

Tees Valley Biodiversity Partnership Rural Action Group Tuesday 23 February 2010 Nature's World meeting notes

Attendance - Vic Fairbrother (Teesmouth Bird Club), David Spencer (Redcar and Cleveland BC), Martin Allen (Wildflower Ark), Ruth Jackson (Natural England), Rachel Jackson (TVWT), Rachel Sparks (Forestry Commission), Sue Antrobus (TV Biodiversity Co-ordinator), Terry Douthwaite (Stockton BC), Ian Bond (Hartlepool BC).

1. Ancient Semi Natural Woodland condition assessment in the Tees Valley

Some funding from the Forestry Commission has become available to enable the TVBP to start a project looking at condition assessment of Ancient Semi-Natural Woodland (ASNW) across the Tees Valley. The funding should be confirmed shortly. This requires a 50% funding match which is being made by Natural England and the TVWT. The whole aim of the work is to enable work to be carried out that will improve the biodiversity of woodlands. The Wildflower Ark will be partners in delivering the project.

The aims of the project are to:

- To survey the extent, nature and condition of the ancient woodland resource in the Tees Valley.
- To provide a better understanding of the characteristics, condition, management and ownership of the resource that will be used to stimulate sustainable management and enable the development of meaningful woodland targets.
- To provide information to the Forestry Commission, Natural England and other partners to enable the co-ordinated targeting of grants and other measures to the Ancient Woodlands in the Tees Valley that are assessed to be in unfavourable condition and identified as high priorities for support.
- To provide advice and guidance to owners and managers to support biodiversity targets.
- To enable landowners to access funds to manage woodlands through EWGS by the provision of condition assessment information.
- To provide the information to enable the Tees Valley Biodiversity Partnership to apply for funding for the restoration of key woodlands through landfill tax funding.
- To contribute to actions and reporting on the favourable management of Local sites (National Indicator 197).

A discussion followed on what grants are available from the Forestry Commission and who can apply for them.

2. Finalising our Woodland action point - a few questions raised by steering group

The action plan was well received by the steering group and there were some suggestions, which we need to decide how to finalise, so that the plan can be published on the TVBP website. The points were as follows;

Nestbox schemes would be easily achieved.—Woodland birds aren't caught anywhere else in the BAP. Don't know how essential this is but given that we don't have ancient trees in our ancient woods it could well be. This was discussed. Whilst it was felt that it was more desirable to concentrate on managing the habitat so that there are suitable natural nesting sites it was also raised that in some cases there may be a short term need in some places without suitable sites. The practical issues of erecting and annual checking of boxes and this cost was also discussed. Sue's suggested wording for HAP. "Investigate the need for nest box schemes where woodland structure does not provide natural nesting opportunities for species in decline."

Recent plantations—Is there an action around improving the blocks of woodland planted by councils in the 1980's and 90's to make them better for biodiversity / more like ancient woodland? Grants at the time paid for dense planting of broadleaves, but nothing for future management / thinning etc so they are now over dense, full of spindly trees and lack any understory / ground flora. (Jeremy Garside) This was felt to be a sound addition with an example being the FC

funded work at Cowpen Bewley.

Suggested wording for Hap "Carry out woodland management operations to improve the biodiversity of recent broadleaved plantations in Local Authority Ownership."

Acknowledgement should be given to the work of Tees Forest (Graham Megson); Agreed that this could be mentioned in background information in the section "Habitat in the Tees Valley"

Black Poplar, principally a Darlington issue, should have its own species plan. Agreed to take this out of the plan and at some point join up with the Durham BAP plan which currently includes Darlington.

Small leaved lime was also discussed. The Wildflower Ark has records and Keith Ferry has a lot of local knowledge which we need to collate and see if there are any gaps in our knowledge.

3. Wildflower Ark's new Orchard project

Martin provided an update as Helen is leading a fruit pruning event today.

The Heritage Lottery Fund are supporting a new project 'Traditional Orchards in the Lower Tees Valley' through a grant of £41,000 to the Wildflower Ark at Nature's World. The project will research orchards and fruit growing in the Lower Tees Valley, locate remaining orchards and remnant fruit trees and identify, where possible, the old varieties of fruit. A series of workshops on fruit tree pruning and management, fruit harvesting, storage and uses will be held in the orchards at Nature's World. This will increase the skills within the local community and aid the restoration and management of local orchards.

There were small commercial orchards in 1900/s around Stockton and Hartburn. Some around country houses and farm houses remain.

Orchards are a UK BAP habitat and there is a possibility that the project will result in an Orchards HAP for the Tees Valley.

