

Kingcombe's Wild Energy Project Report

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Background

In 2021, Kingcombe Meadows and Powerstock Common, two of Dorset Wildlife Trust's flagship West Dorset nature reserves, were recognised as a combined National Nature Reserve (NNR). This prestigious designation was made by Natural England on behalf of the UK government, in recognition of the sites' 292 hectares of unique landscape of meadowland, woodland and hedgerows.

Following the declaration of the new Kingcombe National Nature Reserve, we had, and still have, an opportunity to create and restore habitats within the wider valleys. As well as seeing positive change on the ground, this project has developed a platform for future work: a partnership of interested organisations, the willingness of landowners to engage in future works, a set of resources to identify opportunities and has made applications for further larger-scale funding.



Kingcombe meadows © Dani Wilson

Project progress

Working with landowners and farmers

To help guide our work with neighbouring landowners we have been building a set of maps to highlight opportunities for nature conservation to form a Nature Recovery Network. This started with a map of landholdings. Through liaison with landowners in the project area we have built up a jigsaw of who owns or looks after what area of land. On top of this we have begun to show species distribution and, critically, habitat restoration or creation opportunities.

We have been monitoring the distribution of a set of species that are most vulnerable to predicted climate change. We will be adding this information to this mapping so that our work with landowners and managers can be guided towards supporting these highly threatened species.

Using this vital background work, we have worked with landowners and farmers in the Upper Frome river catchment and established an exciting new cluster group to facilitate sharing of ideas and dissemination of technical advice. There are 15 farmers involved so far. This work has gained additional financial support from the Farming in Protected Landscapes scheme.

Dorset Wildlife Trust is working closely with West Dorset Wilding, which is a landowner-led initiative running from the southwest of the Kingcombe NNR towards Bridport. The group, with our support, are looking to gain funding from the government's Landscape Recovery scheme and are undertaking a feasibility study into beaver reintroduction.

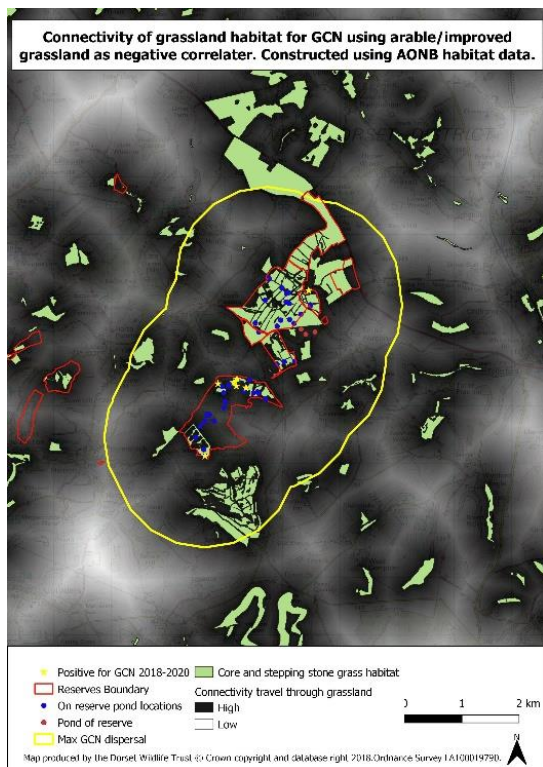
Through the project we are also working with several landowners in the area to support their work under the government's Countryside Stewardship and Sustainable Farming Incentive Schemes. We have held an event focused on the use of 'herbal leys' which is an option under both schemes and will support biodiversity and heathy soils. We continue to advise on options that will restore and create habitat for nature, such as creation of wood pasture and species rich meadows.

Our community links have helped us to identify 23 hectares of species-rich marshy and chalk grassland habitat in the area, which had not previously been recorded. This has now been surveyed and identified as a County Wildlife Site (known locally as a Site of Nature Conservation Interest). This status gives the grassland some protection from planning applications and would make it more likely that the site manager could get grants for nature-friendly management.

Thirteen people have also attended a farm walk lead by our Farm Advisor at Hollis Mead organic dairy.

