

Wimbledon and Putney Commons
Annual Conservation Report 2020/21



Bluegate Gravel Pit (2020)

Summary

- 1. Introduction** - The Annual Conservation Report for 2020/21 provides a summary of the conservation, volunteering and public engagement activities that have taken place on the Commons from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021. (Page 5)
- 2. Heathland Management** – Lowland heathland is an internationally important landscape which has been listed as a priority habitat for conservation in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan. (Page 7)
- 3. Heathland Management** – Lowland heathland in London is now limited to a very small number of sites with the largest of these areas found on Wimbledon Common and Putney Heath. (Page 9)
- 4. Heathland Management** – Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, condition assessments for SSSI's (Page 10)
- 5. Heathland Management** – Operational requirements under the Commons' Higher Level Countryside Stewardship agreement. (Page 11)
- 6. Heathland Management** – Management of the Commons' heathland involves a joint effort by the Commons' full time staff and volunteers. (Page 12)
- 7. Heathland Management** – In addition to the tree felling work that was carried out on the Commons' heathland during 2020, another important piece of heathland regeneration work involved the cut and collection of vegetation on two areas of Wimbledon Common. (Page 14)
- 8. Heathland Management** – While there are no immediate plans to reintroduce grazing cattle back to the Commons, a recent study has shown that grazing ponies could be of great benefit to reducing the coverage of Molinia on heathland. (Page 15)
- 9. Acid Grassland Management** – At the current time, there are three areas of acid grassland that are managed under the guidance of the Commons' Countryside Stewardship agreement with Natural England. (Page 16)
- 10. Acid Grassland Management** – Out of the three areas of acid grassland that are included in the Commons' Countryside Stewardship agreement with Natural England, the area of The Plain is the most actively managed. (Page 17)
- 11. Additional Acid Grassland Restoration Work** – In addition to the three areas of acid grassland that are included in the Commons' Countryside Stewardship agreement with Natural England, during 2020, further grassland restoration work was also carried out by the Commons' Maintenance team on three smaller sites on Wimbledon Common, Putney Heath and Putney Lower Common. (Page 20)
- 12. Woodland Management** – Covering an area of 291 hectares (649 acres), woodland is the largest habitat type found on the Commons. To help manage the Commons' woodland, all work is carried out under the guidance of a five-year Countryside Stewardship agreement with the Forestry Commission. (Page 21)

- 13. Woodland Management** – The two largest pieces of woodland work that were carried out on the Commons during 2020 involved the thinning of trees along two rides on Putney Heath. These rides were located near 7 Post Pond and to the immediate north of Scio Pond. (Page 23)
- 14. Woodland Management** - During 2020 and the beginning of 2021, open space management on the Commons was carried out at the Brickfield site which is near Robin Hood Ride and at Stag Bog. (Page 25)
- 15. Woodland Management** – Towards the end of 2020, 800 small trees were planted around the Commons’ woodland. These trees included 700 Hazel (*Corylus avellana*), 50 Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) and 50 Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*). (Page 27)
- 16. Pond Management** – There are nine ponds on the Commons. All of the Commons’ ponds vary in size, depth and setting and each pond has a specific set of management objectives that are required for the ongoing protection of these special habitats. (Page 29)
- 17. Pond Management** – As part of the Commons’ involvement with the Forestry Commission’s Countryside Stewardship agreement, selective tree felling was carried out around the edge of Curling Pond during February 2020. (Page 29)
- 18. Pond Management** - In addition to the work that was carried out around the edge of the Curling Pond, two new floating platforms were floated on Queensmere and two duck tubes were trialled at Kingsmere. (Page 31)
- 19. Disturbance on the Commons Ponds** – During summer 2020, a significant rise in visitor numbers and the number of dogs on the Commons led to a heightened concern about the safety of the wildlife that can be found around the Commons’ ponds. (Page 32)
- 20. The Beverley Brook on Wimbledon Common** – The Beverley Brook is the only riverine habitat on the Commons. From 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021, work along the Beverley Brook on Wimbledon Common included litter picking, the removal of the non-native and highly invasive Himalayan balsam (*Impatiens glandulifera*), the planting of marginal vegetation and the reconstruction of certain in-stream modifications by staff from the South East Rivers Trust. (Page 35)
- 21. Path Restoration along the Beverley Brook** – To help improve access across the Commons, during August 2020, resurfacing of the path between the REMPF pavilion and the bottom of Robin Hood Ride was completed. (Page 39)
- 22. Management of Invasive Species** – In general, the management of non-native invasive species on the Commons involves the control of Oak Processionary Moth (*Thaumetopoea processionea*) Japanese knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*), Himalayan Balsam (*Impatiens glandulifera*) and New Zealand Pigmyweed (*Crassula helmsii*). (Page 40)
- 23. Management of Invasive Species** – Oak Processionary Moth (*Thaumetopoea processionea*) (Page 41)

24. Management of Invasive Species – Japanese Knotweed (Page 43)

25. Putney Lower Common – Putney Lower Common is separated from the main body of the Commons by a distance of approximately one mile and it covers an area of 20 hectares (50 acres). From 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021 activities on this area of the Commons included litter picking, upholding the Commons' bye-laws, control of invasive species, tree safety work, grass cutting and two Hedgehog surveys. (Page 44)

26. Volunteering on the Commons – Unfortunately, from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021, volunteering activities on the Commons were largely influenced by the restrictions that accompanied COVID-19. During this period, the Commons did however continue to benefit from the ongoing support of a substantial number of volunteer litter pickers and wildlife recorders (Page 47)

27. Public Engagement on the Commons – With similarities to the Commons' organised volunteering activities, over the past twelve months, public engagement events on the Commons have also been largely affected by the restrictions that have accompanied COVID-19. (Page 49)

28. London In Bloom – Despite all of the uncertainties that have accompanied the period from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021, both Wimbledon Common and Putney Lower Common were presented with Gold Awards at this year's London in Bloom competition. (Page 50)

Wimbledon and Putney Commons

Annual Conservation Report 2020/21

Introduction

The Annual Conservation Report for 2020/21 provides a summary of the conservation, volunteering and public engagement activities that have taken place on the Commons from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021.

Since the first UK lockdown was announced by Prime Minister Boris Johnson on 23 March 2020, Commons' staff and where possible, Commons' volunteers', have all worked tirelessly to ensure that the Commons have remained both safe and accessible for visitors to use. Ensuring a staff presence on the Commons, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, over the past year, each one of the Commons' various departments learned to quickly adapt to the changing circumstances that had been thrust upon all of us by the arrival of COVID-19.

Although each department maintained its primary role on the Commons, a significant and sustained increase in visitor numbers to the site meant that each member of the team soon focused their attention on prioritising those tasks which would be of most benefit to the Commons as a whole. Unfortunately, throughout the warmer months of the year in particular, this often meant that many hours of staff time were consumed by the need to clear litter, deal with fly-tips and empty dog waste bins.

Throughout this time, we have been extremely grateful for all of the hours that have been provided by the Commons' volunteers in helping to litter pick on the Commons but nonetheless, the task of keeping the Commons clear of litter over the past 12 months has been an extremely arduous and time-consuming activity.

Inevitably, with so much staff time devoted to keeping the commons clear of litter, other areas of work that would normally have been completed as a matter of routine were either put on temporary hold or they have received less attention than would normally have been the case. This said, despite all of the additional pressures that have accompanied the arrival of COVID-19, a great deal of conservation work, volunteering and public engagement has still been achieved over the past twelve months and as a result, there remains a great deal to celebrate.