A discussion followed on occurrence of mistletoe in the Tees Valley. It is very uncommon in this area although very abundant in other counties.

4. Redcar and Cleveland Council - management of SITA grassland and HLS at Eston Moor

David outlined the current position in Redcar & Cleveland Council regarding reorganisation. Three Countryside posts are being deleted at the end of March so that only the countryside centre staff and two access rangers remain. The implications for the management of Eston Moor under HLS, the SITA project on council owned grasslands and the woodland management work through Forestry Commission grants were discussed. The role of the TVBP in highlighting the needs of biodiversity with the local authority was discussed and Sue to discuss further with the chair and steering group.

With regard to the arable field margins event David will contact partners to let them now that it is on long term hold.

5. Role of land owners on TVBAP?

The background to this is that Redcar and Cleveland Council sent a consultation to all affected landowners and as a result a local landowner has feed some very useful comments back on the Local Sites process that highlights the need to ensure greater understanding and clearer communication by landowners in the process. One suggestion that the landowner made was to have landowner representation at the steering group. This was discussed at the steering group and Sue was asked to research further with FWAG an the NFU. It was not felt appropriate that a landowner rep other than the FWAG who are already represented be part of the rural action group and it may be that most of the steering group meeting content would not be of interest to a rep. It was felt that it was important to have a representative land owner and that there may be other ways to work more closely with landowners. Sue has written to the NFU to explore this.

Ian outlined how he was going to consult /inform landowners Local Sites in Hartlepool that sounded very helpful, Sue to assist with this. It is hoped that this will be a template for other local authorities to follow.

6. A season of pond digging - find out where Pondscape have been creating and restoring ponds this winter and the results of PSYMs surveys.

Rachel showed photographs of the ponds that have been created and restored this winter as part of the 2009/10 programme of restoration and creation. The target was 25 which have been achieved. Examples included restoration of a woodland pond in Thornton, restoration of a historic mill pond near Guisborough, and the creation of a network at ponds at Coatham Marsh and pond restoration and creation at Lucite and creation at South Works. Work has also been carried out on land managed by Northumbria Water.

7. 10 ha of meadow creation - Update on proposal and funding bid for Pickard's meadow.

Martin gave an update. He has assisted Stockton Council with this project proposal. An application has now been submitted to SITA. This includes the creation and future management with fencing and water source for grazing animals. If the funding application is successful it will contribute to 100% of the local BAP target, 20% of regional target and 4% of national target. There is an opportunity for pond restoration too through the pondscape project as well.

8. Remaining action plans and LBAP species

Terry has agreed to be the plan lead for brown hares.

A discussion followed on the need for an action plan on farmland birds. Vic said whilst he was happy to write one he didn't see that it would raise new actions that were not covered in other action plans. Sue said she was looking for fewer plans and concentrating on delivering SMART actions in less plans. This was accepted and led to a discussion on the implications of having less species plans. The main points were as follows; incorporating the needs of species into habitat plans makes a more streamlined and easier to manage system. However if species are not B local Bap species they can be perceived as less important. Also when ecological consultants are involved in planning applications they tend to focus on protected species and bap species. There was discussion on having a list of species that were of conservation concern in the Tees Valley that wouldn't actually have plans written, It was noted that these shouldn't be simply rare species as there may be a good reason why a species is rare in the Tees Valley. There may be an issue for birds as so many are declining. What criteria would you use? A lot to think about- Sue to get these thoughts together and prepare for the steering group.

9. Will East Cleveland be a Biodiversity Landscape priority area for the North East? -update on current thinking and its looking good.

Natural England organised a workshop for the North east to look at delivery of regional biodiversity targets and to decide areas where landscape type projects could be delivered, Jeremy Garside, Geoff Barber and Sue Antrobus attended from the Tees Valley. Two landscape areas have been put forward for the Tees Valley- the estuary/Tees marshes area and an area in east Cleveland which is being increasingly recognised as important due to the survey work carried out by the Wildflower Ark. The new national BIG groups (Biodiversity Integration Groups) who are carrying forward the England Bap and replacing the national habitat plan leads are also picking around 20 areas of for national work, one from the North East. It was recognised that this is unlikely to be in the Tees Valley.

10. Any more news, projects, ideas, discussions

David Spencer was thanked for his valuable contribution to the work of the rural action group, especially his work on the heathland and arable action plans.

Date of next meeting

Thank you to Martin for organising the meeting room for this meeting.

10 am Tuesday 8th June. Venue to be confirmed.

