



*North York Moors National Park Authority*

*Woodland*

*Habitat action plan*

# North York Moors National Park

## Woodland Habitat Action Plan

2008 - 2012

## Woodland

### Our objectives for woodland are:

1. To ensure that all native and semi-natural broadleaved woodland is either maintained in or brought into a favourable condition. Woodland condition is assessed according to criteria used by Natural England, which are based on the following attributes:
  - area
  - structure and natural processes
  - composition of trees and shrubs
  - regeneration potential
  - quality indicators
2. To restore planted ancient woodland sites (PAWS), particularly where a significant element of the original biological interest remains.
3. To establish new native woodland where this will increase the nature conservation value of sites. Priority should be given to reducing the effects of fragmentation and isolation by expanding and re-connecting forest habitats.
4. To raise awareness of the importance of woodland to wildlife, the economy and the landscape.

## Introduction

A wood is much more than a group of trees. The various types of native woodland present in the National Park support a characteristic and diverse range of plant and animal species, depending on factors such as the geology and soils, climate and past management of the site.

Ancient woodlands are often considered to be the most important for nature conservation because they are long established (defined as at least 400 years old). Many woodland species have been able to survive within them since the time when most of the landscape was wooded. However, less than half of our surviving ancient woodlands are considered to be ancient semi-natural woodland (ASNW). Although ASNW have usually been managed by man, the trees and shrubs are derived from coppice re-growth or natural regeneration and so woodland composition still clearly reflects natural factors.

The plantations on ancient woodland sites (PAWS), which make up the majority of ancient woodland, have been replanted, usually with faster-growing conifer trees. Replanting has a significant impact on the structure and composition of the original native woodlands and their restoration to native species can be a high priority, particularly where some of the original features survive.

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Recent woodlands are those woods which are less than 400 years old. They fall into two categories: recent semi-natural woodlands, which may have developed through natural colonisation of open habitats; and recent plantation woodlands, which have been planted. The latter make up the majority of our woodlands.

In today's landscape woodlands are a much-depleted and fragmented resource. The result is that many woodland species are now very vulnerable to the effects of isolation and environmental change. This plan primarily considers the conservation of ancient and/or semi-natural woodlands, but all woodland types, including recent woodlands, can contribute to the development of a more resilient forest habitat network.

This plan includes the four UK BAP priority woodland habitat types found in the North York Moors: upland mixed ashwoods, upland oakwood, wet woodland and lowland mixed deciduous woodlands.

### UK BAP Upland Mixed Ashwoods

Upland mixed ashwoods are usually found on free-draining, base-rich soil. Ash is usually the major component, but oak, birch, elm and small-leaved lime may be present. Ashwoods may not necessarily be ancient, as ash is able to colonise open ground relatively easily. In the National Park, ashwoods are often found on slightly acid soils where there is a flushing of nutrients along riverside strips or on flushes and outcrops. Typically they have ash and downy birch as dominant canopy trees with hazel dominating the understorey. They support a rich field layer often dominated by dog's mercury, with common dog violet, early purple orchid, and primrose.

### UK BAP Upland Oakwood

Upland oakwood is found on acid soils and is usually dominated by oak and birch. Holly, rowan and hazel are usually abundant. The field layer may support acidic heathland species such as bilberry, common cow wheat and various sedges. More neutral sites may have bluebell, bramble, honeysuckle and wood anemone present, occasionally with a very diverse bryophyte flora.

### UK BAP Wet Woodland

Wet woodlands become established on poorly drained soils. Alder, willow and birch are usually the dominant species. This woodland often occurs around springs and streams in a mosaic with other types, so it is often difficult to consider in isolation. Wet woodland habitats are especially rich in bryophytes and invertebrates.

### UK BAP Lowland Mixed Deciduous Woodland

Lowland mixed deciduous woodlands can vary widely in species composition and other characteristics. Dominant canopy species often include ash, oaks and field maple. With appropriate management, the field and shrub layers can

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be diverse. Hazel, hawthorn, blackthorn, elder, bramble and honeysuckle can be abundant and provide the early succession habitats required by turtle dove (with nearby arable feeding areas). Scrubby woodland and wood-edge can also be important for other Species of Conservation Concern (SoCC) such as linnet, whitethroat, yellowhammer, tree sparrow and tree pipit.

In addition to supporting a diverse community of animals and plants, woodlands are an important amenity, landscape and economic resource. They can also play an important role in stabilising soil, reducing water runoff and buffering rivers and streams against pollution.