Over the course of this report, attention will be drawn towards all of the usual elements that have traditionally formed the Commons' Annual Conservation Report. These include the subjects of habitat management, wildlife, pest control, the contribution of volunteers to the site and how we plan to move forward over the next year in order to further improve the Commons.



A daily occurrence on the Commons during much of 2020 - Litter bagged up and ready for collection near the Rushmere Pond.

Heathland Management:

Lowland heathland is an internationally important landscape which is listed as a priority habitat for conservation in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan. At the current time, there are approximately 60,000 hectares of Lowland heathland in the UK which is about 20% of the world's resource of this rare and threatened habitat. According to a publication entitled 'Lowland Heathland, a cultural and endangered landscape' that was published by English Nature in 2002, in the UK, we now only have about 16% of the heathland area that existed in 1800. In 1800, heathland covered 400,000 hectares in the UK with approximately 230,000 hectares of this found in England.

Through a combination of factors that have included agricultural intensification, afforestation, urbanisation and the decline in traditional management techniques, the dramatic decline of Lowland heathland in the UK has resulted in a far more fragmented habitat than once existed.

While there are still significant areas of Lowland heathland in areas of the UK such as Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Hampshire and even Surrey, in London, Lowland heathland is now limited to only a few remaining sites. There is a total area of 80 hectares of Lowland Heathland within the London area with the largest single area of this habitat found on Wimbledon Common and Putney Heath where approximately 20 hectares of this habitat still survives.



Heathland photographed near Ladies Mile on Putney Heath: 2020

Lowland heathland is comprised of a mosaic of habitats that are found on extremely impoverished, acidic soils (pH within the range 3.4 to 6.5) which occur in areas with mild temperatures and regular rainfall. The landscape in which Lowland heathland can be found is characteristically open and dominated by low growing vegetation, with areas of bare ground, wetland and scrub.

Unfortunately, in London, Lowland heathland is now only limited to a small number of fragmented sites and while the largest of these areas is found on Wimbledon Common and Putney Heath, the heathland on these two sites are exposed to a high and sustained level of pressure.

To gain a greater understanding of what is required to manage the Commons' various natural and semi-natural habitats, in 2016, a team of ecological consultants (Penny Anderson Associates) carried out a National Vegetation Survey and Habitat Assessment (NVC) on the Commons. With reference to the Commons 20 hectares of remaining heathland, the results were that all heathland areas on the Commons' were species poor versions of the communities they are assigned to and this was almost certainly related to the high level of human impact on the habitats due to their location in such an urban setting.

Despite the protection that is afforded to the Commons' remaining areas of heathland through the Wimbledon and Putney Commons Act 1871 and the designation of both SSSI and SAC status, a summary of ongoing threats which effect these areas include: unmanaged fires, woodland succession, Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*) invasion, recreational use and erosion, pollution and potentially, climate change.



During 2020, there were three uncontrolled fires on Putney Heath that were attended by the London Fire Brigade. The photograph above was taken during April 2020 on heathland located between Ladies Mile and Roehampton Ride.

To help protect the heathland on Wimbledon Common and Putney Heath, over the past few years these areas have been managed under a series of different management agreements. From 2006 to 2016, a Higher- Level Stewardship (HLS) agreement with Natural England provided the framework for the management of the Commons' heathland and since 2018, this work has continued under the management of a Countryside Stewardship (CS) agreement which is also administered by Natural England.

Approximately every six years, all SSSI land is assessed against the six conditions that are listed below. All SSSI sites are divided into units (although some sites may only have one unit). Each unit is then assessed separately and this can often result in a mixture of 'Favourable, Unfavourable and Destroyed units across one SSSI. At the current time, the heathland that is located on Wimbledon Common and Putney Heath is classified as Unfavourable recovering.

Condition assessments for SSSI's

Favourable - The SSSI is being adequately conserved and is meeting its 'objectives'.

Unfavourable recovering - Often known simply as 'recovering', SSSI units are not yet fully conserved but all the necessary management measures are in place. Provided that the recovery work is sustained, the SSSI will reach favourable condition in time.

Unfavourable no change - The special interest of the SSSI unit is not being conserved and will not reach favourable condition unless there are changes to the site management or external pressures. The longer the SSSI unit remains in this poor condition, the more difficult it will be, in general, to achieve recovery.

Unfavourable declining - The special interest of the SSSI unit is not being conserved and will not reach favourable condition unless there are changes to site management or external pressures. The site condition is becoming progressively worse.

Part destroyed - Lasting damage has occurred to part of the special conservation interest of a SSSI unit, such that it has been irretrievably lost and will never recover. Conservation work may be needed on the residual interest of the land.

Destroyed - Lasting damage has occurred to all the special conservation interest of the SSSI unit, such that it has been irretrievably lost. This land will never recover.

Information taken from Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs –
condition assessment for SSSI's

At an operational level, over the duration of the Commons' HLS and CS agreements, the management of the Lowland heathland on the Commons has included the following activities:

- The control and management of invasive trees such as Silver birch (*Betula pendula*) and Turkey oak (*Quercus cerris*) by cutting and stump treatment.
- Rotational cutting to maintain a varied heathland vegetation structure.
- The creation of bare ground sites through the scraping back of turves.
- The maintenance of a full range of classes of Gorse by cutting and removing arisings.
- The management of dense stands of Bracken and deep Bracken litter layers by rotational cutting or spraying.
- The control of non-native species.
- The control of pernicious weeds such as Creeping thistle (*Cirsium arvense*), Common ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*) and Hogweed (*Heracleum sphondylium*) by topping or spot spraying.
- The reduction of accumulated nutrients to expose seed banks.
- The maintenance of fire breaks.



The Commons' Maintenance Team clearing invasive trees from an area of Heather located alongside Green Ride.

With such a high level of intervention required to manage the Commons' heathland, over the past few years, the management of these areas has come to rely on the joint effort that is provided by the Commons' Maintenance Team and by the Commons' volunteer 'Scrub Bashers'. Under normal circumstances, the Commons' Scrub Bashers would visit the Commons' heathland on two Saturday or Sunday mornings each month. During these visits, this group of volunteers would be involved with the important task of cutting back invasive scrub around various parts of the heathland. Piling the cut scrub into neat piles, these pieces of wood would then either be chipped and removed from the heathland or used in the creation of dead hedging around various parts of the Commons.

Unfortunately, as a result of the restrictions that have been forced upon us all by COVID-19, from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021, there were only three of these volunteer sessions held on the Commons. This has not only been a shame for the Commons' volunteering programme but it has shown just how much the management of the Commons' heathland now relies on the ongoing support of our volunteers.



During December 2020, two volunteer sessions were held on heathland near Roehampton Ride. The cut wood was later used by the Commons' Maintenance Team to create a dead hedge along part of the Inner Windmill Road which would help to prevent further erosion occurring to a heavily used area of ground.

With the Commons' volunteer scrub bashers sadly unable to provide too much help over the past year, the majority of the Commons' heathland work during this time has therefore been carried out by the Commons' Maintenance Team. While the Maintenance Team were often fully committed to the completion of other important tasks, the necessary time was still found to carry out a number of activities around the Commons' heathland.

