

FOREST FLOOR

Woodlarks vs. woodsmen – a fight to the finish?

Dear Editor

A recent Forestry Journal article by Dr Terry Mabbett warned of, "The destruction of our hard fought for home grown timber industry," as a result of restoring heathland for wildlife. But the reality is very different.

The government has just launched a policy to guide the restoration of heathland and other open habitats under plantation forestry. The policy pushes for an increase in lowland heathland restoration alongside a greater increase in woodland expansion – both things the RSPB adamantly supports. The policy also has a requirement to maintain the level of productive woodland in England, something which has been welcomed by both the RSPB and ConFor. This does not sound like the 'wholesale destruction of UK timber reserves' suggested by Mabbett.

In his article Mabbett chooses to attack the RSPB based on second-hand information from a 2009 article in *The Observer*. The article in question accused the RSPB of damaging the environment by harvesting trees to restore heathland at Farnham Heath, Surrey. However the RSPB's work at Farnham has been a major success for the local environment, thanks in no small part to the project manager Mike Coates.

Since restoration of heathland began at Farnham in December 2004, the site has been successfully recolonised by woodlark, nightjar and tree pipit, as well as a variety of heathland reptiles, invertebrates and plants. Increasing numbers of people are now enjoying the reserve and the wildlife it supports.

Across the UK the RSPB creates more woodland than it removes – but we make no apology for restoring some critical areas of heathland to their former wildlife richness. We hope Mabbett will base his judgements on first-hand information in future, rather than media spin.

One critical point missing from Mabbett's article was an explanation of why government, conservation organisations and forest owners are so keen to restore heathland. Put simply, we've lost most of it. In England only 20 per cent of the heathland present in 1800 now remains, which covers 58,000 hectares. Yet, despite this being such a small area it is a fifth of the entire world total. Restoration is essential for helping the huge variety of threatened wildlife, that depend on this habitat, to adapt and respond to climate change.

If we fail to provide habitat for these species, then they could become the victims of climate change, the problem we all claim we are trying to solve. The importance of restoring areas of lost heathland is recognised internationally, and it is an area where the UK has a major responsibility.

Another misconception Mabbett resurrects is the argument that heathland wildlife is capable of surviving in appropriately managed plantations. It would be wonderful if this was the case but unfortunately the evidence in this area tells us it is not.

Woodlarks and nightjars do use large clearfells and restocked areas. Ideally the blocks should be at least 10 hectares in size. Woodlarks use them for the first 4 years or so, and nightjars for a further 6 or 7 years. This means that for most of its commercial rotation, a planted block is unsuitable. More importantly, nightjars and woodlarks are only two of the species associated with heaths. Many others cannot use plantations at all. Such a site, "Completely fails to provide suitable habitat for most UK BAP heathland plant species." (*Byfield, British Wildlife vol 20, no 4, April 09.*)

There are 32 heathland plants given Priority Species status under the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (UKBAP). 27 of them require permanent heathland. The same is true for an even bigger range of invertebrates, reptiles and amphibians, such as the heath tiger beetle, ladybird spider, smooth snake and natterjack toad. Afforestation will not solve the difficulties faced by heathland species. More heathland is required. Mabbett states that better management of existing heaths will suffice. The RSPB does not see it as an either/or option – we must do both.

The RSPB certainly does not view commercially productive land, be it barley or timber, as incompatible with wildlife. For example, our arable farm

in Cambridgeshire is managed to grow profitable crops and promote wildlife. We also recognise the critical role of the forestry industry in bringing the UK's woodlands back into sustainable, productive management that benefits biodiversity.

Many specialist woodland birds and other wildlife have recently shown dramatic national declines. Changes in woodland structure brought about by lack of management and impacts of deer are thought to be key factors. A healthy forestry and processing industry is vital to nature conservation. Now is the time for increased partnership working between the conservation sector and forestry industries to deliver productive, sustainably managed, wildlife rich woodlands fit for the future.

*Nik Shelton
Media Officer, RSPB*

Dr Terry Mabbett replies

I deliberately focussed on the nightjar and woodlark because these are the avian heathland standards always 'flown' by RSPB in their continued quest for large scale lowland heath restoration in England at the expense of conifer plantations. As such they should be considered and discussed in detail.

