

## **SOMERSET WOOD PASTURE, PARKLAND & VETERAN TREES HABITAT ACTION PLAN**



### **Action plan name**

Somerset Wood Pasture, Parkland and Veteran Trees

### **Background and vision**

A combination of two UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) Priority Habitats, Wood Pasture, Parkland & Veteran Trees (WPP&VT) can be considered as woodland in terms of Landscape-scale Rebuilding Biodiversity/Nature Map targets. This habitat can contribute to woodland and other semi-natural habitat targets in the landscape scale project 'Rebuilding Biodiversity'. It is important to remember that these areas have cultural, historical and landscape value as well as biodiversity value. This means that there are other interests that are keen to manage and maintain them in a sustainable condition for the future, and who might prove useful allies in that respect.

Alongside younger trees, the original 'wildwood' cover of Britain contained a profusion of veteran trees and dead, decaying wood. Wood Pasture, Parkland & Veteran Trees retain a link with this ancient 'wildwood' and these

landscape features of antiquity support a range of species within the only habitat that can sustain them. As trees become old, they develop features such as hollows, splits, deadwood and fungi that can be home to a wide range of other often scarce wildlife. Bats may roost in holes and splits, deadwood can support a range of rare invertebrates, particularly beetles and fungi that that can themselves support other invertebrates such as a variety of fungus-eating species of gnats, many of which are restricted to their own particular type of fungus.

The UK is uniquely important in Europe for its large population of veteran trees, generally defined as having a circumference of trunk greater than 1.7m at 1.3m above ground level. Many veteran trees are found in WPP&VT. It is estimated that some 1,300 hectare of Wood Pasture, Parkland & Veteran Trees occur in Somerset, making this UK Priority Habitat extremely important in both regional and national contexts. A WPP&VT habitat consists of a matrix of large, old trees, sometimes mixed with younger trees of various ages, interspersed amongst an open habitat that was traditionally managed as pasture.

Traditional (broadleave) tree management within WPP&VT usually consists of pollarding, which is achieved by removing the top of the trunk at a height clear of stock browsing at an early age, and then harvesting the subsequent multiple leading shoots on a regular basis. This has the effect of rejuvenating trees right through into very old age, although older trees must be assessed carefully before being re-pollarded, as they may not respond, particularly if they have not been pollarded for a long time.

Much is already known about the distribution of veteran trees in Somerset. However, this knowledge would benefit greatly by being enhanced; both where historic parklands may not have been fully surveyed and where there could be existing but unrecorded parkland and WPP&VT remnants, particularly within Rebuilding Biodiversity Strategic Nature Areas.

This HAP aims to work with volunteers, for example through the Woodland Trust's Ancient Tree Hunt with targeted professional survey to augment existing knowledge of the extent and condition of this habitat.

Wood Pasture, Parkland & Veteran Trees in Somerset is under medium-level threat, and much is not in a sustainable management that supports its special biodiversity. This HAP will seek to revisit Wood Pasture, Parkland & Veteran Trees Local Wildlife Sites where previous advisory visits were made to help ensure that they are in favourable management and will also target any new areas of Wood Pasture, Parkland & Veteran Trees identified particularly in Strategic Nature Areas (SNAs). Buffering and linking of the habitat by woodland and other semi-natural habitat is also an aim of this Habitat Action Plan.

Parklands have a similar structure to Traditional Orchards, which are also a dominant feature of the Somerset countryside. Both retain a grazed grassland habitat, often of permanent pasture, within which old trees and their features of hollows, lichens, mosses, scarce invertebrates, fungi and associated species abound. Traditional Orchard 'Veteran Trees' with such characteristics may only be 60-100 years of age, compared to Veteran Trees of native species normally being in excess of 150 years old.

### **Plan species and habitats**

#### **Habitats**

Traditional Orchards, itself a UK BAP Priority Habitat, as described above have structural similarities to Parklands, albeit normally with a greater density of trees per unit area.

Wood Pasture Priority Habitat has often evolved from Semi-Natural Ancient Woodland, itself a UK BAP Priority Habitat, for example as a result of extensive timber extraction from mature woodland in the early 1900s. Subsequent livestock grazing enabled grassland to develop in the most open areas, whilst denser areas of younger trees too small for the original timber harvest, remain as discrete 'patches' usually with an under storey shrub layer.

All these UK BAP Priority Habitats are targets within the re-building process for their maintenance, enhancement and linking, so as to provide corridors for species population interchanges.

#### **Species**

WPP&VT Priority Habitat comprises a wide range of tree species, of which perhaps Common Oak predominates, but followed by Ash and, in formal Parklands, more exotic species such as Sweet and Horse Chestnut. With trees and shrubs being in small parcels, inevitably Wood Pasture has often been 'invaded' by Sycamore and Bramble.