Over the past year, the most significant piece of work that has been carried out on the Commons' heathland has been the creation of two large scallops which have been located along the edge of two nearby areas of woodland. These areas are located close to the northern end of Ladies Mile and along a section of Somerset Ride. In both cases, trees along the edge of the woodland were coppiced to help improve the structural diversity of the area and to help improve the range of available habitats that can be found on site. As part of this work, on both sites, cut timber was also stacked within the nearby woodland to help provide further important habitat piles for wildlife.

At various other smaller sites around the Commons, the Maintenance Team also carried out further restoration work by cutting back encroaching scrub and larger trees that had become established in certain fragmented areas of Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*). The sites where this work was carried out included an area near to the junction of Green Ride and Inner Windmill Ride and an area near to the Gravelly Ride intersection. While all of these locations only contain a small amount of Heather, all of these sites still need to be protected if they are to survive into the future.



Woodland scallop created close to the northern section of Ladies Mile by the Commons' Maintenance Team during November 2020.

In addition to the various tree cutting operations that were carried out on the Commons' heathland during 2020, another important piece of heathland work that was undertaken by the Commons' Maintenance Team involved the cut and collection of vegetation on two areas of Wimbledon Common.

While it is generally accepted that heathland is usually comprised of a variety of plants such as Heather, Gorse and a mixture of different grasses, on various open areas of the Commons, *Molinia* (*Molinia caerulea*) in particular has become a dominant feature of the landscape. Native to Britain, other parts of Europe, West Asia and North Africa, *Molinia* is best known for growing on acid soils where it forms dense tussocks that can exclude many other plants from growing. This in turn results in a decrease in species richness around these particular areas. Able to increase its biomass far quicker than Heather, *Molinia*, therefore often outcompetes Heather for any available space.

The reasons for this may be speculative but one suggestion for the increasing dominance of *Molinia* over other vegetation types is that it thrives on the nutrient enrichment that effects heathland soils from the polluted atmosphere and particularly from the nitrogen that is washed from the air through rainfall. As we are very limited in what we can do to combat air pollution on the Commons, by cutting and removing the coverage of *Molinia* around certain heathland sites, it is anticipated that this will eventually reduce the vigour and dominance of this specific type of grass and allow other plants such as Heather to thrive.



The Commons' Maintenance Team involved with the cut and collection of Molinia near Windmill Ride during summer 2020

While there are no plans to re-introduce grazing cattle back on to the Commons at any time soon, an interesting article appeared in the Autumn 2020 edition of a magazine called Conservation Land Management. In this article, the author, Samantha McNeil, wrote a piece entitled “Using ponies to reduce Molinia dominance on Moorland”. Working in collaboration with the Dartmoor Pony Trust, researchers from the University of Plymouth investigated whether ponies could be used as an effective conservation method to reduce Molinia and encourage Heather regeneration. It was reported in the article that over the first three years of the study, the increase in grazing and trampling across the trial areas had resulted in the reduction of Molinia cover and Heather seedlings had been found in most areas of the transect. Although we do not currently have wandering herds of ponies on site, there are however horses and ponies using the Commons on a daily basis. If the owners of these ponies and horses are willing to help with our heathland restoration work, it may well be worth trialling at least a small area to see if improvements to the landscape could be made.

After the appalling year that all of us experienced during 2020, we can only hope that things will improve over the course of the next 12 months. This said, we still have a great deal planned in terms of our ongoing management of the Commons’ heathland. Without doubt, we hope that we’ll see the return of the Commons’ Scrub Bashers in the very near future as the benefits of having this particular volunteer group on the Commons are plain for all to see. We also plan to continue with the creation of additional woodland scallops along the edge of two areas of heathland, create small areas of bare ground around the site and stump grind a large number of the small tree stumps that have been left behind after scrub clearance has taken place.



The importance of small areas of bare ground on the heathland cannot be underestimated as they provide an important breeding and hunting habitat for a wide range of species.

Acid Grassland Management

Occurring on nutrient poor, free draining soils with a pH from 4 to 5.5, acid grassland is an important part of the mosaic of habitats that are found on heathlands. As one habitat can often blend into another, in some circumstances, heathland may even gradually be replaced by acid grassland as a result of factors such as nutrient enrichment, intense grazing or burning.

As with the Commons' heathland, the management of acid grassland also forms part of the Commons' CS agreement with Natural England. Supporting a wide range of species including invertebrates, reptiles, birds and flowering plants, this increasingly rare habitat is a UK Biodiversity Action Plan Habitat and as such it is a top priority for wildlife Conservation.

At the current time, there are three areas of acid grassland that are managed under the guidance of the Commons' CS agreement with Natural England. These areas include The Plain, the area of grassland which is located to the immediate south of Tibbet's Corner and a small area of grassland that is located close to the southern end of Center Path.



Contractors photographed carrying out part of the Commons' annual cut and collect work near Tibbet's Corner during August 2020.

Although the management of each of the Commons' three areas of acid grassland differs slightly from one site to another, the actual operational requirements for each area is fairly straightforward. Towards the end of each summer (August to September) a programme of cut and collect work is carried out by contractors where vegetation is cut, baled and removed from each site in order to maintain a low nutrient level across all three areas. This work is an essential part of maintaining a well balanced and diverse grassland. Without this operation being carried out, all three areas of acid grassland on the Commons would soon become coarse and rank where they would gradually lose both diversity and interest. With a continued absence of any form of suitable management, eventually these areas would revert first to scrub and then finally to woodland.



Contractors baling vegetation on The Plain during August 2020

There are however a few subtle differences involved with the management of the Commons' three acid grassland sites and these relate largely to the level of disturbance that is experienced by each area.

As the Commons are permanently open and unenclosed and therefore available for visitors to use 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year, a large part of managing each area of the Commons is to try and educate and encourage visitors to act responsibly while they are on site. In the case of the Commons three areas of acid grassland, the most significant level of management is carried out on The Plain as this site experiences the most sustained and heaviest levels of public use.

With a total area of 11.7 hectares, each year, between 1 March and 31 July, 9.7 hectares of The Plain are designated as a Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*) Protection Area where visitors to the Commons are asked to keep dogs on lead, keep to mown paths and to not fly kites near the restricted area. As part of this work, approximately 30 public notices are positioned around the perimeter of the Skylark Protection Area and during late spring or whenever the height of the ground flora allows, three paths are mown by the Commons' Maintenance Team across the area to allow visitors to use the site.



30 public notices are positioned around the edge of the Skylark Protection Area on the Plain from 1 March to 31 May.

During April and May 2019, seven visits were made to The Plain to monitor the level of disturbance that affected this area of the Commons during the spring period. As noted in the Annual Conservation Report for 2019/20, the majority of visitors that used this area of the Commons did so while accompanied by their dogs and sadly, most of the dogs were off lead and allowed to roam freely. Unfortunately, through the continued monitoring of The Plain during 2020, the situation was far worse than the previous year and as a result of the restrictions that were placed upon the public through COVID-19, sustained and heavy public use of this area persisted throughout the year. With the Commons playing such a vital role in helping to maintain the health and well-being of the surrounding population, policing The Plain was never going to be straightforward but where appropriate a sympathetic approach was always adopted when asking people to use this area correctly.

As reported by Senior Keeper Richard Thompson in the August 2020 edition of Common Ground:

“Throughout lockdown, the value of the Commons to the local and wider community has been immense, attracting many new visitors who had never used the site before. Unfortunately, this has presented us with new challenges. For a small number of visitors, the name Commons has been interpreted as meaning the Commons are places where they are able to do whatever they please. This has led to Keepers engaging with many new people who have no knowledge of the rules and regulations of the Commons. During the initial phase of lockdown, Keepers were involved with trying to implement the Government’s guidelines around social distancing, dogs on lead, exercising only once a day and not sitting on benches, just to name a few. All these factors meant that the Keepers were, at times, each engaging with over 100 people a day. This meant that it was impossible for us to record incidents in our normal way but I believe that it’s fair to say that we have never been busier.”