Mapping and monitoring

As a key part of the project, we needed to get a better picture of where the most important wildlife species are within the Kingcombe landscape. Using existing and new survey information we have begun to plot the location and potential movement of a handful of priority species in the area. An example of the type of map we have created, showing the distribution of great crested newt and grassland habitats is shown below. This information is extremely helpful when planning future conservation works within the nature reserves and with our neighbours. We are working to create wildlife corridors and steppingstones over the next three years, to help reconnect habitat needed by each of these species.



A map showing the distribution of great crested newt and grassland habitats. Map produced by DWT © Crown copyright and database right 2018 Ordnance Survey LA 100019790

Great crested newts breeding in eight ponds across Kingcombe and Powerstock. The pond mud snail was found in one new pond on Kingcombe © Steve Masters

We have also installed an exciting new monitoring system, which will help our project partners and ourselves see up-to-date environmental and visitor data. Information on

the condition of the habitats we are targeting will be added to the system and as part of the project; we have also carried out assessments on the condition of the main habitat types in the area so we can help improve the management needed.



As well as monitoring over 60 hectares of grassland habitat, wetland and pond monitoring (shown here) has also been taking place across the reserves © Steve Masters

Gains for wildlife

The project has carried out several habitat improvements targeted to help wildlife move around and expand their population.

We have re-instated traditional hedge management, including hedge laying, to help connect some important wildlife corridors. Through our monitoring programme we know that several bat species use these connections to travel across the landscape. For those able to visit, there is a great example of our hedge laying work very close to the Kingcombe Visitor Centre, where a 100m stretch of hedge has been re-laid.

Habitat improvements, such as the creation of fish spawning areas, increased meanders and flow directors on the River Hooke have been installed that allow the

river to flow more naturally, creating fish spawning opportunities and improving bankside vegetation, home to many dragonfly and damselfly species.

The project has opened up new butterfly corridors through scrub management that have joined up two or more areas of grassland habitat. This is vital to species that would otherwise struggle to move freely past blockages such as dense scrub.

Essential fencing has also been installed to allow us to graze meadow and chalk grassland with cattle and sheep. This will help maintain and expand the incredibly diverse wildflowers in these habitats.

As well as keeping areas of important grassland open for wildlife diversity, we are also making plans to create new open woodland habitat through re-wilding about one hectare of land which currently has very low species diversity.



Long-horned bee colony monitored at Powerstock, and present in good numbers © Steve Masters



Harvest mice found widely across Powerstock through winter nest searches © Steve Masters

River enhancement works

The River Hooke, a tributary of the River Frome, rises from a large number of chalk springs and flows right through the Kingcombe NNR. We are working with farmers in the catchment to improve water quality, reduce soil run-off and help manage surface water flooding. In doing so, improvements to habitat connectivity and resilience to climate change through additional flood storage are expected.

Thanks to the donations made to support this project we have secured additional funding from the Environment Agency to pay for works to enhance flow using 'woody debris' placed in-channel on 550m of the river – this helps create riffles which speed up flow and create cleaner gravels to allow for fish spawning. We have also created bunds, or embankments, on two farms that will hold back sediment at times of heavy rain and prevent it getting into the river, through additional funding brought in by the project.

Nine new survey volunteers were trained in Riverfly monitoring at Kingcombe using the River Hooke as a classroom. And finally, a talk on the project for Hooke Parish Council was attended by thirty people.

Looking forward

Through the project we have been looking for opportunities to permanently expand the wonderful riches of Kingcombe National Nature Reserve through acquiring additional land. We successfully acquired three new lots of land, totalling 32 acres, at Kingcombe: two directly adjacent to Kingcombe Meadows Nature Reserve and one very close. These plots, exhibiting significant wildlife value and habitat potential, provide further pond, grassland and woodland restoration opportunities, which will lead to bolstered species movement.

Over the next twelve months we will be working with neighbouring landowners and farmers to implement projects such as river restoration, hedgerow planting and grassland restoration, including herbal lays and re-wilding; taking direct interventions such as pond creation and restoration, meadow enhancement and rewilding within the Kingcombe NNR; continuing our programme of monitoring key wildlife species; and hosting more events to encourage people to learn, engage with and enjoy the wonderful wildlife of the area, ranging from volunteer activities, activities for young people and families and deep nature experiences within the National Nature Reserve.

Thank you so much for supporting this exciting and rewarding project.

Further information: <https://www.dorsetwildlifetrust.org.uk/wildenergy>