### **National Status**

After the last ice age much of Britain was colonised by woodland - the 'wildwood' (Oliver Rackham 1994). The original forest was probably a patchwork of closed-canopy forest and smaller groups of trees with a diverse mosaic of other habitats present too. Large herbivores and natural disturbance are thought to have maintained a dynamic patchwork of wetlands, heaths and grassland within the forest. Humankind began to have a significant impact on the woodland in the Bronze Age (after about 2500BC) and, by Roman times, clearance for agriculture and domesticated livestock had reduced woodland cover to the levels familiar to us today.

In the 20th century new methods of intensive forestry and farming were developed. Ancient semi-natural woodlands declined in value as their products were no longer required and traditionally managed woodlands often fell into neglect. At the same time, faster-growing conifer species became more profitable to grow and planting on a large scale was encouraged by the government, mainly to create a home-grown strategic timber reserve. In the 20th century many ancient woods were felled and replanted with conifers.

Today ASNW covers just under 1.5% of England and PAWS covers just over 1% (Woodland Trust). Only 617 ancient woods in Great Britain exceed 100 hectares (ha), and almost half of the woodlands in the Ancient Woodland Inventory (AWI) are below 5 ha in size (Woodland Trust). This means that many of our woodlands are too small to maintain a core area unaffected by adjacent land use or to sustain healthy wildlife populations. Many woodlands are also too isolated to allow migration of species across the landscape. As climate change accelerates, species that are unable to re-locate to suitable climatic niches will become locally extinct.

### **Local status**

In the North York Moors forests began to be disturbed by Mesolithic peoples, perhaps as early as 7000BC, and small-scale clearance on the moors was becoming widespread by about 4300BC. The major clearance of woodland took place in the Bronze Age and more limited clearance continued into recent

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times, although there may have been some recovery between 420 and 900 AD, and an unknown amount of new planting for timber after about 1700.

In the 20th century woodland cover is believed to have increased four-fold in the North York Moors, largely because of the impact of plantation forestry. Since the mid 1980s, however, support has shifted from the creation of a timber resource to the provision of public benefits, and so for the past decade, at least, most new planting has been with native species.

In 2002 Dr George Peterken published his review of woodland in the region, *Native Woodland Development in the North York Moors and Howardian Hills*. In it he noted that although 21% of the National Park supports woodland, more than two thirds of this area is coniferous plantation and does not yet form an effective part of the habitat network. Only 4% of the National Park supports ancient woodland and more than half of this has been replanted with conifers. Whilst a few areas are well wooded and ecologically connected, in many areas woods are sparsely scattered and poorly linked. Peterken highlighted the need for the restoration of PAWS and the development of woodland networks by the establishment of new woodland, field trees, hedges and wood pasture (see Farmland and Wood Pasture LHAPs). The need to conserve and enhance remnants of ASNW and PAWS was identified as a priority in some areas. Using his report as a basis, a local partnership is now working with landowners to develop the native woodland resource.

## Legal status

The Forestry Act 1967 (as amended) requires that felling licences are obtained from Forestry Commission (FC) under Forestry Regulations.

Just 14% of Britain's ancient woodland gained legal protection by being included in Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) (Woodland Trust). A few additional areas are protected as nature reserves and community woodlands.

Protected species in woodlands can include bats, badgers, otters, breeding birds and great crested newts.

## Links to other Action Plans

Habitat Action Plans

Habitat Action Plans:	Species Action Plans:
Rivers and streams*#	Bats*#
Moorland*#	Otter#
Wood pasture, parkland & veteran trees	Nightjar#
	Farmland birds#

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	Great crested newt
	Orchids
* = Local Species Action Plan	Bluebell
# = UK Species Action Plan(s)	Rare butterflies & moths

## Local examples

Levisham Woods are owned by the North York Moors National Park Authority and support a range of SSSI ancient semi-natural woodland types. The woods can be accessed from the Hole of Horcum or Levisham village.

The Woodland Trust, Yorkshire Wildlife Trust and the Forestry Commission own extensive areas of easily accessible SSSI ancient semi-natural woodland to the south of the village of Littlebeck near Whitby.

## Threats

- A poorly developed forest habitat network means that many woodlands are small and isolated and are vulnerable to a loss of diversity. Climate change is likely to make this issue more urgent in the medium to long term.
- Uncontrolled grazing and browsing by deer, rabbits and livestock can prevent natural regeneration and markedly alter the field layer. High concentrations of stock can also cause localised poaching and nutrient enrichment, particularly around access points.
- Climate change and other environmental factors mean that pests and diseases present a greater threat to our woodlands than ever before.
- Climate change may mean that local and traditionally planted genotypes and species of trees and shrubs may not be as well suited to future environmental conditions.
- ASNW are often unmanaged because traditional markets no longer exist or are not economically viable. Nature conservation value may have declined because of reduced structural diversity.
- Many PAWS sites are nearing the end of the first rotation of the plantation crop and a change of management may be urgently required to avoid further losses of biodiversity.
- Intensive sporting use of native woodlands can damage the field layer, especially where pheasant release pens are sited.
- Old trees and dead wood are not always represented in managed woodland, reducing the habitat available to fungi, lichens, invertebrates, birds and bats.
- Invasion by non-native plants, such as *Rhododendron ponticum* and Himalayan balsam can threaten ground flora and natural regeneration of trees.
- Inappropriate silviculture and timber extraction methods can sometimes damage conservation features such as field-layer species and fragile soils and wetland.

