HABITAT ACTION PLAN FOR OAK-BIRCH WOODLAND

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CURRENT STATUS

Oak-birch woodlands are those on acid soils in which pedunculate oak and silver birch are the principal tree species. On very acid sandy soils oak and birch dominate the canopy, with occasional yew and rowan. The understorey is sparse and patchy, with saplings of the main canopy trees plus species such as holly, and the ground flora is dominated by wavy hair grass and bracken with a range of other grasses and herbs. Ling heather, bell heather and bilberry occur infrequently in glades.

On less acidic brown earths a greater variety of trees may be present, and the understorey may include shrubs such as hazel, hawthorn and holly. The ground flora is usually dominated by a combination of bramble and bracken, with climbers such as honeysuckle and grasses including Yorkshire fog and creeping soft grass. Bluebell and wood anemone may also occur.

Before man began to have a significant impact on the landscape, much of England would have been wooded. With the exception of Sherwood, however, modern Nottinghamshire is not a well wooded County, and even Sherwood Forest now consists largely of conifer plantations. Ancient woodland constitutes only 14% of the total, and ancient oak-birch woodland is restricted to a few isolated fragments. The total area of ancient and recent oak-birch woodland in the County is not yet known.

Nottinghamshire's oak-birch woodlands support a high diversity of wildlife, and ancient woodland sites are especially valuable for their ancient trees, which are often lacking in modern woodlands. Bats such as noctule and brown long-eared bat roost and hibernate in the trees, while the dead wood supports some of the most important invertebrate assemblages in the UK, with many rare species of spider, moth and beetle. The rich supply of invertebrates provides food for birds, and typical woodland species include jays, woodpeckers and birds of prey such as the sparrowhawk and tawny owl.

The woodlands also support a diverse fungal community. Commoner species include stinkhorn and typical associates of birch such as fly agaric. As well as

fungi associated with the root systems of trees there are the bracket fungi of dead and dying trees such as beefsteak fungus, sulphur tuft and birch polypore. A number of fungi are rare and indicative of long established and ancient woodland sites. Hoof fungus occurs in the Birklands and Bilhaugh SSSI at its southern limit in the UK.

THREATS

The main factors currently affecting the County's oak-birch woodlands are:

- The loss of forest to agriculture, mineral extraction and development.
- The replacement of native broad-leaved trees with non-native conifers and hardwoods such as red oak and beech
- The invasion and spread of non-native trees and shrubs such as rhododendron.
- The increasing dominance of the woodland ground flora by bracken, which creates a fire hazard, causes water stress for ancient trees, and smothers regeneration.
- The tendancy of woodland managers to 'tidy up' by removing dead wood, which is an essential part of any woodland habitat.
- Increasing summer droughts and reduction of water levels in the sandstone aquifer.
- Air pollution, in particular atmospheric enrichment through nitrogen deposition.
- Deer grazing preventing regeneration in some areas. This needs to be balanced with the need to increase grazing in other areas for bracken control and heathland management.
- Lack of management of many woods in private ownership.
- Conflicting interests between tourism and the conservation management of key 'honey pot' sites. In particular increasing visitor pressure can cause undue disturbance and impact on the ecology of this habitat.

CURRENT INITIATIVES - EXAMPLES

- Many private landowners manage areas of oak-birch woodland, and have a vital part to play in its conservation.
- Nottinghamshire County Council, Forest Enterprise and RJB Mining are planting oak-birch woodland as part of the restoration of colliery spoil tips.

- Forest Enterprise are restoring 150ha of oak-birch woodland and rehabilitating surviving ancient oak hulks by the gradual removal of coniferous plantation in the Birklands and Bilhaugh SSSI and adjacent land. Management plans for both SSSI and non-SSSI parts of the site have been finalised.

- The Woodland Trust seeks to acquire sites on which to estabish new oak-birch woodlands, or manage existing ones, in appropriate parts of the County.

- Oak-birch woodland on several sites is managed under the Woodland Grant Scheme.

- Center Parcs, the Thoresby Estate, English Nature and RJB Mining are all involved in oak-birch woodland restoration and management projects.

- Ancient woodland sites are given specific protection under the Nottinghamshire Structure Plan

- English Nature have recorded the location and condition of all the ancient oak hulks within the Birklands and Bilhaugh SSSI and Forest Enterprise have undertaken a similar exercise in the adjacent oak-birch restoration project area.

- The Greenwood Community Forest and the Sherwood Forest Trust are promoting the planting of new woodland and the management of existing sites.

- English Nature and the Sherwood Forest Trust are looking at how to solve the ecological problems associated with habitat fragmentation in the Sherwood area, and have developed bracken rollers for the management of bracken in oak-birch woodland.

- The ancient oak-birch woodland within the Birklands and Bilhaugh SSSI is a candidate Special Area for Conservation under the European Habitats and Species Directive, mainly due to its important dead wood invertebrate communities.