Shelton says these ground nesting species cannot survive in appropriately managed forest plantation environments and I am wrong to think otherwise. Not so according to the Forestry Commission (FC) which is adapting its forest management policy with great success to the needs of these birds. Forest plantations are increasingly designed and managed to provide the birds with all stages of tree development, including clearfelled blocks, newly-planted trees and young trees with bare ground between.

On the nightjar FC says: "More than 50% of Britain's nightjar population now nest in woods where mature trees have been cut down and young trees planted. Adult pairs require a minimum of 2 hectares (ha) to nest." FC acknowledges the nightjar traditionally nests on classical heathland but says nightjars, "Also like forestry plantations, nesting on clearfell sites – where all the trees have been cut down – and on replanted areas, until the trees are around 15 years old. Such areas provide good nesting cover, plenty of perches and abundant food supply."

About the woodlark FC says: "More than 50% of the British population is now nesting in forestry plantations. The traditionally recognised habitat for woodlark has been lowland heath but in the last 25 years it has become widely recognised that the birds also like forestry plantations." FC says that, like the nightjar, it nests on clearfell sites as well as in young plantations until the trees reach around 7 years old. Advantages given are the same as for nightjars – provision of good nesting cover, abundant perching sites and a plentiful supply of food.

This overall FC view is clearly at odds with Shelton's. His minimum area for nightjar breeding (10 ha) is five times larger, while maximum ages of stands used by the birds, according to Shelton, are significantly lower. UK foresters with an interest in the nightjar and woodlark say the biggest threat to their welfare would be wholesale moves into continuous cover forestry (CCF).

Adopting a forest plantation habitat is not a recent phenomenon as far as nightjars are concerned. A countrywide survey in 1957-8 [*Stafford J, (1962) Nightjar Enquiry 1957-58 Bird Study 9:2, 104-115*] documented some of the most frequently occupied breeding habitats for nightjars in all counties: For instance:

- Devon – conifer plantations and clearings in woodland
- Somerset – conifer plantations and cleared woodland with regenerated undergrowth
- Wiltshire – young conifer plantations
- Staffordshire – young conifer plantations; most recently (1957-58) in areas clearfelled and replanted by FC
- Sussex – conifer plantations with young trees up to 8 to 10 feet high
- Shropshire – planted conifers in early stages of growth up to about 9 feet.





Displacement by new housing estates and disruption of breeding grounds by day trippers and picnic parties [with and without dogs] were listed as main threats to the nightjar especially in its south of England and Midland strongholds in the 1950s. This is interesting because the contemporary policy of clearing conifer plantations to restore lowland heath in densely populated southern England goes hand in hand with an open-access policy for the public.

Local authorities such as Dorset County Council openly invite the public to walk their heathland with their dogs, even though canine pets are recognised as a major disruptive influence on ground nesting birds. I assume the RSPB has a 'no dogs' policy, but most landowners, including local authorities and wildlife trusts, do not. They ask the public to exercise control over dogs but, as we all know, many do not. Surely these ground nesting birds are more secure in managed conifer plantations with restricted public access.

Recently I was confronted by a huge 'off-lead' dog when out and about in my home county of Hertfordshire. I was taking pictures of superb old Scots pines in mixed woodland, before some misguided fool fells them having read in the paper that Scots pine should not be growing in southern England.

Shelton should tell Coates that his comments reported in *The Observer* could be taken as tacit encouragement for landowners to start culling conifers in southern England. Briefing the national press should be done with responsibility and consideration of others' needs and views. I don't want to wake up and find Scots pines in south Hertfordshire, many over 200 years old, cut down because someone in Surrey from a high profile national charity with an 'axe to grind' has been 'shooting the breeze'.

Since nightjars and woodlarks aren't restricted to classical heathland, and we already have 58,000 hectares, why double the amount at the expense of productive forest plantations in which these birds do just as well? And at the same time squander efficient carbon sequestration from fast growing commercial conifers, and generations of softwood timber for construction with the carbon locked-up in processed wood.

My logical reason for prioritising proper management of existing heathland is that its custodians can't even manage the bracken they have, so why open up more land to invasion. And there might not be any herbicides left capable of killing bracken if the EU continues to ban pesticides at its current rate.