This said, despite the need to patrol a total area of 461 hectares, staff and especially Mounted Keepers continued to patrol The Plain and where required did their very best to encourage people to put their dogs on lead and picnic or fly kites elsewhere on the Commons.



Mounted Keepers on patrol

Additional Acid Grassland restoration work

In addition to the management of the three established areas of acid grassland that are included in the Commons' CS agreement with Natural England, during 2020, restoration work was also carried out by the Commons' Maintenance Team on three smaller areas of ground that we believe could be improved with some ongoing attention. With two areas located north of the A3 on Putney Heath and one area located near to the Southern Pound on Wimbledon Common, 2020 marked the third consecutive year of an annual programme of cut and collect work that should help to improve these sites for inclusion in any future management agreements with Natural England.

Having purchased a Rytech tractor mounted mower at the beginning of 2020, this additional piece of equipment has provided Commons' staff with the ability to tackle a number of small grassland and heathland sites which in all likelihood, would have otherwise continued to deteriorate through a general lack of suitable attention.

During 2021, it is anticipated that the ongoing programme of grassland restoration work will continue on the three sites that have previously been mentioned and, if time allows, further similar work will be carried out around other small grassland sites around the Commons.



Acid grassland restoration work being carried out by the Commons' Maintenance Team near Cross Road Cottage during August 2020.

Woodland Management

Covering an area of 291 hectares, woodland is the largest habitat type across the whole area of Wimbledon and Putney Commons. As described in the Commons' 2016 NVC survey, the Commons' woodland is largely categorised as oak-bracken-bramble woodland-typical community (*W10, Quercus robur-pteridium aquilinum-Rus fruticosae*) and at present all of the woodland found within the Wimbledon Common SSSI is classified as *unfavourable-recovering*.

Unfavourable recovering - Often known simply as 'recovering', SSSI units are not yet fully conserved but all the necessary management measures are in place. Provided that the recovery work is sustained, the SSSI will reach favourable condition in time.

To help manage the woodland on Wimbledon and Putney Commons, all work is carried out under the guidance of a five-year Countryside Stewardship agreement (2018 to 2022) that has been agreed by the Forestry Commission, Natural England and the Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators.

Lasting for a period of five years, the FC's, CS agreement involves the following objectives:

- To create a more varied range of tree age to ensure good succession
- To maintain and enhance Hazel coppice
- To reduce the dominance of Holly in the understorey
- To increase open areas within woodland
- To remove invasive non-native species
- To retain non-intervention areas
- To improve wetland areas and ponds
- To encourage a wider range of native species
- To maintain an appropriate and effective health and safety regime
- To maintain and improve amenity
- To obtain grants where available to further objectives.
- To continue to encourage the use of the Commons for recreational and educational purposes.

From 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021, the woodland management work that has been carried out on the Commons has fallen into the following categories:

- The provision of public information
- Ride management
- Open space management
- Planting
- Selective felling/thinning
- Creation of deadwood habitats
- Tree safety
- Management of invasive species



Ride management work being carried out between Scio Pond and the 'Frying Pan' on Putney Heath.

Public Information:

The importance of ensuring that visitors to the Commons are kept informed about the work that is being carried out on site forms a significant and ongoing part of our work on the Commons. From regular visitors to the Commons to all of the many new visitors who may be largely unaware of what is involved in managing the site, accurate and up to date information is vital.

With the encouragement of the UK government, the planting of new trees around many areas of the country has become a popular way to try and help fight climate change. For this reason, the sight of existing trees being cut down can often be an emotive issue. Understandably, for some people, the more trees that are left on site the better and apart from planting even more trees on the Commons, perhaps the next best thing could be to simply do nothing and allow nature to take its own course. While there would certainly be some merit in following this particular belief, there would also be very little chance of achieving what we and the Forestry Commission believe to be the most beneficial course of action for the overall improvement of the Commons' woodland.

As pointed out by D. Blakesly and P. Buckley (2010) in their publication entitled 'Managing Woodland for Wildlife', there are some drawbacks to consider by managing a woodland through a general policy of non-intervention. If left unmanaged, woodlands will pass through a very long dark phase, where the canopy closes and light typically falls to a level of approximately 1-5% of those areas that are more open. During this time, many sun loving species such as butterflies and many invertebrates will disappear unless they are able to find other areas of the woodland that have become more open.

Although certain areas of woodland are left untouched on the Commons, our woodland management plan aims to create more areas of light in the woodland and for this to happen, intervention is required. It should however be noted, that apart from Holly, wherever tree thinning has taken place, the vast majority of trees that have been selected are in fact non-native and often invasive species such as Turkey oak (*Quercus cerris*) and Sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus*). To help visitors to understand why certain work has been carried out, notices are displayed around the work site, updates are provided through newsletters, under normal circumstances, public walks are provided and emails are always answered within a very short period of time.

Ride Management:

One of the most significant areas of woodland management that was carried out on the Commons from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021 was the completion of work along two rides that are situated on Putney Heath. These rides are located near to 7 Post Pond and just north of Scio Pond.

Prior to any of the work being carried out, both areas of woodland were largely comprised of a dense cover of Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) which resulted in a very dark and even aged section of woodland. With the woodland edge providing the interface between the high forest and open ground, trees were thinned to approximately 10 metres away from the edges of the rides to allow increased levels of light to reach the ground which will be of great benefit to a wide range of sun loving plants and wildlife.

In time, the trees that were cut back will develop new shoots which will gradually help to create a more structured woodland that will include all of the key elements which include a ground layer, a field layer, a shrub layer and a canopy layer.

As with all woodland ride management, these areas will be actively managed to prevent Holly and other unwanted trees and plants from once again colonizing these areas. Towards the end of 2021, a number of smaller native tree species will also be planted along these areas which will help to maintain the diversity and quality of this habitat.



Before (above) and after...ride side thinning near 7 Post Pond

Open Space Management:

As with our management of the Commons' rides, creating and maintaining glades and other open spaces around various parts of the woodland is carried out to provide additional edge habitat within otherwise sheltered locations. The benefits of this work include opportunities to develop warm, sheltered micro-climates within the woodland, to develop feeding and habitat opportunities that are associated with low scrub and open ground and to provide a greater level of diversity around the site.

From 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021, the two areas on the Commons where open space management was carried out included the old Brickfield Cottage site which is located along Robin Hood Ride and Stag Bog which is located just below the Paradise Fairway on Wimbledon Common.



Open space management at the Brickfield Cottage Site was carried out by volunteers during December 2020.

While the management and restoration of the glades at both sites will be extremely valuable for the Commons' wildlife, perhaps the most interesting and potentially beneficial of the two pieces of work was carried out at Stag Bog.

Historically, there have been three bogs (or Valley Mires) located on Wimbledon Common. These are Farm Bog, Ravine Bog and Stag Bog. With reference to Stag Bog, in Wimbledon Common & Putney Heath, A Natural History (2000), Flag iris (*Iris pseudacorus*), Marsh pennywort (*Hydrocotyle vulgaris*), Purple moor grass (*Molinia caerulea*) and various rushes were recorded on site with only a small area of Bramble (*Rubus fruticosus*) and Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*) on show.