WPP&VT Priority Habitat is often recognised as a major roosting and nesting location for a range of bird species, including both Barn and Tawny Owls, particularly where hollows occur and deadwood is retained. In addition, birds such as Nuthatch, Tree Creeper, and the range of Woodpeckers that rely upon small invertebrate food sources living in or under deadwood, lichens and fungi, both feed and nest within Veteran Trees and the clumps of trees within Wood Pasture.

Veteran Trees and particularly their hollows in are widely recognized as important day/night or maternity roosting sites, for the whole range of UK Bat species. Veteran Trees are also important for a range of rare and scarce lichen species.

## **Habitat status**

WPP&VT is a UK BAP Priority Habitat that occurs widely throughout Somerset and is particularly associated with old country houses and land contiguous with Semi-Natural Ancient Woodland, itself a UK BAP Priority Habitat.

Parkland trees contribute to Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) status at several locations including Nettlecombe Court and Dunster Castle. Several SSSI woodlands contain Wood Pasture, most particularly within Exmoor National Park.

In the mid-1990s, SERC surveyed Veteran Trees within Somerset, based largely upon Parkland Habitats and identified some trees of veteran status within the county. Locations with 20 or more Veteran Trees were subsequently recognised as Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) of which all were visited to advise on maintenance and enhancement.

As described above, Wood Pasture, Veteran Trees and Parklands are the habitat of numerous UK BAP Priority Species and associated with other UK BAP Priority Habitats such as Neutral, Acid and Calcareous Grassland, Rush Pasture and Ancient Semi-Natural Woodland.

Veteran trees including those in Woodpasture and Parkland are important for a range of rare invertebrate and support rare lichens and fungi, including a number of UK BAP priority species.

## **Specific impacts/threats**

Advisory visits in the late 1990s to Local Wildlife Sites of Parklands with Veteran Trees, confirmed that this habitat was much appreciated by its managers and owners. Because so many of these Veteran Trees are within Parklands that have been within the same ownership for many generations, this appreciation of the habitat was deemed largely because of childhood memories and ancestral history. Nevertheless the increasingly frequent change of ownership of estates and large country dwellings with surrounding land, such Parklands become at risk of mismanagement and development, including:

**Inappropriate arboricultural or habitat management practices** for example:

- neglect of traditional management to prolong the life span of Veteran Trees, such as pollarding;
- the removal of dead wood (tidying up) and the felling and removal of standing dead and dying trees;
- a lack of regeneration and/or planting of new generations of trees;
- insufficient care being taken to maintain nectar sources such as hawthorn within range of the maturation flights of deadwood beetles;

- a lack of livestock grazing leading to development of secondary woodland which can shade out epiphytes and present unfavourable conditions for many invertebrates;
- for Parkland Priority Habitat within arable land-use, ploughing and land cultivation under the crown of Trees can substantially damage root systems leading to stress;
- over-enthusiastic tree surgery by both amateurs and professionals can severely inhibit the response of older pollards.

**Death of trees through water stress** - as a resulting of changes to the water table through abstraction, neighbouring development, roads, prolonged drought, damage to tree roots from ploughing, as well as climate change.

**Soil compaction, pollution and root damage letting in disease** - around old trees through trampling by livestock, vehicles or people or through developments, tipping or storage of materials, eg manure

**Loss of trees through disease** - for example Dutch Elm Disease

**Vandalism** - is a concern in public parks, particularly with younger replacement trees.

**Felling or tree surgery for Health and Safety concerns** - particularly where building development has taken place inappropriately close to Veteran Trees and on roadside verges. Tree Preservation Orders (TPO) provide little protection if a tree can be described as dying or unsafe. Although a Felling Licence is required from the Forestry Commission for the felling and removal of more than 5 cubic metre of timber per quarter, which would often be exceeded by a single Veteran Tree, this does not protect against 'safety felling', which may be unjustified or unnecessary.

Most Wood Pasture Habitat is found on areas of farmland that are considered of peripheral commercial value, often on slopes that cannot be ploughed or in areas contiguous with Woodland. Nevertheless, although at relatively lower risk of destruction, it is under threat from:

- Changes in land ownership as a result of the desire to own and manage land for private amenity and leisure use, including lifestyle "hobby farmers" and horses, and in the 'tidying up' that this frequently involves;
- Agricultural development as well as conversion to arable and overstocking/lack of protection from stock, particularly browsers such as horses or alpacas.
- Swamping of wood pasture trees by secondary woodland threatens both veteran trees and the lichens associated with them.