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### Requirements

- Ancient woodland is irreplaceable, so none should be lost.
- Silvicultural systems should be appropriate to the site and encourage diversity of age and structure. They should maintain and develop existing conservation features (eg rides and open space, sensitive field-layer species and soils, dead and decaying wood etc).
- Protection from damage by livestock, rabbits, roe deer and grey squirrels is often necessary. Fencing, individual tree protection and/or control measures might be required.
- New pheasant release pens should be sited away from sensitive areas such as ancient semi-natural woodland, or sites with an important field layer. Relocation of pens should be considered if damage is being caused. Guidelines on stock numbers published by the Game Conservancy Trust should be heeded.
- Development of soft woodland edges, using grazing regimes where this is practicable, can be desirable.
- Reduction or removal of invasive or damaging species should be considered, particularly rhododendron and Himalayan balsam.
- Consideration should be given to restoring PAWS to native woodland using the most appropriate silvicultural techniques. In all cases surviving semi-natural features still present in PAWS woodland should be maintained and enhanced.
- Use of trees and shrubs of local provenance and origin should be promoted, particularly when planting in and close to ancient woodland or when planting native species which are localised or may have locally distinct populations. This issue (and that of species choice generally) needs to be kept under review in the light of better understanding of the effect of climate change.
- New native woodland should be established in locations which buffer existing ancient woods, link up fragmented woods or replace woods lost in the recent past. Ideally they should be established in ways which emulate semi-natural woodland in structure and composition.

### Local action

- In 2002 a review of native woodland in the region considered how the development of a 'forest habitat network' could be achieved whilst enhancing other important elements of the landscape. A Native Woodland Development Officer post, supported by Forestry Commission (FC), Natural England (NE), Howardian Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (HHAONB) and the North York Moors National Park Authority (NYMNP), specifically promotes native woodland development in the area in line with the native woodland review. Priorities are to promote new native woodland and tree

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planting, ASNW management and PAWS restoration, particularly where this will help develop the network.

- The Cultural and Natural Development Opportunities (CANDO) partnership in the southwest of the National Park and the northern part of the HHAONB has a strong focus on woodland conservation and restoration opportunities.
- FC completed a study of ancient woodland on its own estate in the North York Moors Forest District in 2002 and began implementing priorities for restoration.
- The establishment of new native woodland has increased significantly in recent years, thanks mainly to close partnership working between FC and NYMNPA. Nearly 500 ha of new native woodland has been established since 1998 using FC challenge funds and other woodland grant schemes.
- An Environment Officer is in post to advise on biodiversity and native woodland development issues on the FC estate.
- The North Yorkshire Forest Bird Study Group monitors woodland bird populations and carries out projects within the National Park. The Forest District Butterfly Monitoring Group also carries out regular recording in particular areas.
- The Yorkshire Wildlife Trust (YWT) provides advice on woodland management to benefit otters.
- Yorwoods assists owners and managers of woodlands with free advice, particularly with business development, marketing and training. Specific emphasis on the development of the local woodfuel resource will have benefits for native woodlands.
- The Regional Forestry Strategy for Yorkshire and the Humber was published in July 2005, setting out the framework for the future management of trees and woodland in the region.

### **Opportunities**

- Regional targeting of woodland grant schemes, Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) and other support from NYMNPA to joint projects with FC and/or through its own grant schemes (such as the Landscape Intervention Fund).
- CANDO partnership supported projects.
- Continued development of local markets for woodfuel and an improving market for timber may provide opportunities for positive management of woodlands.

### **What you can do to help**

- Record any notable species or veteran trees you see and send these records to the National Park Authority by mail or using the online

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recording form on the National Park's website:  
[www.moors.uk.net/recording](http://www.moors.uk.net/recording)

- Leave fallen timber to decay naturally – even in our gardens this is important for wildlife.
- Leave wild plants for all to enjoy.
- Join the North York Moors National Park Volunteers Service and help out with conservation management. Phone the Volunteers Service on 01439 770657 for details.