

BUSH WALK WOODS COMMUNITY BIODIVERSITY PROJECT
KETTERING, NORTHAMPTONSHIRE
AREA 7 EMAD, KIER HIGHWAYS

BIG Biodiversity Challenge Award Category: Community Engagement

Project overview

Working proactively with the woodland owners, the Ginpat Charitable Trust (GCT), & as part of their 'Corporate Social Responsibility' agenda, the Environment Team of Area 7 Kier Highways are assisting with management of a precious, protected ancient woodland & proactively engaging with the local community in the heart of rural Northamptonshire.

What were the biodiversity conditions on site, prior to the enhancement?

Bush Walk and Withmale Park Woods is a 26 acre shady, non-intervention 'coppice with standards' ancient woodland afforded protected status as a SSSI. Rich in ancient woodland indicator species (*Plate 1*) including herb paris, wild garlic and four species of orchid including greater butterfly orchid but over-run with deer, key management recommendations to maintain the SSSI in favourable condition are ongoing and include coppicing, ride (or forest track) management and halo-thinning around the majestic oaks.

What were the reasons behind this project ?

The Ginpat Charitable Trust strive to promote protection of the natural environment for public benefits, a value shared by Kier Senior Ecologist Dr James Littlemore who personally volunteered to proffer specialist advice on how to manage their unique asset. Kier's input has been twofold: (1). to enhance the nature conservation and biodiversity value of the wood through synthesis of a woodland management plan to maintain the favourable SSSI status (*Plate 2*), and (2). to increase awareness of its special character by co-ordinating engagement to broaden public awareness of biodiversity and woodland resilience issues and drive Natural Capital initiatives through hosting local wildlife awareness walks, conservation activities and working with local stakeholder groups.



Plate 1: Striking drifts of vernal woodland flowers including bugle greet visitors to Bush Walk Wood.

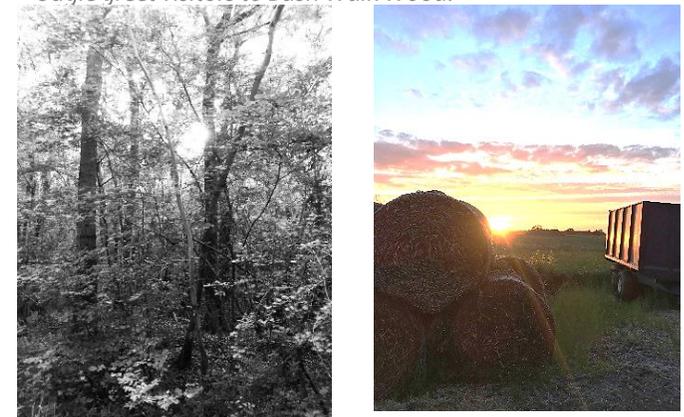


Plate 2: The special qualities and character of Bush Walk Wood and surrounding countryside, Northants.

What were the biodiversity measures taken?

The Kier approach has been one of fostering true collaboration amongst multiple stakeholders to ensure envisaged biodiversity targets are achieved. The previous 5-year woodland management plan has been revised by involving and mentoring University of Northampton undergraduate students and liaising with Natural England. Revised long-term aims will maintain a site of low intervention, but locally create a more diverse woodland structure and promote tenure of woodland grant aid to assist in future tree thinning operations as well as encouraging natural regeneration by coppicing. Work so far has implemented 'Action A' in managing lowland mixed deciduous woodland under the Northamptonshire BAP (2015), as well as targeting the conservation of flagship species including protected noctule bats (Plate 3).

Community awareness activities and projects have proven key, including in particular a well attended 'Walk on the Wildside' event led by Kier Ecologists and held in June 2018 (Plates 4 & 5). Members of the public were invited to the private wood to participate in a bat walk (bat capes were optional!), learn about bushcraft and handle some of the resident wildlife species including secretive small mammals. Key to the success of this event was liaison and attendance at meetings with others including Orlingbury Parish Council and with all Trustees of the GCT. Additional organised conservation work parties are planned as a consequence for the winter months, which will help to implement and measure the actions identified in the revised management plan. Kier staff have even overseen the use of materials liberated from the wood by green woodworkers. All of this hard work has been accomplished by Kier ecologists who have volunteered their own time, clearly demonstrating their enthusiastic commitment to the biodiversity cause and going beyond normal business practice.



Plate 3: Community outreach has helped to increase the public awareness of protected species, including resident noctule bats.



Plate 4: Learning about woodland ecology by an open fire on the 'Walk on the Wildside' event – a great way to spend an evening! The event attracted over 30 people.

Further information

The case-study of Bush Walk Woods SSSI provides an ongoing and legacy building opportunity for Kier Highways staff to work with multiple stakeholders on common goals of sustainable woodland management, biodiversity gain and community awareness. Survey work carried out with local students suggests that the ecological condition of the wood has improved. The project team have been able to share expertise and train each other and others across disciplines and are looking forward to steering the next chapter in tandem with the GCT. In terms of mechanisms for community outreach a useful tip to pass on is that using social media to advertise public events will only go so far – to be fully inclusive, Kier staff here went the extra yard to attend extensive community meetings and engage with the local population in more old fashioned ways! Fitting perhaps, given the ancient legacy of the site and our future plans (including the setting up of a ‘Friends of...’ group) steered by enthusiastic individuals with measurable practical outcomes to ensure Bush Walk Wood remains in favourable condition for future generations to enjoy (Plate 6).

What was the motivation for carrying out the enhancement?

After the ‘Walk on the Wildside’ event, one participant stated ‘I’ve driven past this wood for years and didn’t even realise all this was here. I’ve come along tonight and really enjoyed learning about the wildlife, tried some wild foragers tea and even made some new friends! I’m all signed up to the next practical conservation event too!’.

This statement perhaps neatly encapsulates the social ethos driving this community project initiative and demonstrates the importance of engaging with, and understanding synergies between, people and biodiversity.

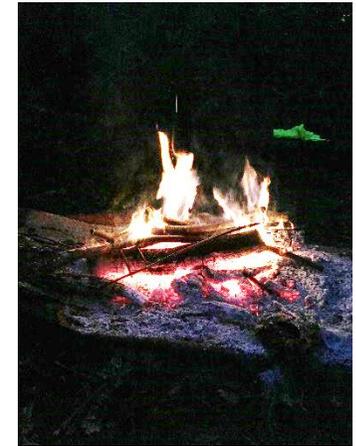


Plate 5: Time for toasting marshmallows by the open fire and making new friends at a Bush Walk Woods community event – a true ‘green prescription’ to combat nature deficit disorder.



Plate 6: Innovative community engagement at Bush Walk Woods has resulted life-long learning with a positive ‘thumbs up’ from one young attendee!