Unfortunately, since this time, Bramble and Bracken had become the dominant vegetation at Stag Bog and given the dense cover of this vegetation, it was very difficult to see whether the bog had managed to retain any dampness from the underground natural spring which is located in this area.

The first step of the open space management project at Stag Bog was carried out by the Commons' Maintenance Team during November 2020. This work involved the use of a tractor mounted mower around part of Stag Bog to reduce the coverage of Bramble and to allow the team to enter the area and carry out strimming work and the reduction of tree cover. Given the easily accessible location of Stag Bog, trampling across this area of the Commons has always been a problem and this particular aspect of the site was also mentioned in *Wimbledon Common & Putney Heath, A Natural History (2000)*. To try and reduce the impact of trampling across Stag Bog, a dense screen of vegetation which is largely comprised of Holly has been left standing and where gaps have appeared in the screen, these have been filled with pieces of cut timber. On the two other sides of the bog which are slightly more accessible, a thick dead hedge has been created on one side and a large and dense expanse of bramble can be found on the other.

To ensure that Stag Bog is kept as wet as possible, the drainage ditch which runs into the bog from the bottom of the valley below Paradise Fairway has been largely re-instated and a small number of pools have been created around the site. Interestingly, during the recent restoration work at Stag Bog, three dams that were built during the late 1990's were uncovered and all three are still in good condition and performing the task they were designed for. As noted in *Wimbledon Common & Putney Heath, A Natural History (2000)*, Stag Bog 'has undoubtedly been a better bog in the past' and while a full restoration of this site may be difficult, the creation of an area of wet woodland on the Commons will certainly be of benefit to the site as a whole.



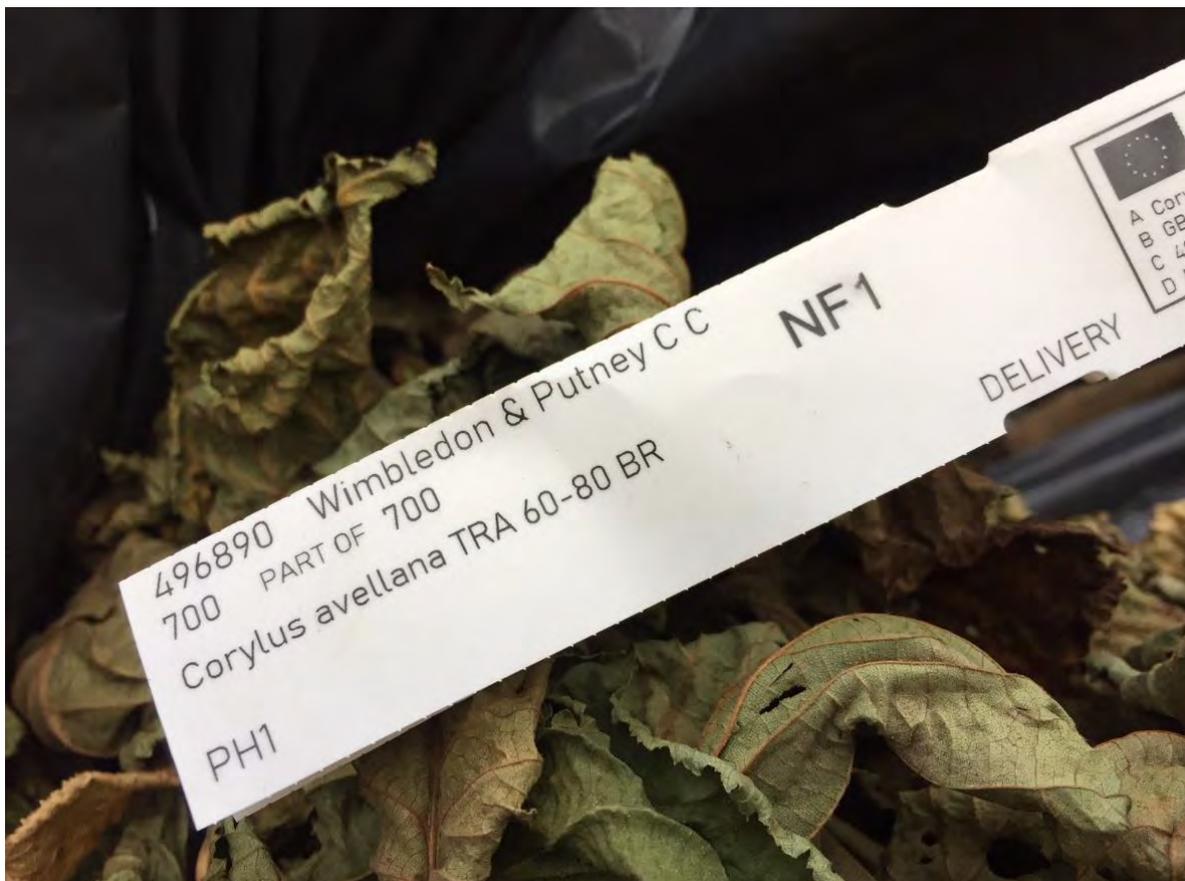
Stag Bog photographed in February 2021

Planting:

While much the current phase of our woodland management programme has inevitably involved the thinning of trees, another important part of our work during the past 12 months has been the planting of new trees that will help to improve the structure of the woodlands and form part of the next generation of trees on the Commons.

In descending order, the four main layers of a healthy woodland are known as the Tree (or canopy) layer, the shrub layer, the Field layer and the Ground layer. As much of the Commons' woodland emerged at roughly the same period of time, it is clear to see that in many areas of woodland, the various levels are either not present at all or they are in a very poor condition. To help improve this situation, during November 2020, 800 small trees or whips were planted around various areas of the Commons. 700 of these whips were Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) 50 were Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) and 50 were Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*).

Hazel is a small, native, deciduous tree which is moderately shade tolerant and is found in many areas of the Commons' woodland. All of the 700 Hazel whips were planted in woodland areas that are close to the Gravelly Rides and Warren Farm Ride and all planting was carried out to expand existing areas of Hazel coppice. At the current time, dense areas of Hazel on the Commons are being actively managed through periodic cutting and replanting.



Part of the Commons' tree delivery for 2020.



Bare root Hazel whips ready for planting near Upper Gravelly Ride

Blackthorn and Hawthorn – In total, 100 small Blackthorn and Hawthorn whips were planted in two locations on the Commons. These locations were at the northern end of the Curling Pond (close to the junction of the A3 and Roehampton Ride) and along the perimeter hedge of White Cottage which is located further south on Wimbledon Common. Both the Blackthorn and the Hawthorn are small native deciduous trees which provide food and cover for a wide range of invertebrates and birds. In the case of the whips that were planted near the Curling Pond, in time, these will hopefully provide a thick screen between the Commons and the nearby traffic on the A3.

Pond Management

At the current time, there are nine ponds located on the Commons. Having either been created by damming wet areas of the Commons or through the flooding of old gravel pits, each one of these ponds has a very specific set of management objectives that are required to ensure the ongoing protection of these special sites. Although daily patrols are made by the Commons' Mounted Keepers around each of the Commons' ponds, the main form of inspection around these areas is made via a designated quarterly visit that is carried out by the Commons' Conservation and Engagement Officer.

As a result of the huge increase in visitors to the Commons over the past 12 months, work around the Commons' ponds has been limited to carrying out routine tasks such as displaying appropriate signage and carrying out tasks that have been included as part of the Commons' various CS agreements. As part of the Commons CS agreement with the Forestry Commission, selective tree thinning work was carried out around the Curling Pond during February 2021.

