



*North York Moors National Park Authority*

*Wood pasture, parkland  
and veteran trees*

*Habitat action plan*

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Habitat Action Plan  
2008–2012

## **Wood Pasture, Parkland and Veteran Trees**

### **Our objectives for wood pasture, parkland and veteran trees are:**

1. To record the locations of important veteran trees in the North York Moors National Park, and increase our knowledge and understanding of their management needs and of the wildlife associated with them.
2. To ensure the positive management of all key sites and important trees so as to help maintain the continuity of veteran tree populations and the wildlife, landscape and historical interest associated with them.
3. To develop networks of parkland, wood pasture and open-grown trees as a part of the forest habitat network to encourage the movement of associated flora and fauna through the landscape.

### **Introduction**

Veteran trees may be found throughout the landscape, in hedgerows, woodlands, fields and avenues. Many are also found within wood pastures and parklands, habitats which represent a vegetation structure rather than a particular plant community. Wood pastures and parklands have a long-established tradition of grazing (by deer, cattle or sheep), and are characterized by open-grown or high-forest trees (of which at least some are in the later stages of life) growing in a matrix with grassland, heathland or woodland floras.

The terms 'veteran tree' and 'ancient tree' are not interchangeable. The term 'ancient' refers specifically to the age of a tree and is used to describe the life-stage of the tree as 'beyond full maturity'. The term 'veteran tree' includes this important ancient category and also takes in other tree specimens which, while not truly ancient in years, have some of the same characteristics.

These may include a notable girth, an abundance of dead or decaying wood, and a range of cavities, hollows and rot-holes, which are colonized by fungi and invertebrates, bats and birds. By virtue of their great age or size or their condition, veteran trees are of exceptional value in cultural terms, as a component of the landscape, and for wildlife. They are usually older or larger than most examples of their species, and generally have grown or are growing in open conditions rather than in closed canopy woodland.

After maturity many open-grown trees go into a period of natural retrenchment. Their crowns die back and new lower epicormic growth occurs as the trees adapt to a slower rate of growth. This stage in their lives can last for centuries and it is when trees are at their most valuable for wildlife. Although many old trees have developed their characteristics naturally,

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some may also have had their lives artificially prolonged through management techniques such as pollarding or coppicing.

Trees grow and age at different rates, depending on where they are and what happens to them during their lifetime. Some veteran trees are instantly recognizable by their stature, but others may not be. At 100 years of age a birch is old, a willow very old and an oak hardly into maturity. At 900 years an oak is very old, but limes or yews can easily be twice that age.

A useful way to tell if you have found a veteran tree is to measure the girth (circumference) of its trunk at 1.5 m above the ground. If a tape measure is not available you can make a worthwhile estimate by putting your arms around the tree. From fingertip to fingertip, an adult's arm span is usually about the same as their height, so if you know your height, you can make a rough measurement of a tree trunk. The tree species below might be considered veteran if they measure as follows:

- Sycamore, lime, chestnuts, elm, poplar, beech, crack willow ~4.5m
- Oak, ash, Scots pine, alder ~3m
- Hornbeam, holly, field maple, rowan, yew, grey and goat willow, cherry ~2.5m
- Birch ~1.5m
- Hawthorn ~90cm

## National Status

Country estates and parklands are a legacy from a past era when such designed landscapes constituted a status symbol as well as an economic resource, providing hunting and grazing and construction materials. The heyday of deer parks was the fourteenth century. Many have now disappeared, leaving only their outlines visible as hedge-lines and boundary ditches. Those parks which remain are an ageing resource. One of the chief conservation challenges is to ensure a continuation of trees that can be managed to become the future veterans. Parks of national importance, of which there are 43 in North Yorkshire, are recorded in the 'Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest in England'.

It is suggested by leading academics that the UK supports a significant proportion of Europe's ancient trees and that the UK's wood pasture and parkland within countryside estates is therefore of international importance. Given this resource, we also have a real responsibility for the conservation of this special habitat. The National BAP estimates that the UK has between 10,000 and 20,000 ha of this habitat, with a particularly rich resource in the Yorkshire and Humber region.

## Local Status

The North York Moors habitat audit estimated a total of 615 ha of wood pasture and parkland. These habitats are particularly noted for their abundance of veteran trees. There are over 700

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veterans within Duncombe park alone. Some of these areas were planted with conifers during the 1970s but are now being managed to restore more open habitats to benefit the tree populations. Important and quite extensive wood pasture occurs in several places in Bilsdale, and single and small groups of veteran trees are present in various places throughout the National Park. However, detailed information on their numbers or distribution is still lacking.

## Local examples

Duncombe Park, just to the west of Helmsley, is a Grade II English Heritage registered site and National Nature Reserve designated primarily for the wildlife associated with its important veteran tree population. Part of a larger veteran tree population in the general area, it is probably the single richest site in northern England for insects associated with trees and woodland.

Currently there is little information on isolated veteran trees in the National Park and it will be important for the BAP to address this.

## Legal status

Tree Preservation Orders can be served by the North York Moors National Park Authority to protect trees of amenity value that are considered to be under threat. Occasionally veteran trees can be protected in this way, but this is unusual.

