

RESERVE MANAGEMENT:

GRAZING

- The reserves 18 resident Exmoor ponies continue to graze the 250acre grazing enclosure, creating fantastic diversity in the vegetation. Their dunging areas help to boost invertebrate numbers, whilst a fungi expert has confirmed their critical role in supporting one of the UKs best populations of declining nail fungus *Poronia punctata*.
- Unfortunately, in April 2019 a vehicle hit one of the Exmoor ponies whilst it was crossing a road, and this resulted in the pony having to be euthanised. This led us to conduct a thorough review of risk mitigation, resulting in no actions taken except for the normal annual planned cut of roadside vegetation. We continue to appreciate the efforts of local people to drive slowly through the reserve and encouraging others to do the same. The ponies continue to wear the highly reflective collars that have proved very successful in helping motorists see the ponies when driving through at night.
- We continue to experience problems with visitors feeding the Exmoor ponies. Being a semi-wild native breed suited to grazing moorland and heathland, Exmoor's can become quickly unwell, and even die, if fed foods such as carrots, apples or bread. This can also lead to long term behavioural problems with individual ponies associating people with food. We therefore appreciate any helping in spreading the word that feeding them is not allowed.
- Goats. A herd of Bagot goats were introduced in February 2019 to aid the heathland restoration process by browsing on birch and pine seedlings that the ponies rarely graze. However it became apparent that modifications would be needed to the cattle grids to prevent the goats escaping, therefore the goats were moved to the riverside paddocks to graze and benefit the meadow structure there. We are continuing to wait for the Highways Agency to carry out modifications to the cattle grids to allow the goats to be reintroduced into the heathland enclosure. The goats also graze some of our other Trust reserves on the coast, and so are not currently at Knettishall Heath (May 2020).
- Rabbits. Being crucial to the long-term maintenance of rare Breckland flora and fauna, we continue to encourage rabbits to populate the heath. We are also still observing how rabbit numbers are boosted in areas that the ponies have grazed heavily, where they lower the vegetation enough for the rabbits to move in.

HABITAT MANAGEMENT

- With the end of the project in 2018 there have not been any contractors undertaking work on Knettishall Heath throughout 2019 – 2020.
- Weekly volunteer working parties have been continuing the management programme by removing encroaching scrub on the heathlands, and felling trees along ride edges and within woodlands to create or restore glades. The majority of this year's work has been to thin the woodland edge bordering the western heathland that runs adjacent to the Icknield Way footpath. This is creating a more scalloped natural edge allowing the sunlight to permeate into the woodland, providing improved habitat for invertebrates, heathland and woodland flora, bats and reptiles. The work was halted by the start of the Covid19 lockdown, therefore the stump removal remains to be completed in this area later in the year.
- With consent of the EA, repairs have continued to the Little Ouse riverbank, with posts, faggots and soil to help prevent erosion damage to the footpath. In some areas temporary wooden fencing remains in place to allow the groundwork to recover before access is allowed down to the river again.



Image 1: Riverbank repaired adjacent to dipping platform, May 2019

- Tree planting was undertaken by Knettishall heath volunteers, with funding from the EA, in February 2020 along the Little Ouse bank. This was to reduce the likelihood of flood damage and improve the ecology of the riverbank and the river channel itself. 170 trees were planted at Knettishall Heath and on neighbouring land, species including alder, willow, goat willow, maple and oak.
- In Spring 2019 an unexploded ordnance (UXO) was found at Knettishall Heath, resulting in the police bomb disposal unit attending to detonate it. As a result of this a thorough risk mitigation survey was carried out, resulting in changes to the way we approach any new ground disturbance in reserve management.

WILDLIFE

- Woodland edges, rides and glades that have been created and improved over the last 8 years are now supporting a greater wealth of plant species including honeysuckle and foxgloves. These areas have in turn boosted populations of white admiral butterflies, hawker dragonflies, and over 7 species of bats.



Image 2: Foxgloves and woodland flora in new woodland glade June 2019

- We are continuing to see heathland specialities such as the green tiger beetle, rare lichens, moths and butterflies, bats and reptiles all increase in number and diversity around the reserve, as a result of the grazing, newly cleared areas of heathland and bare ground plots.
- The butterfly transect was successfully carried out from 1st April – end of September 2019 and results submitted to Butterfly Conservation.
- Reptile transects are ongoing with good numbers of slow worm, common lizard, grass snake and some adder sightings in 2019.
- Invertebrate surveys, bryophyte and fungi surveys, and vegetation monitoring by experts ongoing, particularly in areas of bare ground creation.
- Spring 2019 saw woodlark return for the third consecutive year after a 10+ year absence. These ground nesting birds rely on the patchy areas of bare ground to feed on, and the heather and gorse swathes to nest in. Other heathland, grassland and farmland species doing well include the yellowhammer, skylark and stonechat.
- Woodland bird species that have been recorded breeding are lesser spotted woodpecker and woodcock.

- We would like to offer thanks to all our regular dog walkers who are helping to spread the word about keeping dogs on leads on the heathland areas between 1st March – 31st July to protect ground nesting birds.

COMMUNITY WORK

- Summer 2019 saw our new wild learning officer; Lauren Mack, in post to help further drive events and learning activities on the reserve, under the Trusts core funding and support from our Higher Level Stewardship Programme. This included monthly youth groups, school visits, school holiday events, new family walks, and new weekly wild tots.
- The reserve has unfortunately experienced an increase in problems with antisocial behaviour, particularly over summer 2019, including bonfires, car racing, flytipping and general litter, dog fouling, and night gatherings/parties. The Trust are currently looking into ways we can introduce a greater site presence and maintain control. This will include improved car park infrastructure in 2020, such as;
 - The removal of bbq pits and introduction of bbq stands to prevent the use of pits for fires
 - Improved signage in the main car park area
 - New improved network of bins
 - Greater staff presence
 - Improved main car park entrance security
 - Improved links with local police

Looking forward – Covid19:

- The Trust have cancelled all events up to the end of June 2020, and the main car park remains closed in line with government guidance (as of 05/05/2020). We hope to run some events throughout the summer, which will be put on our website, and hope to welcome our wider visitors back to the reserve soon.

We once again thank you for your ongoing support and I hope to attend another parish council meeting soon.

Samantha Norris - Knettishall Heath Warden