Originally created as one of two purpose built areas for the sport of curling, the one remaining curling pond, which is located close to the junction of the A3 and Roehampton Lane, is the smallest of the Commons' ponds. Liable to dry out during the summer months, the Curling Pond is an incredibly good area to find Common newts (*Lissotriton vulgaris*) and when water levels allow, Common frogs (*Rana temporaria*) will also spawn in this pond. Over the years, the Curling pond had become increasingly shaded by tall and invasive Turkey oaks and therefore it was agreed that a programme of tree thinning around this pond would help to improve this particular area of Commons.

This work was carried out during February 2021 with the aim of increasing the amount of sunlight that can reach the pond, reducing the amount of leaf fall entering the pond and to also reduce the amount of water that is removed from the pond by the surrounding trees. With a significant reduction in the number of non-native and invasive Turkey oak on site, it is anticipated that a number of smaller tree species such as Mountain Ash (*Sorbus aucuparia*), Wild cherry (*Prunus avium*), Spindle (*Euonymus europaeus*) Hawthorn, Blackthorn and Hazel can be planted nearby to further increase the diversity of this area of the Commons.

As previously noted in this report, to help further improve this area, during November 2020, a mixture of Hawthorn and Blackthorn whips were planted along the edge of the woodland at the northern edge of the pond. This work was carried out to create a screen between the Commons and the lights and traffic of the nearby busy A3 which, in time will help to provide a more naturalised aspect to this area of the Commons.



The Curling Pond photographed prior to the completion of tree thinning work (above)



The Curling Pond photographed after the completion of thinning work at the end of February 2021

In addition to the felling work that was carried out at Curling pond, another two activities that have taken place on the the Commons' ponds have included the floating of two new nesting platforms on Queensmere during March 2021 which currently brings the total to three floating platforms on this pond and the positioning of two duck nesting tubes at Kingmsere.

At the time of writing this report (March 2021), a pair of Mute swans (*Cygnus olor*) were nesting on the largest of the three floating platforms on Queensmere and a female Mallard duck (*Anas platyrhynchos*) was in residence inside one of the duck tubes at Kingmsere.

With news that Mallard ducks are currently declining in numbers in the UK, the introduction of duck nesting tubes on the Commons is something of a new initiative for us but as they provide elevated protection for ducks flom flooding and predation, it certainly appeared to be a good idea to try them out.



WPCC members of staff positioning duck tubes close to the island on Kingmsere during March 2021. Photographed on the left is Bill Rowland and on the right of the photograph is Jim Hutchings, designer and builder of these particular duck tubes.

Disturbance on the Commons Ponds:

Between 1 April and 31 August, public notices asking visitors to keep dogs on lead and out of the water are positioned around six out of the Commons' nine ponds. While this policy has been in place for many years, the increase in visitor numbers to the Commons during 2020 confirmed that this is not a policy that can be easily monitored by Commons' staff.

Although there were occasions when the Rangers Office was informed of dogs being in the water and of dogs chasing wildfowl, given the extraordinarily busy circumstances that were faced by Commons' staff throughout 2020, we simply did not have the resources to attend every report that was made. In some circumstances, public notices were read and adhered to but there were just too many occasions when notices were either ignored or dogs were so far ahead of their owners that by the time the owners had reached the pond, the damage had already been done.



Unfortunately, during 2020, it became clear that signage alone would not be enough to protect the biodiversity of the Commons' ponds.

So, what can be done?

In 2017, an article appeared in the summer edition of Conservation Land Management magazine entitled, 'Dogs and Ponds: A case study from Heady Heath which covered the issues connected with public pressure and the effects of dogs

being allowed to use open water bodies on wildlife sites. As witnessed on the Commons, many of the effects of dogs bathing in open water bodies are obvious and include things such as the disturbance of waterfowl and amphibians and physical damage to submerged and emergent vegetation.

According to the article, there are however other less obvious effects of high numbers of dogs using ponds.

These have been cited as:

- Disturbance to the substrate leading to the deposition of sediment on submerged vegetation.
- The adverse effects of turbidity on the presence of dragonfly and damselfly larvae.
- The possible effects of dogs spreading fragments of invasive plants such as New Zealand pigmy (*Crassula helmsii*) from one pond to another.
- The possible negative effects on wildlife from commercial worming pills and tick treatments. As noted in the article, commercial tick treatments for dogs are accompanied by a warning that the active ingredients are toxic to aquatic life and that animals that have recently received treatment should be kept away from water for 48 hours.



In certain large and deep ponds on the Commons, floating platforms and purpose built islands are able to provide some protection for wildlife but in more shallow areas, temporary fencing may be the only way forward to protect these ponds.

Using the example of Headley Heath, the report noted that following a biological survey that was commissioned by the National Trust and carried out on six of the Heath's ponds, it became obvious that dogs were affecting the conditions of all of the ponds in the open areas of the Heath. Looking at areas where certain ponds had been partially fenced off using woven birch and willow brash and then secured in position by wooden stakes, it was reported that where dogs had been excluded, rapid plant growth soon appeared within the fenced off areas.

Although the Commons must remain permanently open and unclosed for public use, there is provision within the Wimbledon and Putney Commons 1871 Act for certain areas to be temporarily set aside or enclosed for the protection of vegetation or to plant trees and shrubs for the purpose of shelter or ornament. Where vegetation on the Commons requires protection, it therefore appears to be fairly clear that we are able to achieve this through some form of temporary fencing.

From the experience gained during 2020 in particular, it is clear that while they may be observed by some people, clear signage alone is not capable of protecting the Commons' ponds from the threat of ongoing damage. It is therefore suggested that in order to protect these areas into the future, we should think about trialling a programme of installing temporary fencing around certain sections of the most vulnerable ponds on the Commons. Judging by the evidence gathered from the study at Headley Heath, it appears that the results would be clear to see and well worth the effort.



Despite the presence of clear signage during 2020 that informed visitors that breeding waterfowl were using Rushmere (photographed above) during the important bird nesting season, the only thing that truly kept dogs out of the water were the public notices that informed visitors about the presence of blue-green algae.

The Beverley Brook (Wimbledon Common)

The Beverley Brook is the only riverine habitat on the Commons with sections of it running through both Wimbledon Common and Putney Lower Common. While Putney Lower Common only contains a few hundred metres of the Beverley Brook, on Wimbledon Common there is approximately 2km of the brook that enters the Common at Mill Corner and flows in a northerly direction until it leaves the Common beneath the Beverley Bridge on the A3 Kingston By-pass.

Over the past few years, a great deal of work has been carried out along the Beverley Brook on Wimbledon Common. This work has included a major restoration project carried out in partnership with the South East Rivers Trust (SERT), Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators and Merton Council. The project was funded by the Environment Agency, and Viridor Credits (landfill tax) and carried out during the end of 2018 and the beginning of 2019.



Restoration work being carried out along the Beverley Brook during the beginning of 2019

Over the past 12 months, work has continued along the Wimbledon Common section of the Beverley Brook with tasks including litter picking, Himalayan balsam (*Impatiens glandulifera*) pulling, the planting of wetland plants and path restoration work.