### **Proposed Partners**

Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG)  
Forestry Commission (FC)  
Highways Agency (HA)  
Landowners, managers and tenants  
Local Authority Tree Officers  
Members of the public  
Natural England (NE)  
Neroche Project  
Somerset Environmental Records Centre (SERC)  
Somerset Bat Group (SBG)  
Somerset Wildlife Trust (SWT) staff and members  
National Trust (NT)  
Woodland Trust (WT)  
Exmoor National Park Authority (ENPA)

### **Current action**

- Veteran Trees were the subject of previous LBAP action and much was achieved towards previous targets in terms of survey of Veteran Trees, mainly within Parkland Habitat, and advisory visits to landowners by SWT's Wildlife Sites Project.
- The Neroche Project in the Blackdown Hills has undertaken additional survey of Veteran Trees in 2005/2006, and is also felling coniferous woodland to establish and re-establish wood pasture.
- Some Somerset Parklands are in DEFRA's Countryside Stewardship Scheme, and others are in Historic Parkland Stewardship Agreements.
- The National Trust owns and manages important Parkland with Veteran Trees at Dunster Castle and on the Holnicote Estate, Exmoor National Park.
- The Somerset Wildlife Trust is clearing secondary growth and conifer plantation from around ancient Wood Pasture in the Mells Valley, Mendip.
- The Woodland Trust Ancient Tree Hunt was initiated in 2004 and has involved the finding and mapping all the fat, old trees in Somerset and across the UK, with mapping at least 100,000 ancient trees throughout the UK by 2011.

## Target description and target goals

1. Establish extent of WPP&VT in Somerset through Aerial Photograph Interpretation and some field survey. This will establish the extent of habitat to be maintained and identify the best areas for linking and buffering this habitat.  
**Goal:** Map completed.
2. Field survey or 'ground truthing' of new WPP&VT sites, recording condition, tree numbers, current management and ownership details for each location, recognising new LWSs where appropriate.  
**Goal:** 2 voluntary and one professional study/survey within lifetime of LBAP.
3. Minimise destruction of Parkland Priority Habitat, and isolated individual or groups of Veteran Trees, through the planning process, by screening all Planning Applications for presence of Veteran Trees and subsequent restriction/modification of building development.  
**Goal:** 100% of Planning Applications screened for presence of this Priority Habitat and individual Veteran Trees.
4. Through the creation of greater awareness, maintain and, where possible, restore and enhance the quality of WPP&VT and Veteran Trees by ensuring greater understanding by land managers of its wildlife importance.  
**Goal:** at least 30 advisory visits in Somerset over lifetime of BAP
5. Initiate work to extend the area of WPP&VT within SNAs throughout Somerset by linking and extending existing WPP&VT and other BAP Priority habitats to help achieve Rebuilding Biodiversity targets.  
**Goal:** 30 HA by 2001
6. Align WPP&VT LBAP with actions arising from other programmes including the Neroche Project and Rebuilding Biodiversity.  
**Goal:** Align LBAP with these two initiatives
7. Monitor achievement of BAP actions through BARS and develop and implement program to monitor outcomes of those BAP actions.  
**Goal:** Target Goal: 3 BAP monitoring programmes achieved.

## **Key factors**

The Habitat Regulations offer some increased protection for veteran trees, in so far as they may well be home to species that are protected by the regulations. Owners and land managers have to take account of these regulations whenever they are considering work that may damage or destroy the habitat of any European Protected Species, which includes all the species of bat found in this country. This should be included in all best practice advice, leaflets, etc.

Although both Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) and Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) of DEFRA's Environmental Stewardship Scheme (ESS) contain options for management and protection of in-field trees, only land within the Rural Land Register is eligible. Some WPP&VT Priority Habitat will be owned by the non-farming community however, and other sources of funding such as the Somerset Landscape Scheme are likely to be necessary to achieve the Targets of the Woodland Pasture and Parkland Priority Habitat HAP.

**SOMERSET WOOD PASTURE, PARKLAND & VETERAN TREES**

**Management**

<b>Action text</b>	<b>Lead organisation</b>	<b>Action start and end dates</b>	<b>Action goals</b>	<b>Key partners</b>	<b>Funding link to target</b>
Initiate entry to either ELS and/or HLS thus ensuring that Veteran Trees, both within Parkland and outside, and Wood Pasture maintained, retained and enhanced.	SWT	2008-2011	20 ELS or HLS Applications involving WPP&VT	FWAG SWT NE	Target 5
Encourage those land managers not eligible for ESS, to manage Veteran Trees, Parklands and wood pasture using best practice. (EWGS is aimed at woodland situations and will rarely be applicable).	SWT	2008-2011	5 applications for SLS or EWGS	FWAG SCC FC WT	Target 5  Use Somerset Landscape Scheme or England Woodland Grant Scheme (EWGS)

