

Pontesbury Parish Council Report

Poles Coppice Management

Report date; October 2023

Introduction;

Poles Coppice Local Nature Reserve is a 30 hectare Countryside Heritage Site located approximately 1km to the south-west of Pontesbury

Quarrying has taken place on site since the early 18th century and only ended in 1971. The ancient woodland is dominated by sessile and hybrid oak with occasional silver and downy birch and rowan. There are now wonderful views across the Shropshire hills, endless possibilities for walking, car parks and a picnic area

As well as the ancient woodland, there are also several fields that are part of the site. This year, important information has been gleaned about the ecology and management of these fields



Photo credit John Handley

Works undertaken during 2023-24;

In order to better manage the habitats at Poles Coppice, we need to understand their ecology. With this in mind, Shropshire Council commissioned an ecological survey of the fields currently managed by a local grazier. Because of the management of the fields, the plant community is now classed as MG6b *Lolium perenne - Cynosurus cristatus* grassland (*Anthoxanthum odoratum* sub-community).

MG6 is a common grassland community across much of the farmed landscape. The ecologist noted that there were indicator species that suggest the fields were once species-rich hay meadows (a rare and declining habitat, community type MG5). Armed with this information we now plan to issue a new grazing agreement that is based on managing the fields to restore a hay meadow plant community with all the associated benefits for people and wildlife. During summer 2023, the grazier actually took a hay crop off the fields to begin the restoration process. The consultant ecologist also discovered a veteran crab apple tree and ancient hedgelines that need careful management.

The quarries within the woods are also a biodiversity hotspot. The rocky screes are home to rare orchids and represent important basking sites for invertebrates and reptiles. The wet flush habitats are vital refugia for amphibians. The ecologist also visited the quarries to undertake condition assessments. The report will follow sometime before Christmas. The biggest threat to the biodiversity value of the quarries is the encroachment of scrub (willow and birch trees)

The large quarry benefitted from a work party held in partnership with Cap Gemini, a multi-national IT Services company with an office in Telford. As part of their community work they offered the services of a large team (around 15 people) for a day in October to help cut scrub in the quarry. A huge amount of work was undertaken and the arisings will be used to create and strengthen dead hedges to protect the top of the quarry face (whilst also creating habitat for nesting birds and small mammals)



Photo credits Liv Burns, Cap Gemini

Young Rangers

The Young Rangers scheme has continued through this year (funded by the Shropshire Hills AONB). The project officer has led work parties at Poles Coppice for the young people from the local area. The project also funded interpretation signage to go on the dipping platforms, explaining to visitors what creatures might be lurking in the water! The project has been instrumental in training and developing the next generation to care for their local environment. Young people have been empowered to play an active role in caring for their local countryside heritage sites, learning new skills and gaining valuable experience for their future career.

Future works;

Now that we better understand the ecology and best management for the grassland on site, it is hoped that it may be possible to apply for stewardship funding to help fund management works on site. However, it seems that the relevant stewardship has not yet opened so we await further news. Ash dieback (*Chalara*) is becoming an increasing problem on our countryside sites. More felling is likely to be needed to ensure that the site is safe and accessible.

We are also still hoping to organise a public open day at Poles Coppice in 2024. Thanks to the parish council for their generous offer of £350 to pay an exhibitor. Shropshire Council will contribute the staff time to organise and deliver the event. More details to follow!

Financial position;

Budgets at Shropshire Council remain very tight and with little light on the horizon for non-statutory services like Parks and Countryside. With that in mind, Shropshire Council is asking Pontesbury Parish Council for a grant of £2000 for financial year beginning April 2024

A big thank-you!

Thanks to Pontesbury Parish Council for your ongoing support with the management of Poles Coppice Local Nature Reserve. Any questions about site management, please contact Edward Andrews (Country Parks and Heritage Sites Manager) edward.andrews@shropshire.gov.uk