Beverley Brook Litter Picking:

Located downstream from a very busy catchment area, the more naturalised setting of the Beverley Brook on Wimbledon Common provides the ideal environment to collect a huge amount of litter that is washed along this watercourse. Like a round of the once popular television show, The Generation Game, the variety of litter that is removed from the brook is wide and varied and over the years has included road cones, mattresses, golf bags, wooden pallets, balls of many shapes and sizes and even the occasional extremely waterlogged 'cuddly' toy.

Over the course of the past year, there have been monthly litter picks carried out by the Commons' team but given the ongoing and gargantuan task of keeping this area of the Commons clear of rubbish we will be initiating a volunteer group that will help us with this work. With a waiting list of just over 30 volunteers and all of the necessary equipment ready for use, this volunteer group will begin volunteering along the Beverley Brook as soon as government restrictions allow. Although a full risk assessment has been written for volunteering along the Beverley Brook, there are sections along the brook that are very deep and silty making volunteering quite treacherous in certain areas. For this reason, the new Beverley Brook volunteer group will initially be supervised by a member of the Commons full time staff and in time, it is anticipated that a suitable volunteer will be able to lead the group during any regular sessions.



Litter picking being carried out by a member of the Commons team during February 2021

Himalayan Balsam removal:

Following a routine visit to the Wimbledon Common section of the Beverley Brook in June 2020, it became immediately clear that the coverage of Himalayan balsam along the edge of the river had significantly increased from the previous year. Himalayan balsam is a non-native invasive plant species which is listed on Schedule 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and therefore it is an offence to plant or allow this species to grow in the wild. Growing rapidly, Himalayan balsam can grow to a height of between two and three metres in one season, spreading quickly and smothering other vegetation beneath it. Affecting wetland areas such as river banks, each plant can produce up to 800 seeds which are dropped or fired into the watercourse resulting in the contamination of land downstream. As a result, towards the end of June 2020, all Himalayan balsam was manually removed from the edge of the brook and moved away from the watercourse where it will naturally decompose. Satisfied that every visible piece of Himalayan balsam had been removed it was slightly frustrating to discover that by the middle of the following month large clumps of this plant had once again appeared but along different sections of the brook. As a result, these additional plants were also removed but it is anticipated that the control of Himalayan balsam will be an ongoing part of the management of the Beverley Brook on the Commons



Himalayan Balsam pulling along the Beverley Brook during June 2020

Planting along the Bevelrey Brook.

Following on from the completion of the initial phase of the Beverley Brook restoration project during the beginning of 2019, in August 2020, staff and volunteers from SERT carried out two days planting where 5,000 small plants were planted on a large number of the berms that are located along the Wimbledon Common section of the brook.



Yellow flag iris	1250
Branched bur-reed	1250
Brooklime	350
Greater pond sedge	500
Lesser pond sedge	500
Marsh Marigold	350
Common water-plantain	300
Water mint	500
	5000

Path restoration along the Beverley Brook:

To help improve access around the Commons, during August 2020, resurfacing of the area of path which is located alongside the Beverley Brook between the REMPFF Pavilion and the bridge leading onto the Merton Extension Fields was carried out. This work was funded via a grant that was provided by Southern Western Railway's Customer and Communities Improvement Fund and through donations that had been made to the Friends of Wimbledon and Putney Commons.

While the creation of well surfaced paths may not initially appear to be related to the conservation of the Commons, the events of 2020 proved just how much damage can result to the wider landscape when well-maintained paths are not available.

In the case of the areas which adjoin the new path along the Beverley Brook, some temporary fencing and dead hedging will be required to allow the regeneration of bankside vegetation but on the whole, the new path is being well used by visitors.



The newly restored Beverley Brook path on Wimbledon Common: photographed during August 2020

Management of non-native invasive species

In general, the management of non-native invasive species on the Commons involves the active control of Oak Processionary Moth (*Thaumetopoea processionea*), Japanese knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*), Himalayan Balsam (*Impatiens glandulifera*) and New Zealand Pigmyweed (*Crassula helmsii*). Records are kept for the management of all of these non-native invasive species and with the exception of the chemical spraying of Oak Processionary Moth (OPM), all management work is carried out by full-time members of the Commons' team.



While no active management was carried out to remove invasive non-native vegetation from any of the Commons' ponds during 2020, regular vigilance is kept on all of the nine' ponds and action is taken wherever required. The photograph above shows 7 Post Pond prior to the removal of New Zealand Pigmyweed in 2018.

Oak Processionary Moth (OPM)

OPM is a non-native species of moth that was first introduced to the UK (Kew, West London) in 2006. Despite the active management of this pest by the Forestry Commission and various landowners, at the current time OPM is established in most of Greater London and in some surrounding counties.

The caterpillars of OPM are pests of Oak trees and present a hazard to human and animal health. Developing tiny hairs which contain an irritating protein called thaumetopoein, contact with the hairs can cause itching skin rashes, eye irritations and in some cases, can result in sore throats and breathing difficulties.

Having been involved with the management of OPM on Wimbledon and Putney Commons since 2011, our annual approach to dealing with this problem focuses on the two key aspects of communications and risk management. In effect, this involves specialist contractors applying a recognised biological control agent (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) to Oak trees in a small number of high footfall areas during May, the positioning of public notices around strategic points on the Commons, informing local organisations and schools about OPM on the Commons and the survey and removal of all OPM nests found under a height of two metres from the ground.

OPM life Cycle: (Information sourced from the Forestry Commission)

Egg Stage – Eggs are laid from July to early September where each female deposits between 100 and 200 eggs on twigs and small branches in the canopy. The first larvae hatch from the eggs in April.

Larval stage – OPM larvae can be found from April to June. There are six stages during the caterpillar feeding cycle with caterpillars getting progressively bigger during each stage. As they mature, thousands of short hairs cover the larvae and it is these short hairs that contain the irritant toxin.

Stages 1-3: Caterpillars are very small when they hatch, around 2mm long, and are still less than 1cm by the time they reach the third stage.

Stages 4-6 – Caterpillars spin silken nests and the larvae eventually moult to the pupal stage within those nests. During this phase, larvae may also be seen massing on the trunks and branches of trees and moving in the characteristic processions that give the moth its Common name.

Adult moths – Adult moths fly at night from July until early September and they have a wingspan of around 30-32mm.

As a result of a long period of dry weather and the high number of visitors that used the Commons throughout much of the year, the 2020 summer period proved to be a very busy time for managing OPM on the Commons. Unfortunately, with many new visitors to the Commons, the incidents of children coming into contact with OPM caterpillars and hairs while climbing trees increased from previous years. Unfortunately, we received one report of a child having to visit a hospital as a skin rash that had been caused by contact with OPM hairs had become infected.

As with every year since 2011, June and July are the busiest times of year for the management of OPM on the Commons. During this period, surveys are made of all oak trees in easily accessible areas on the Commons and in total 300 low nests were removed and disposed of by the Commons team.



OPM caterpillars photographed on the underside of an oak branch during 2020.

Japanese knotweed

Japanese knotweed is a fast-growing non-native perennial which produces bamboo like stems up to a height of 2 metres (approximately 7ft). Under the provisions made within Schedule 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, it is an offence to allow Japanese knotweed to grow in the wild and therefore, whenever this plant is identified on the Commons, its location is entered into a specific data base and herbicide treatment is carried out as soon as possible.

The most effective method of controlling Japanese knotweed is through the use of glyphosate which is a herbicide that is able to travel through the plant and kill the extensive system of rhizomes. This work is generally carried out by the Commons' Maintenance Team during late summer.

