

The Green Linnet

The Newsletter for owners of Sites of Nature Conservation Interest



Issue 19: December 2014

How Can We Help?

Your SNCI is a unique bit of land, important for a variety of wild plants and animals, whether it is a grassy meadow full of wild flowers and butterflies in summer; an ancient woodland with gnarled veteran oaks home to countless insects, mosses and lichens, bats and birds, or a lake, pond or section of stream fringed by tall 'fen' plants such as rushes, meadowsweet, fleabane, comfrey etc. Every area is different and each one is special.

All these special areas need some help to keep them in good condition for the important, rare or declining species of plants and animals that inhabit them. In other words they need some management.

The purpose of the SNCI project is to record all these important pieces of land in Dorset, to make sure that those who own or manage them are aware of why they are special, and to support them as much as possible in looking after their wildlife interest.

Over the next few years one of our aims is to find as many of the 'hidden gems' that we don't yet know about as possible so that they too can benefit from the support of the SNCI system. It is part of the way that we hope to build some 'resilience' into the countryside to help species survive in the face of climate change and the other pressures they face in 21st century Dorset. So if you have any additional areas which you think might qualify as SNCIs, please let us know. Or chat to your neighbouring landowners and ask if they are aware of the SNCI Project (pass on your copy of the Green Linnet if you like!) and see if they would be interested in getting us to come and have a look at their 'rough' areas of land. Of course, bear in mind that not every area of rough grassland or woodland will qualify as an SNCI.

So how can Dorset Wildlife Trust help SNCI owners? Initially we'll undertake a free full survey to establish the quality of the site and tell you what the important habitats and plants are. We will also write a brief Management Statement offering general advice on best management practice. We can follow this up with a visit to discuss your management of the site in more detail. A first visit will be free, but we may also be able to undertake more

specialist services for a charge, for example:

- Writing a detailed management work plan;
- Undertaking specialist surveys;
- Working with you to draw up applications for grants such as the new agri-environment grant schemes, once these are rolled out by Defra.

In some instances we may also be able to provide some practical help on sites in the form of volunteer work parties to undertake tasks such as scrub clearance on grassland, removal of alien species such as Himalayan Balsam etc.

In this issue are a couple of examples of wonderful partnership working, and hard work by SNCI owners, managers and volunteers to enhance and maintain the wildlife quality of their sites.

So the message is: Be proud of your SNCIs! - but not too proud to ask for a little help if needed.

Sharron Abbott

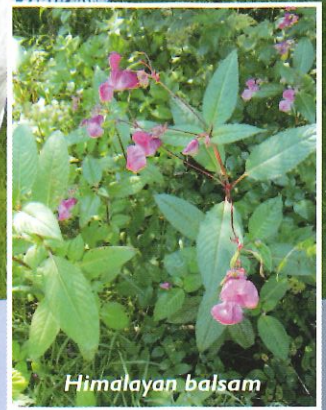


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Good News for another West Dorset SNCI



Clearing Himalayan balsam at Compton Withy Bed SNCI



Himalayan balsam

Compton Withy Bed SNCI is a deliciously damp, verdant, inaccessible and ecologically vital patch of habitat. Deep mud underfoot, large sedge tussocks and tangles of dead and living branches arrest visitors' progress through this wet woodland. It's the perfect place for the dreaded Himalayan balsam *Impatiens glandulifera* to flourish undetected and unchecked, and for the tiny stream which trickles through the wood to unwittingly carry flung seed out into the broad and bountiful Frome catchment.

Luckily, thanks to landowners Gail Ridgway and Oliver Jerome - with a bit of help from DWT - the threat is being contained. We spotted the pink 'policeman's helmets' ominously waving in the breeze during fieldwork for a Farm Environment Plan in 2011 and vowed there and then not to let the pervasive invader have its wicked way with this lovely wood. There had been no mention of Himalayan balsam in the last SNCI survey (2007) so how it had got there was a mystery; (deer hooves, otter pads, unfortunate human vector?) However, as any follower of Himalayan balsam's inexorable march along Dorset's water courses, hedgerows, railway lines, etc will know, despite the devastating impact it has on native ground flora and the vulnerable state in which it leaves river banks, the plant has an undeniably effective seed distribution technique and competitive abilities.

The fact that this infestation is the uppermost occurrence of balsam on this tributary of the Frome inspired even more determination to eradicate it from the SNCI. DWT's dedicated and energetic bunch of wider countryside volunteers joined Gail in an early foray which yielded several dumpy bags full of pulled stems but also delivered

a reality check about the scale of the task. With some encouragement (and funding) from Natural England, the landowners plugged away for another two seasons, joined at one stage by a balsam bashing gang hired by DWT through our Return of the Natives project (funded by Natural England and the Environment Agency).

Fast forward to 2014, and I was amazed at the vastly reduced number of plants seen on a spring tour of the woods and ponds. Despite frequently dense scrub, Gail had a detailed knowledge of where she had tackled patches of balsam and individual plants in the previous years. As anyone who's bashed balsam knows, repeat visits are necessary through the season to catch early and late flowering plants so it was crucial for Gail, working mostly on her own, to be able to get to all the inaccessible corners. Step up once again the West Dorset volunteer group who toiled hard for a day in June this year to pull up as much balsam as they could and also create some paths (with the very minimum of disturbance to the wood). Gail then used these paths to double, triple and quadruple check the wood through the rest of the season.

