

Project Profile

Forestry Estate Management in Oxfordshire

Background

BSG Ecology undertakes a wide range of ecology work on estates. This allows estate managers to align management operations with wildlife legislation, and maximises wildlife conservation gain. Several examples of work undertaken working alongside Nicholsons Forestry are detailed here.

Forestry Track Upgrade

Over the past two years, BSG Ecology has been advising a large (wooded) estate in North Oxfordshire on a project requiring the upgrade of a network of forestry tracks.

The old woodland rides were rutted and narrow, restricting access for gamekeepers involved in deer control and also modern machinery used in forestry operations. The work was necessary to enable improved access so that necessary management could continue to take place across the estate. The woodland is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) notified in part for its rich flora, including the rare plant meadow saffron *Colchicum autumnale* and several species of orchid. This meant that the work had to be done with great care to avoid damage to the interest features of the SSSI.

We produced a working method statement and agreed this with Natural England. It involved standardised sampling of the track routes by an ecologist with specialist botanical skills. Tracks with least botanical interest were favoured for access over those of highest interest, and where impacts along the more interesting tracks could not be avoided, an ecologist helped with local re-alignment of the route of the track to avoid key species.

We worked closely with Nicholsons Forestry and undertook regular liaison with both the estate and Natural England to ensure that all re-alignment work was practical (in terms of estate management) and acceptable in respect of maintaining the interest features of the SSSI.

Biodiversity conservation measures incorporated into the upgrade work included woodland thinning along the edges of tracks in the more dense areas of woodland, which will help increase the coverage of managed woodland glades at the site. Woodland glades support the greatest botanical interest within the SSSI.

Ecological Impacts of Outdoor Recreational Activities (Bushcraft)

BSG Ecology has been working with Nicholsons Forestry to advise a farmer who is promoting outdoor bushcraft activities across his wooded estate in Southern Oxfordshire. Supervised outdoor activities for children and adults alike provide opportunities for environmental education, and woodlands are particularly attractive settings for such activities.

However, part of the estate is a SSSI, notified for its habitat and several rare species. Therefore measures had to be taken to ensure that activities such as camping, localised camp fires, shelter construction, and foraging for wild foods could all be undertaken in a way that was compatible with the maintenance of the interest features of the SSSI.

We assessed the ecological impacts of bushcraft activities on the SSSI in liaison with Natural England, and working with Nicholsons Forestry presented a strategy to mitigate these impacts. A scientifically-grounded monitoring programme was then developed to enable evidence to be collected to establish whether there would be any residual effect on the conservation value of the SSSI from the continuing activities.

The monitoring will allow changes in woodland structure and flora to be detected that can be attributed to the bushcraft activities. Should any deleterious impacts be identified, changes can be implemented to ensure that the favourable conservation status of the woodland is maintained.

Forestry Operations at a Wooded Estate in North Oxfordshire

BSG Ecology has been engaged, through Nicholsons Forestry, to undertake baseline surveys of birds, butterflies and deer at a large wooded estate in North Oxfordshire. This work has been instigated following a prolonged period of low-intervention management. A significant opportunity was realised to improve the structure and secure the wildlife of the woodlands, through ride widening, coppicing, thinning and halo-thinning¹ around veteran trees and wild service trees *Sorbus torminalis*, which are relatively scarce across the UK.

Nicholsons Forestry is implementing a comprehensive programme of forestry works which will continue for some years to come. The baseline surveys that we are conducting will firstly establish the status of target faunal groups across the estate; and secondly, allow comparison against this baseline through monitoring in subsequent years. It is hoped that the results of the monitoring will show a marked increase in butterfly and bird species diversity, and a reduced impact from deer, as the deer control measures become more targeted.

¹Halo-thinning is a method of 'freeing up' veteran / specimen trees from densely shaded stands. This normally requires progressive selective thinning around the tree; otherwise sudden exposure to open conditions could cause water stress, damage epiphytic species (if present) and result in wind damage.