The largest wood pasture and parkland sites are statutorily protected as SSSIs. Duncombe Park receives extended protection and active conservation focus by Natural England as it is a National Nature Reserve.

## Links to Other Action Plans

Habitat Action Plans:	Species Action Plans:
Farmland*#	Bats*#
Woodland*#	Rare butterflies & moths*#
	Farmland birds*#
	Lesser spotted woodpecker#
	Spotted flycatcher#
* = Local Species Action Plan	
# = UK Species Action Plan(s)	

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## **Threats**

- Loss of traditional knowledge and the cessation of traditional management techniques such as pollarding can cause top-heavy crowns to develop and trees to collapse.
- Veteran trees and their associated habitats can be damaged by changes in the management of adjacent land – for example, stock poaching, the use of fertilisers or herbicides, changes in drainage, and ploughing within the rooting zone.
- Loss of shorter-lived nectar-providing species (eg scrub such as hawthorn, blackthorn, holly, rowan, bramble) may affect some deadwood-specialist invertebrates which require them for a part of their life cycles.
- Disease and wind damage may increase, particularly if climate change results in more extreme weather (such as drier summers and windier winters) and if changing environmental conditions favour new or existing pests and diseases.
- Poor age-structure in tree populations combined with a lack of regeneration and the gradual loss of old trees may lead to loss of continuity of old growth habitats.
- Felling of trees and removal of dead wood for reasons of tidiness or because of concerns over safety.
- Natural development of woodland or new planting close to open-grown veteran trees may cause competition for light or direct damage to trees (too sudden a release from competing trees can also be a threat).
- Compaction of the ground caused by livestock or people can damage tree roots.
- Isolation and fragmentation of habitats where veteran trees are present may threaten species with poor powers of dispersal.

## **Requirements**

- Wherever possible, retain important existing dead and decaying trees and fallen and standing dead wood.
- Where there is a poor age-structure or lack of old-growth habitats, carry out management to maintain important trees for as long as possible and develop dead and decaying wood habitats on existing non-veterans.
- Retain and develop associated semi-natural habitats, in particular grassland habitats (parkland and field trees), and scrub/nectar sources near to veteran tree populations.
- Consider appropriate tree hazard and risk assessments where public safety is an issue to prevent unnecessary felling and/or removal of dead wood.
- Replace trees and consider planting shrubs for nectar (using primarily broadleaves; and local origin planting stock may have some benefits and should be considered).
- Restore open conditions around trees (gradually if necessary) where these have been lost in the recent past through planting and natural woodland development.
- Create a root protection area around veteran trees and avoid applying fertilisers or pesticides or allowing soil compaction or excavation to damage roots and associated wildlife. This area should be at least 15 times the diameter of the tree (measured at 1.5

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metres above ground level) or 5 metres beyond the crown spread, whichever is the greater.

- Improve awareness among landowners of the importance of veteran trees and their management.
- Improve knowledge and understanding of the locations and distribution of veteran trees in the National Park and nearby areas, and work with the Ancient Tree Hunt and others to use the information effectively.

## **Current local action**

- The National Park Authority is compiling a database of known veteran trees and the concentration of ageing tree populations within the Park;
- Acorn collection by the National Park Authority has maintained a local-origin stock of trees over the past decade (grown on by Castle Howard tree nursery) for new native woodland and tree-planting schemes. A tree-planting scheme run by the National Park Authority promotes the planting of local origin oaks in priority areas with known veteran tree populations.
- Natural England has a restoration management plan for Duncombe Park's important parkland habitat and its suite of veteran trees that have been designated as a National Nature Reserve.
- Important wood pasture sites such as High Wood at Tripsale SSSI are being managed and expanded through work by the National Park Authority, Forestry Commission and Natural England.
- The Forestry Commission is carrying out and planning large-scale restoration projects to conserve and enhance veteran tree populations at Deer Park near Helmsley and in Bransdale.
- Ryedale District Council has held training events (at Duncombe Park) for contractors, landowners and volunteers interested in veteran tree management and recording.
- Fylingdales Local History Group has set up a veteran tree recording group to assess the population of veteran trees in the Robin Hood's Bay area.
- Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) applications have included the development of wood pasture and field trees in priority areas such as Farndale and Bilsdale.

## **Opportunities**

- Closer working between the Ancient Tree Hunt, the National Park Authority (NPA) and other surrounding local authorities to share records and develop ideas for management across the landscape.
- Promote veteran tree conservation and management through HLS and NPA grant schemes.
- Raise awareness (with others as above) of the importance of veteran trees and their appropriate management among landowners, arborists and the public through training, publicity, and advice.

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**What can you do to help?**

- Record any veteran trees you see and send these records to the National Park Authority by mail or using the online recording form on the National Park's website: [www.moors.uk.net/recording](http://www.moors.uk.net/recording)
- If you own a veteran tree please notify the National Park Authority and consider seeking advice on its management.
- Leave fallen timber to decay naturally – even in our gardens this is important for wildlife.

Assist the North York Moors National Park Volunteers with conservation management. Phone the Volunteers Service on 01439 770657 or see the National Park's website for details: [www.moors.uk.net](http://www.moors.uk.net) (For volunteering opportunities click on Authority Services at the top of the screen. Then choose 'Rangers, Volunteer & vocational training'.)