

MENDIP WOODLAND HABITAT ACTION PLAN



Action plan name

Mendip Woodland

Background and vision

Some parts of the Mendip District were identified as priority areas (Strategic Nature Areas or SNAs) for creating new native broadleaved woodland during a process called 'Rebuilding Biodiversity' or 'Nature Map'. SNAs link areas of existing mapped areas of habitat identified as priorities in the UK BAP and identify priority areas for linking and buffering existing habitat patches with new habitat. The new South West Regional Spatial Strategy contains a map of SNAs for a variety of target habitats.

(http://www.swenvo.org.uk/nature_map/downloads.asp - checked 05/02/2008).

Woodland is a Rebuilding Biodiversity target for the following Natural Areas in Mendip District: the Mendip Hills, Thames and Avon Vales, the Wessex Vales and the Mid Somerset Hills (http://www.english-nature.org.uk/pubs/gis/tech_na.htm - checked 05/02/2008)

The ultimate aim, by 2030, is for woodland SNAs to contain 30% of the target habitat and 30% other semi-natural Habitats.

Creation of such blocks of target and other semi-natural habitats is aimed at reducing gradual extinction of species from small patches of habitat and to allow species to adapt to climate change.

In Mendip District, Strategic Nature Areas for woodland often overlap with Strategic Nature Areas for other target areas. Where this is the case, the target habitat for one SNA can form the other semi-natural habitat target for overlapping SNAs.

Target habitats for SNAs that overlap with Woodland SNAs in Mendip District include:

Calcareous Grassland (Hills in Mendip District and Mid Somerset Hills Natural Areas)

Lowland Heathland, (Hills in Mendip District Natural Area)

Neutral Grassland (Hills in Mendip District and Wessex Vales Natural Areas)

Purple Moor Grass and Rush Pasture (Wessex Vales Natural Area)

Plan species and habitats

Additionally, to achieve Rebuilding Biodiversity targets there will be a need to create other semi-natural habitat alongside woodland. Existing non woodland semi-natural habitat within Woodland SNAs in Mendip District include:

- Calcareous and Neutral Grassland
- Lowland Meadow
- Heathland
- Purple Moor Grass and Rush Pasture
- Wood Pasture, Parkland and Veteran Trees

Species identified as potential priorities for LBAP action in Mendip District that are associated with broadleaved woodland are:

- Meadow Saffron
- Whitebeams some of which are unique to places like Cheddar Gorge
- Other Somerset SAP species associated with Woodland in Mendip District include Long-eared Owl which requires a patchwork of trees and open ground

Habitat status

SNAs contain significant variety of woodland UK BAP Priority Habitats of which details can be found in the UKBAP (as listed 05/02/2008):

- Lowland Mixed Deciduous Woodland (English Nature, 2002)Wet Woodland – (<http://www.ukbap.org.uk/UKPlans.aspx?ID=4>)
- Upland Mixed Ash Woodland (<http://www.ukbap.org.uk/UKPlans.aspx?ID=3>)
- Lowland Wood-pasture and Parkland (<http://www.ukbap.org.uk/UKPlans.aspx?ID=5>)
- Lowland Beech and Yew woodland (<http://www.ukbap.org.uk/ukplans.aspx?ID=2>)

As well as containing the UKBAP Priority Habitats listed above, many of the existing areas of woodland in Mendip District are identified as Local Wildlife Sites. Of these many are likely to be fragments of ancient woodland.

There are several large woodlands currently with SSSI status in Mendip District such as Vallis Vale and Mells Valley, whilst Asham Wood and Ebbor Gorge have SAC status.

Some woodlands in Mendip District support habitats identified in Annex 1 of the EU Habitats Directive as being of European importance.

- Tilio acerion (Lime/Maple) forests of slopes, screes and ravines (<http://www.forest-trends.org/biodiversityoffsetprogram/BBop%20library%202/Europe/Not%20Printed/Council%20Directive%201992%20NATURAL%20HABITATS%20Annex%20I.pdf>)

Specific impacts/threats

Outside of the planning process (eg new roads and other developments) woodlands are well protected by the Forestry Commission under the 1967 Forestry Act, as amended, and have been for a good number of years. In the more distant past however, woodland suffered from a variety of threats that have left existing blocks of woodland small and fragmented and of much lower quality for wildlife. These include:

- Coniferisation of Ancient Woodland Sites
- Reduction in size of woodland blocks
- Lack of management, leading to loss of physical structure, species diversity and natural regeneration
- Grazing by domestic stock also leading to loss of physical structure, species diversity and natural regeneration
- Loss, due to woodland fragmentation, of large woodland blocks capable of supporting invertebrates and birds requiring core woodland interiors (well away from woodland edge).
- Local species extinctions from fragmented woodlands

- Current levels of aerial Nitrogen deposition are often above critical loads for Woodland habitats leading to a loss of ground flora species diversity.

With potentially increasing markets for sustainable energy sources, woodlands may become more intensively managed for fuel production. While this may be of great benefit in some areas, it could lead to a significant reduction of deadwood in some woodlands. The challenge is to ensure a range of woodland types from intensively managed for biofuel production to non-interventionist with plentiful deadwood. The FC is well aware of the value of deadwood habitat, and actively promotes it's development and retention, both within it's own woodlands, and in the non FC woodlands with which it deals for grants and regulation purposes. According to statistics however, more than 50% of non-FC woodlands currently receive little or no management.