**Policy and legislation**

Trial screening on presence veteran tree records at planning application sites, using 'Bioplan' to recognise those Planning	SERC	2008	Trial Screening programme run	Planning Authorities	Target 3
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Applications that might impact Veteran Trees.					
If trial successful, screen all Planning Applications against Veteran Tree data to be adversely affected	SERC	from 2009	All Planning Applications to be screened	Planning Authorities	Target 3
Develop standard response for how veteran trees should be taken into account in the planning process	SWT	From 2009	1 set of standard responses in use by all Planning authorities	Planning authorities	
Ensure rejection or minimisation of non-essential Felling Licences within WPP&VT habitat	FC	2008	All Felling Licences screened and reviewed	Planning Authorities SERC	Target 3
<b>Education and awareness</b>					
Provide best practice guidance to arboriculturalists and tree surgeons working with Veteran Trees – particularly on reconciling health and safety tree surgery and felling with biodiversity value of Veteran Trees	SCC/FWAG	2008 -2011	3 workshops for Arboriculturalists and Tree Surgeons delivered	Planning Authorities Highways Agency NT	Targets 1 & 2
Prepare and distribute guidelines describing the	SWT	2008-2011	2,000 leaflets produced and distributed	SERC NE WT FWAG	Target 4

value of Veteran Trees and WPP&VT including new planted standard trees, advisory and possible financial support and post-establishment management.					
Develop and distribute to all land managers of Wood Pasture Priority Habitat, Guidelines describing the wildlife importance of Wood Pasture for best practice management.	SWT	2008-2011	250 Guidelines leaflets produced and distributed	SCC NE FWAG	Target 4
Produce articles for farming press on value of parkland trees and best practice management guidelines.	SWT/FWAG	2008-2010	3 articles in both Farming and general Press	NFU CLA PNR FWAG	Target 4
Produce Website article/links for best practice for Veteran Trees and to encourage survey	SWT	2008-2011	Website article created and regularly up-dated	SCC FWAG	Targets 1, 2, 3 & 4
<b>Information and data</b>					
Develop a definition of WPP&VT habitat for mapping purposes.	SERC	2008	1 practical definition developed by end 2008	NE	Target 1
Aerial photo survey	SERC	2008-2009	1 completed API	Las	Target 2

of Somerset Parklands, past and present for potential additional habitat.				NE	
Continue to maintain a complete record of Veteran Trees in Somerset, particularly in SNAs.	SERC	2008-2011	+ 1 professional survey.  Update Map annually	All partners	Target 2
Create links with other initiatives to collate all available data.	SERC	2008-2011	Annually for lifetime of BAP	Woodland Trust Neroche Project SWT Specialist Groups	Target 2
Voluntary survey to identify previously unknown WPP&VT habitat, targetting Strategic Nature Areas	SERC	2008 and 2009	2 voluntary surveys	SWT Members NT Members WT Members	Target 2
Professional survey to complement voluntary survey and identify previously unsurveyed concentrations of Veteran Trees, particularly in the vicinity of Strategic Nature Areas.	SERC	2009-2010	1 veteran tree survey	NE	Target 3
Identify key potential areas for new WPP&VT (particularly Parkland) from the mapping exercise in Target 1	SERC	2008	Identify key potential areas for new WPP&VT (particularly Parkland) from the mapping exercise in Target 1	all partners + members	Target 5

Create and maintain record of areas where new WPP&VT Habitat creation has taken place	SERC	2008-2011	Record created and maintained	all partners + members	Target 5
Liaise with partners to ensure that all activities/actions are recognised and recorded for public awareness purposes	SCC	2008-2011	3 Annual Reports in BARS to be distributed to all partners	all partners + members	Target 6
Devise method to assess and monitor quality of sites.	SERC	2009	1 monitoring methodology devised	SWT Specialists groups SWT NE	Target 2
<b>Rebuilding biodiversity (Nature Map)</b>					
Liaise with landowners of potential WPP&VT Priority Habitat identified in Target 1, to create new areas of WPP&VT Habitat	FWAG SWT	2009-2011	30 ha new habitat created mainly in SNAs	SCC FC WT FWAG	Target 5
<b>Economy and business</b>					
Identify sources of grant funding for land managers wishing to create new WPP&VT Priority habitat	SCC	2008-2011	£9,000 over 3-year LBAP period	FWAG LAs All partners	Target 5
<b>Communities, health and well-being</b>					
N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

<b>Climate change</b>					
N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	The health of Veteran Trees could be seriously affected by drier summers
<b>Tourism / access</b>					
N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A