During 2020, there were 18 Japanese knotweed sites located on the Commons, all of which were treated with herbicide. This was 3 fewer sites that were dealt with during the previous year and 8 fewer sites than were treated during 2018.



Japanese knotweed site located along the edge of the Splash Fields at the REMPF. The Japanese knotweed can be seen in flower just below the metal railing at the bottom of the photograph.

Putney Lower Common

Separated by the main body of the Commons by a distance of approximately one mile, protecting the wildlife and natural aspect of Putney Lower Common remains a high priority in the overall management of the Commons. With a comparatively small area of approximately 20 hectares, the management of Putney Lower Common is largely involved with a series of important albeit routine tasks. These tasks involve a great deal of litter picking, grass cutting, upholding the Commons Bye-laws and maintaining good public relations with the various groups and individuals who regularly use the Common.



As part of the regular management of Putney Lower Common, staff are often required to liaise with local residents to ensure that rubbish and building materials are moved as quickly as possible off the Common.

In addition to these tasks, over the past 12 months, other work that has been carried out on the Common has included the control of non-native invasive species, the installation of two new Tawny owl (*Strix aluco*) nesting boxes, the positioning of two new Hedgehog nesting boxes, tree safety work and two Hedgehog (*Erinaceus europaeus*) surveys.

As part of the Zoological Society London (ZSL) third year of surveying for Hedgehogs around the Barnes area, during August 2020, 11 camera traps were positioned for a period of two weeks at various points around Putney Lower Common.

During 2019, the ZSL camera trap survey included Putney Lower Common, Barnes Common, Palewell Common, the Bank of England Sports Club, Roehampton Golf Club and the London Wetland Centre. As a result of the survey, it was discovered that out of these six areas, the presence of Hedgehogs was only recorded on three of the sites. These areas included Putney Lower Common, Barnes Common and the London Wetland Centre.

It was also suggested by ZSL that while the presence of Hedgehogs on these London sites was certainly cause for celebration, they were nonetheless still extremely vulnerable as a viable population.



Browning Strike Force Pro camera traps used in the surveys. Cameras were enclosed in a metal box and locked to a tree to protect against theft.

Unfortunately, as a result of the disruptions that have been caused through COVID-19, the results of the 2020 ZSL survey are not yet available but we hope that once again, Hedgehogs were captured on camera and found to be doing well on the Common. Apart from the ZSL project, there was however some very good news produced by the local SW15 Hedgehog Group who were responsible for carrying out two night-time surveys on Putney Lower Common during September 2020.

Over the course of the two-night time surveys, four healthy Hedgehogs were found on Putney Lower Common.

In addition to these two surveys, another exciting piece of news is that Wandsworth Borough Council have agreed to cut a series of small holes through the wall that surrounds Putney Lower Common Cemetery. While Hedgehogs may have used the cemetery in the past, this additional linking up of Putney Lower Common and Barnes Common should help to stop Hedgehogs from crossing the busy Lower Richmond Road where they have been found in the past as fatalities of road collisions.



Putney Lower Common cemetery wall

Volunteering on the Commons.

Unfortunately, volunteering activities on the Commons have been largely dictated by the restrictions that have accompanied COVID-19. In between lockdowns, we have managed to organize a small number of events with the Commons' weekend Scrub Bashers and the Commons' mid-week Volunteer Estate Team but these have been few and far between.

This said, we have been extremely fortunate to have had the ongoing assistance of approximately 30 volunteer litter pickers and an ongoing stream of Duke of Edinburgh students who have continued to help with litter picking over the past year. Interestingly, nearly every volunteer enquiry that reached the Rangers Office during 2020 related to a request to help litter pick and whenever requested, a litter stick and bags have been provided to every new volunteer, many of whom, have continued to help on the Commons into 2021.



Photograph provided by a Duke of Edinburgh student during 2021

Another group of volunteers that have continued to provide help to the Commons throughout the pandemic have been those people who have been involved with wildlife recording. Whether it's been through the ongoing participation with the Commons' Wildlife and Conservation Forum or simply through providing us with various sightings they have been made while out and about on the Commons, every piece of information has been of use to the ongoing management of the site.

As for the future, we can only hope that 2021 will be a much better year for everyone and for the Commons. When restrictions are once again lifted, our programme of volunteering on the Commons will continue and along with the well-established volunteer groups that have been helping on the Commons for some time, during 2021, we intend to initiate some new volunteering opportunities for people to become involved with.

The first new volunteering opportunity will undoubtedly be the Beverley Brook volunteer litter picking group, followed by other much smaller groups which we hope will, in time, be able to take care of specific sites around the Commons such as ponds and bogs.



Volunteers scrub bashing on Putney Heath during December 2020.

Public Engagement on the Commons

Similar to the Commons' organized volunteering activities, public engagement events on the Commons have also suffered over the past twelve months as a result of COVID-19.

Whereas under normal circumstances, the Commons would have hosted a variety of events including the annual BioBlitz, the Commons' Open Day, our programme of fortnightly walking for health events and other management and volunteer led walks, during 2020 and the beginning of 2021, these were either cancelled or delivered via zoom.

While many of these events such as the Commons' Annual Winter Talk that took place via zoom at the beginning of February 2021 were very well attended, we can all but hope that good old- fashioned face to face meetings will once again be permitted and things can once again return back to how they used to be.



Hopefully, we'll be able to host walks like this again on the Commons during 2021.

London In Bloom

Despite all of the uncertainties that have shaped our lives over the past year, one event that remained in the Commons' diary was our annual entry into the London In Bloom awards.

Focusing on the key issues of horticultural achievement, environmental responsibility and community participation, the London in Bloom campaign is something where communities, residents, businesses, private land owners and London Borough Councils can work together with the aim of improving the environment and making London a greener and more attractive place to live and work.

Unfortunately, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, during 2020, London in Bloom was unable to provide judging visits as would usually be the case and therefore each entry was accompanied by a desk top report that had been prepared by the sites involved and marked by the same judge who had visited each site during the previous year.

Having been involved with the London In Bloom campaign since 2013, Wimbledon Common and Putney Lower Common are now well known and proud supporters of this very special London campaign.

In spite of all of the pressures that both of these areas have recently faced, both Wimbledon Common and Putney Common were presented with the Gold Award for all of the ongoing work and dedication that is clearly invested by so many on these sites.

Gold Award

An exceptionally high standard demonstrated throughout. A consistent approach, which demonstrates both best practice and sustainable effort. Meets all of the judging criteria and objectives of London In Bloom and scores very highly in each section of the judge's criteria. Outstanding – 170-200 points (85% - 100%)

References:

Blakesly. D and Buckley. P (2010) Managing Your Woodland for Wildlife, Commissioned by woodlands.co.uk

Denton. J and Groome. G (2017) Dogs and ponds: A case study from Headley Heath. Complete Land Management magazine, Volume 5, Number 2.

Drakeford. T and Sutcliffe. U (2020) Wimbledon Common and Putney Heath, A Natural History. Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators.

McNeil. S (2020) Using ponies to reduce Molinia dominance on moorland. Complete Land Management magazine, Volume 18, Number 3.

Haldane. P (2020) Common Ground 17, Staff and Volunteer Newsletter, Available from the Rangers Office.

Natural England (2002) Lowland heathland, a cultural and endangered landscape. Publications, naturalengland.org.uk/publications/81012

Penny Anderson Associates Ltd, Wimbledon and Putney Commons National Vegetation Classification and Habitat Assessment. Available from WPCC Rangers Office.