Key partners

Mendip District Council (MDC)
 Mendip AONB (MAONB)
 Forestry Commission (FC)
 Somerset Wildlife Trust (SWT)
 Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG)
 Quantock AONB (QAONB)
 Woodland Trust (WT)
 Natural England (NE)
 Local landowners
 The Wildlife Trusts National Office (TWT)
 The South West Wildlife Trusts (TSWWT)
 West Somerset Local Strategic Partnership (WSLSP)
 Forum 21
 Somerset Environmental Records Centre (SERC)
 Somerset Biodiversity Management Group (SBMG)
 Somerset Biodiversity Coordinator (SBC)
 Biodiversity Southwest (BS)

Current action

- The Mendip Hills Living Landscapes project is currently running, led by the Somerset Wildlife Trust, has targets for linking and buffering existing woodland, and creation of other semi-natural habitat to meet Rebuilding Biodiversity targets within some Woodland SNAs.

- Natural England's Entry-level scheme aims to provide protection for existing woodland through the provision of stock-proof fencing for woodland boundaries and other measures. Semi-natural habitat is also considered in farm assessment.
- The Forestry Commission's English Woodland Grant Scheme (EWGS) promotes sustainable woodland management. If within a SSSI, can also help to improve their condition to unfavourable recovering or favourable, towards meeting the governments PSA targets. It can also help create appropriate new woodland, eg new native woodland to link or buffer existing ancient woodland.
- A key aim of the EWGS is to assist in the delivery of Priority Habitat and Species Action Plans for woodlands.
- Conservation organisations including the Somerset Wildlife Trust and Natural England manage existing woodlands of high biodiversity quality in Mendip District.
- Will Woodlands has planted up an area of around 200ha of mainly new native woodland on the Mendip Plateau in 1999/2000, which it is managing with biodiversity as a key objective.
- New Forest Management Plans are currently being written for areas of woodland in the east of Mendip District to connection with Heritage Relief Applications.

Target description and target goals

1. Maintain quality and extent of all areas of existing Priority Habitat woodland in Mendip District LBAP area.
Goal: At least 2976 ha maintained.
2. Increase cover and connectivity of native broadleaved woodland within Woodland SNAs
Goal: Increasing total area by 157 ha by 2010
3. Establish current extent of woodland and other semi-natural habitats within SNAs
Goal: Field Survey of Recent API habitat maps to ground truth area of BAP Priority Habitat
4. Maintain all existing areas of other non-woodland semi-natural habitats within woodland SNAs
Goal: 100% of existing BAP priority habitat
5. Increase area of land in management intended to create other semi-natural habitat component of woodland SNAs

Goal: 200 ha within woodland SNAs by 2011

Key factors

- **Grant aid funding from Forestry Commission.** The EWGS Woodland Creation Grant guide for the South West region of England states that priority is given to the achievement of National and regional Biodiversity, Habitat and Species Action Plans targets. Currently the Forestry Commission in the South West is favouring grant-aiding new woodland creation, particularly of new native woodlands, adjacent to existing ancient woodland. Although there is good existing woodland cover within Mendip District woodland SNAs, a key to success will be to encourage the FC to agree to target woodland creation within SNAs (even if not adjacent to existing woodland). The FC has already established its own Ancient Woodland Priority Areas within the region, one of which is the 'Greater Exmoor' AWPAs, encompassing the ENPA area, and extending to the south and east of Exmoor. Within these AWPAs, management of Ancient Woodlands, PAWS restoration, Woodland SSSI condition improvement, and the creation of appropriate New Native Woodlands, is given additional priority through grants and partnership working.
- **In Mendip District there are some significant blocks of predominately coniferous plantations**, on what was formerly open habitat. These plantations increase the overall diversity of habitats in the AONB (which are otherwise still largely open) by providing homes for a wide range of wildlife. This includes SAP species such as Long Eared Owl, Nightjar and Song Thrush, a wide range of other birds such as brambling, crossbill, tree pipit, coal tit, goldcrest, tawny and barn owl, raven, sparrow hawk, buzzard etc. They provide hunting grounds for several bat species, including Greater Horseshoe, Lesser Horseshoe, Myotis species, Pipistrelles 45 and 55, Noctules and Serotine, and are home to a range of large and small mammals, and reptiles and amphibians including grass snake and adders, another SAP species. These woods also contain a very wide range of invertebrates, fungi, mosses and lichens, ensuring a diverse food chain for a good range of less notable species. Finally, while contributing to our climate change mitigation by producing sustainable raw materials, they are also a key habitat for humans, and are heavily used for recreational purposes. Similar points can be made for other FC plantations on formerly open sites elsewhere in the county. It is therefore important that the Forestry Commission continues to safeguard and manage these plantations for the diverse wildlife and other benefits that they provide, while remaining open to suggestions for future changes.

- **Current lack of funding for HLS and lack of targeting on SNAs**
Natural England's (RDS) Higher level scheme does not currently fund woodland creation, nor does it currently recognize SNAs in its targeting. NE therefore needs to be lobbied to target habitat creation and maintenance within SNAs to achieve re-building biodiversity targets. Moreover, HLS needs to be sufficiently well funded to achieve more than just Natural England's PSA targets on SSSIs.
- **Key landowners need to be identified and targeted for advice.**
SWT, FWAG and possibly QAONB staff are well placed to liaise with landowners and deliver advice to landowners on how to achieve these targets, and this advisory role needs funding.
- **Need for detailed mapping of land use within SNAs.** It is fortunate that in Mendip District a framework of habitat mapping using aerial photographs has already been created. This landscape scale habitat mapping in will help target habitat creation and restoration and help monitor achievement of action and outcomes.