Shelton claims I critically overlooked the fact that 80% of heathland has been lost since 1800 which is why RSPB and others are so keen on its restoration. But he fails to appreciate that Britain's population now is five times bigger with 70 million projected by 2050. There were only 10.5 million people in 1800 using a fraction of the resources. And why should we sacrifice timber resources and local forest related industries in large areas of England because the rest of the world has little interest in lowland heath?

In 1800 English lowland heathland was a material resource used as graze and browse for livestock and with bracken and heather cut and harvested. Prime purpose of contemporary heathland is decoration and recreation which is the key reason why its custodians can't stop what is a man-made and managed environment returning to its natural woodland climax.

I am also chided for not considering dedicated heathland flora. As a botanist I do, but I am also a pragmatist living in a grossly overcrowded country where the whole environment is being degraded, much to my disgust, especially on the outskirts of London where I live. But given the population pressures we are now saddled with, everyone and everything has to 'give'. Surely 58,000 hectares is enough space for rare heathland mosses to 'spread their wings' when you consider the number of families homeless or in substandard accommodation in the UK runs into millions.

Shelton then tries to roast me using the 'old chestnut' of climate change, but I fail to see how increasing the area of high fire-risk dry

lowland heath in the face of hotter and drier summers helps any wildlife. To be fair, I think Shelton is referring to a quote in *The Observer* from Coates on the Dartford warbler, the gist of which also appears on the RSPB website. "Heathland restoration will help Britain to adapt to global warming by providing habitats for species such as the Dartford warbler to spread north with rising temperatures."

I'm sorry, but why should the Dartford warbler in the UK, currently confined to southern England, suffer and move north if our climate warms? Dartford warbler has a West European/North West African distribution with southern England as its most northerly point. According to the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) it is really a bird of Mediterranean climes. Four fifths of the European population of several million pairs reside in Spain. This diminutive UK resident warbler is decimated by harsh UK winters like those of 1961-3 which reduced the known UK population to eleven pairs. Is it fair that livelihoods are put in jeopardy using misinformation like this?

I stand accused of using second-hand sources, but the extensive RSPB quotes in my paid-for national newspaper were clearly aimed at me [the public]. It was certainly not media hype and not 'spun', at least by *The Observer*. Coates had obviously talked at great length, detail and with relish to *The Observer* correspondent using a well-mounted tirade against conifers to promote his prejudices with precision. His only mistake was not sticking to what he knows and chancing his arm with comments venturing into agro-forestry and agriculture.

Such articles are regularly used as PR platforms by RSPB to deliver their message to the general public. An article appeared on April 1 this year in *The Daily Telegraph* ('Plans to chop down forests in England' by Environment Correspondent Louise Gray) with a long quote from Dr Mark Avery (RSPB Conservation Director) on the need for and importance of clearing conifers and restoring lowland heath in southern England.

The Observer article (September 2009) quoted Nick Phillips, RSPB's biodiversity policy officer, as saying, "It [the Open Habitat Consultation] is a once in a generation opportunity to revive heathland on a large scale." *The Daily Telegraph* article (April 2010) said the RSPB wants the government to double the 55,000 hectares (135,000 acres) of lowland heathland in England by chopping down the non-native conifers that stand in the way, a statement which appeared word for word in the *Observer* article in September 2009.

Of course the RSPB is quite entitled to publicly air its views on heathland restoration – it is called free speech. By the same token I or anyone else can disagree if we know the public is only being fed that part of the story which fits in with RSPB's aims and targets for large scale conversion of conifer plantations to heathland, and we also see and understand the bigger picture.

Dr Terry Mabbett

From Jane Karthaus

Some time in the early/mid 80s, I attended some local bird club meetings with my son. I recalled how on one occasion, an ornithologist reported that merlin were being forced to nest in Sitka on the edge of plantations in Dumfries/Galloway due to afforestation and removal of bare land. I suggested that perhaps the merlin were now delighted to see a tree in which they could nest, after decades of suffering predation on the ground.

I have frequently been reminded of this when 'experts' pontificate on what a particular species needs by way of habitat, including remarks such as 'it shouldn't be growing there' (according to the textbooks).