for owners and managers of Sites of Special Scientific Interest.

Grants are available from the Forestry Commission for both woodland management and planting. The Woodland Grant Scheme is available to encourage the creation and management of woodland. This covers new planting, including supplements for additional recreational facilities, restocking and natural regeneration. There are also annual management grants and woodland improvement grants designed to cover half the cost of work to improve public recreation and biodiversity in woodland and reinstate management.

5.2.2 Tree planting and Community Forests

Some parts of London are poorly served for woodland and these should be targeted for woodland planting. However, it is important not to destroy other habitat by planting trees or allowing natural regeneration on land that already has value for nature conservation, including brownfield (wasteland) sites.

There may be opportunities for providing new woodland or enhancing or extending existing woodland in or near proposed development and the London Boroughs have a particular role here through the planning process.

Several organisations and schemes promote tree and woodland planting, including Local Authorities, Forestry Commission, Trees for London, Trees of Time and Place, Watling Chase Community Forest, Thames Chase Community Forest, Thames Gateway Urban Forest Strategy, BTCV, London Wildlife Trust and the Woodland Trust. A range of other organisations provide grants or advice for projects which may include tree planting, such as the Shell Better Britain Campaign.

Tree planting and tree nurseries are excellent mechanisms for encouraging community involvement. The Community Forests and others engage communities in woodland management and conservation through outreach projects such as reminiscence exercises and art.

5.2.3 Woodland products

Although gathering food such as blackberries and fungi has remained popular, historically the demand for formal woodland products was the major influence on the nature and management of woodlands. Whilst markets have changed, there is still a

demand for goods ranging from firewood to bespoke furniture and signposts which can be produced to the benefit of local economies, societies and biodiversity. Urban woodland products may not always cover costs, but they can attract significant subsidies and promote long-term management. The products form a link between people and woodlands, generating employment and strengthening local communities as well as being a useful educational tool.

Considerable progress has been made in London recently towards the production of sustainable woodland products such as charcoal and firewood, particularly through BioRegional Development Group and LB Croydon. A timber station has been established where waste wood and other green products can be aggregated and processed. At present these initiatives are based in south London, but there are plans for extension.

6. Flagship Species

These special plants and animals are characteristic of woodland in London.

Bluebell	<i>Hyacinthoides non-scripta</i>	Our well-loved 'national flower' and a British speciality that provides a wonderful spring spectacle in woodlands.
Wild service tree	<i>Sorbus torminalis</i>	The London Basin is important for this rare tree, which has edible berries called 'chequers' or 'chokers'. It has thick white blossom in May and striking red-copper leaves in autumn.
Hornbeam	<i>Carpinus betulus</i>	London has very important populations of this beautiful tree. It has a grey, sinewy trunk, toothed leaves and very hard wood.
Badger	<i>Meles meles</i>	One of our most well-loved mammals, protected and relatively common in south London woodlands.
Stag beetle	<i>Lucanus cervus</i>	A very large beetle which gets its name from the male's 'antlers'. London holds nationally important populations, most visible on warm summer evenings.
Great spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	A attractive and appealing bird, often seen and heard drumming for insects.
Speckled wood butterfly	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>	A common butterfly, well camouflaged for its life in woodland clearings.
Common dormouse	<i>Muscardinus avellanarius</i>	Lewis Carroll's famous mammal, legally protected, rare in London, with specific habitat requirements.
Bats		Many bats such as noctules and Natterer's roost in trees. 12 of Britain's 16 species have been recorded in London.

7. Objectives, Actions and Targets

Most of these actions are specific to this habitat. However, there are other, broader actions that apply generically to a number of habitats and species. These are located in a separate 'Generic Action' section which should be read in conjunction with this document. There are generic actions for Site Management, Habitat Protection, Species Protection, Ecological Monitoring, Biological Records, Communications and Funding

Please note that the partners identified in the tables are those that have been involved in the process of forming the plan. It is not an exclusive list and new partners are both welcomed and needed. The leads identified are responsible for co-ordinating the actions – but are not necessarily implementers.

Objective 1 Promote knowledge of best practice in woodland management, and increase the area of woodland which is managed appropriately

Target: Establish mechanisms for sharing information and building on existing expertise by 2003. Offer advice to all non- Local Authority and conservation owners/managers of woodlands of Metropolitan Importance by 2005

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
Establish a woodland working group to develop advice and exchange ideas	2001	GLA	LA, BTCV, LWT, EN, TFL, BDG, FC, TCCF, WCCF, LTOA, TGUFS, LNHS, Others
Establish and maintain an accessible database of relevant woodland experience	2003	GLA	Working Group
Offer management advice to all non-LA or conservation organisation owners/managers of woodlands of Metropolitan Importance	2005	GLA	Working Group

Objective 2 Increase woodland cover in areas of woodland deficiency

Target: Establish at least 30ha of new woodland by 2005

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
Assess areas of woodland deficiency and locate suitable planting sites, especially in the Thames Gateway	2002	TGUFS	TCCF, WCCF, LA, GLA
Establish approximately 5 ha of wet woodland in the Lee Valley Regional Park	2005	LVRPA	TGUFS, TCCF, LA
Establish at least 25 ha of new woodland in areas of deficiency	2005	TFL	TGUFS, LVRPA, TCCF, LA

Objective 3 Conserve important species through better understanding of them & their needs

Target: Disseminate relevant guidance about management of species to woodland managers by 2004

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
Identify key woodland species with specialist requirements	2002	Working Group	
Produce and distribute guidance for managers on appropriate management for these species and species groups	2003	GLA	LHNS, LWT, RSPB, EN

Objective 4 Increase production, use and markets for sustainable timber and woodland products

Target: 10 LAs/NGOs providing local sustainable woodland products by 2005

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
Work with LAs and community groups to encourage the production and use of woodland products; ten LAs to be producing and using local woodland products	2003	BDG	LA, LTOA, BTCV
Set up one new timber station in London	2005	BDG	LA, LTOA, FC, GLA

Relevant Action Plans

London Plans

Chalk Grassland; Heathland; Wasteland; Open Landscapes with Ancient/Old Trees; Churchyards and Cemeteries; Railway Linesides; Farmland

Bats, Stag Beetle, Black Poplar, Mistletoe

National Plans

Wet woodland, Lowland Beech and Yew Woodland.

Key References

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Rackham, O (1987). *The History of the Countryside*. Dent & Sons.

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Greater London Council (1986). A Nature Conservation Strategy for London: Woodland, Wasteland, the Tidal Thames and Two London Boroughs; *Ecology Handbook 4*

Abbreviations

BDG - BioRegional Development Group

EN - English Nature

FC - Forestry Commission

GLA - Greater London Authority

LA – Local Authorities

LB – London Borough

LNHS - London Natural History Society

LTOA - London Tree Officers Association

LVRPA - Lee Valley Regional Park Authority

LWT - London Wildlife Trust

NGOs - Non-governmental organisations

RSPB - Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

TCCF - Thames Chase Community Forest

TFL - Trees for London

TGUFS - Thames Chase Urban Forest Strategy

WCCF - Watling Chase Community Forest

Contact

The Lead for this habitat is the Greater London Authority.

Dr Meg Game

Strategy Directorate

Greater London Authority

Romney House

Marsham St

London SW1P 3PY

Tel 020 7983 4319

email meg.game@london.gov.uk

web www.london.gov.uk