We're not resting on our laurels yet: as we all well know, 'it only takes one plant...'. But the amazing reduction in Himalayan balsam at Compton Withy Bed in just 4 years is definitely a success story so far. The landowners are determined to save their SNCI from the scourge of this most pervasive of invasives, and DWT will do all we can to help.

Nick Gray
West Dorset Team Conservation Officer

Pymore Reedbed - massive improvement for wildlife!



Before



After

Volunteer enthusiasm, DWT staff expertise and support, and a Grant from the Dorset AONB Sustainable Development Fund have made a real difference for wildlife in the Pymore Reedbed.

Pymore Reedbed is unique on the river Brit system and has been designated as a Site of Nature Conservation Interest since 1998. It is a rare habitat and is the home of increasingly rare species such as water voles, harvest mice and water rail. In recent years otters have made a welcome return, living alongside birds such as kingfishers, little egret and reed bunting.

But reedbeds need management to maintain their biodiversity. In particular the reeds and bulrushes continually encroach into the open water and the surrounding woodland needs coppicing to let light into the woodland floor. Until recently the management of Pymore reedbed had been neglected and a great deal of this encroachment had taken place.

A management plan was prepared by Dorset Wildlife Trust, which included recommendations to recreate open water areas to encourage dragonflies and damselflies, as well as making the reedbed wildlife more visible to the local community. Richard Gillingham, Pymore volunteer coordinator and West Dorset DWT committee member, identified the need for equipment such as waders and tools for the local volunteers and a contractor with extra manpower and a skip.

Dorset AONB approved a grant and the work started in January 2014. In spite of some horrible weather, 12 volunteers put in the equivalent of 34 working days on reedbed clearance and coppicing to complete the task, a remarkable achievement, and wow, what a difference it has made!



Volunteers at work in the Pymore reedbeds



Photos © Richard Gillingham.

All the volunteers said they had enjoyed the experience and we feel sure that their efforts will be rewarded by more glimpses of otters and the squealing sounds of water rail in the future. Well done to them all.

Thanks to Richard Gillingham for providing this information

Devil's-bit scabious (*Succisa pratensis*)

This curiously named plant is found in a variety of habitats from wet meadows, marshes and fens, to wet heathland and woodland rides, preferring slightly acid soil, but also found on chalk and limestone grassland. It flowers from June to October/early November.

So where did it get this strange name? Well, Scabious comes from the latin Scabere, which means to scratch and apparently the plant was used to treat scabies and bubonic plague sores.

...and the first part – Devil's Bit? In mediaeval Latin the plant was called Morsus diaboli or Devil's Bite. A 15th century tale says that the devil used the root of the plant as a means of power until the Virgin Mary put a stop to it, and the Devil in his frustration bit off the root. (The rootstock is short and blunt-ended giving the appearance of having been bitten off). The Great Herball of 1526 stated that the Devil had envy of the plant's ability to treat scabies and the sores of bubonic plague, so he bit the root causing the plant to lose it effectiveness.

In Culpepper's 17th century book, English Physitian Enlarged, it was prescribed for, among others, poison, plague, wind, dandruff, pimples and freckles!

It is also the food plant of the Marsh Fritillary butterfly and

the female lays glossy yellow eggs on the leaf, which turn red. They breed on medium sized plants with leaves between 5-15cm and are very specific in their requirements. The caterpillars are black and bristly with tiny white freckles on the side and can be found basking in sunlight. In summer they spin a web over the food plant then hibernate in a nest of silk in the base of taller vegetation. In the spring the caterpillars emerge and split into small groups. As they grow bigger they tend to live singly, but can still be seen out in the open.

For me one of the best sights of the botanical year is a wet meadow or downland covered in hundreds or even thousands of these plants, with their small round, bright purple flower heads giving a burst of late colour in the dying summer/early autumn after most other plants have set seed, before we head into the greyness of another winter.

Mark James
SNCI Officer



Marsh fritillary

Photo © Ken Drehegar, Mike

Photos © Mark James

21st Century communication

There are over 1270 SNCl in the county and we send the Green Linnet out to almost 1000 landowners/managers of these sites. We have built up our database of contacts over the last 20 years, but for only a few of you do we have e-mail addresses. We really need to use modern communication methods these days, partly to keep our costs down, and because it is often more

efficient, and more convenient for you. So please might I ask you to simply send an e-mail to my e-mail address below, so that we can contact you by e-mail in future where appropriate. We will NOT pass your e-mail address on to ANY other organisation without your express permission. Thank you very much.

Sharron Abbott

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CONTACTS

For further information on SNCl: Sharron Abbott
01305 264620
Dorset Wildlife Trust
West Dorset Team Office:
01300 321329

For advice on Environmental Stewardship:
Initially contact our West Dorset Team. They can advise you as to the best person to contact within Natural England for further help.
Forestry Authority for: West Dorset & Weymouth & Portland - Chris Gibbard 01392 834278
and for the rest of Dorset - Ian Briscoe 01392 834259
FWAGSW: 07966 032029 Clare Buckerfield
Dorset AONB: 01305 228239 Ian Rees

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