- Other SSSIs also support oak-birch woodland, including Strawberry Hill SSSI, Sherwood Golf Course SSSI and Rainworth Heath SSSI.

- Woodlands can be protected by Tree Preservation Orders.

- National forestry policies include a presumption against the clearance of any broad-leaved woodland for conversion to other land uses, and seek in particular to maintain the ecological interest of ancient semi-natural woodland.

- English Nature have compiled a provisional ancient woodland inventory for Nottinghamshire.

Targets

This is a locally specific habitat falling under the UK Broad Habitat type of Mixed broad-leaved woodland, and includes areas of recently felled broadleaved woodland along with other integral features of woodland such as glades and rides. Specifically Oak-birch woodlands are those on acid soils in which pedunculate oak and silver birch are the principle tree species. On very acid soils, oak and birch dominate the canopy, with the occasional yew and rowan. The understorey is sparse and patchy and the ground flora is dominated by wavy hair grass and bracken. Ling heather, bell heather and bilberry occur infrequently in glades.

Target Type	Target Text	Units	2005 Baseline	2010 Target	2015 Target
Maintain Extent	Maintain the extent of all existing oak-birch woodland.	Ha	347	347	347
Achieve Condition	Maintain and improve by management existing oak-birch woodland.	Ha	159 (46% of resource in favourable condition)	No data	347
Restoration	Improve the condition of relict habitat so that it qualifies as oak-birch woodland.	Ha		No data	No data
Expansion	Encourage the re-establishment and increase the area of oak-birch woodland.	Ha		No data	No data

PROPOSED ACTION

Policy and legislation

1. Ensure the incorporation of relevant (inter-)national law, policies and guidance into all plans and policies relating to the protection, enhancement and management of oak-birch woodland habitat.

ACTION: Government Agencies, Local Authorities, NGO's.

2. Through planning control or other land use consultation processes, allow no further loss of areas of oak-birch woodland habitat and seek opportunities to enhance existing areas and create new areas through approved development.

ACTION: Government Agencies, Local Authorities, NGO's.

3. Ensure agri-environment, forestry and other funding schemes include appropriate management options and design measures to suit local nature conservation needs.

ACTION: Government Agencies.

Site safeguard and management

4. Review the extent of SSSI coverage of woodland habitat and consider notifying further sites as necessary.

ACTION: Government Agencies.

5. Designate SINCs and declare Local Nature Reserves on appropriate areas of habitat or instigate other appropriate measures for their protection.

ACTION: Government Agencies, Local Authorities, NGO's.

6. Promote the uptake of positive management with owners of SSSIs, LNRs, SINCs and any other areas of oak-birch woodland habitat.

ACTION: Government Agencies, Local Authorities, NGO's.

7. Carry out appropriate habitat management on sites controlled by BAP partners.

ACTION: Government Agencies, Local Authorities, NGO's.

8. Ensure sites containing oak-birch woodland habitat have appropriate management plans that are working towards improving site management and condition

ACTION: Government Agencies, Local Authorities, NGO's.

9. Acquire land to ensure good habitat management or to create habitat.

ACTION: NGO's.

Advisory

10. Provide formal or informal training in management techniques for oak-birch woodland habitat to land managers, site wardens, volunteers, etc.

ACTION: Government Agencies, Local Authorities, NGO's.

11. Establish demonstration sites or projects to demonstrate/publicise good habitat management techniques.

ACTION: Government Agencies, Local Authorities, NGO's.

Future research and monitoring

12. Establish and maintain a monitoring programme (a site register) to determine progress towards county HAP targets.

ACTION: Government Agencies, Local Authorities, NGO's.
13. Ensure that areas of oak-birch woodland habitat are periodically resurveyed to establish extent and condition. Update resulting habitat inventory every 5 years and revise targets and HAPs if necessary.

ACTION: Government Agencies, Local Authorities, NGO's.

Communications and publicity

14. Improve public awareness and appreciation of oak-birch woodland habitat by providing appropriate interpretation, education and access (where appropriate).

ACTION: Government Agencies, Local Authorities, NGO's.

15. Improve awareness of the value of, and appropriate management techniques for oak-birch woodland habitat among site owners and occupiers.

ACTION: Government Agencies, Local Authorities, NGO's.

What You Can Do

- If you are planning to do any tree planting, try to use native species appropriate to the area, as these are much more valuable for wildlife than non-native species. Advice is available from a range of sources.

- Adopt a local ancient tree or oak-birch woodland and help towards its good management.

SPECIES LIST

The following are examples of species of conservation concern (Appendix A) which are likely to benefit from this action plan:

- Noctule bat
- Brown long eared bat
- Fallow dear
- Tawny owl
- Nuthatch
- Treecreeper
- Lesser spotted woodpecker
- Green woodpecker
- Great spotted woodpecker
- Speckled bush cricket
- Great oak beauty moth
- Pearl bordered fritillary butterfly
- Alternate leaved golden saxifrage

- Great wood rush
- Herb Paris
- Wood dog violet
- Bluebell