



Dorset
Wildlife Trust

Wild Woodbury

Five Years of Community Rewilding



Five years ago, Dorset Wildlife Trust took a bold step. In 2020, the opportunity arose to acquire 170 hectares of land on the edge of Bere Regis. The vision was ambitious: restore nature at scale, lock up carbon, and create a place where local people could reconnect with nature on their doorstep. Today, Wild Woodbury showcases exactly how quickly nature can rebound when given the space and time to do so.

The Wild Woodbury community rewilding project has three goals:

1. Tackle the ecological crisis

The Wildlife Trusts have committed to seeing 30% of UK land managed for nature by 2030. To reach that target, nature-poor landscapes must be restored. Wild Woodbury offered a rare chance to transform depleted arable land which had been extensively drained and intensively farmed into a thriving mosaic of habitats.

2. Combat the climate crisis

Healthy soils, wetlands, and woodlands store carbon and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Rewetting the land and restoring natural processes helps it to store carbon while actively reducing nutrient run-off into Poole Harbour.

3. Reconnecting people with nature

Access to nature is generally accepted as important to improving wellbeing. From the start, the plan was to involve the community in every aspect of the Wild Woodbury project and to create a place where people could walk, learn, volunteer, and rediscover the joy of the natural world.

What is rewilding?

Rewilding is the restoration of natural processes – letting ecological dynamics, rather than human prescriptions, shape the land. Instead of aiming for a fixed habitat type, rewilding encourages a shifting mosaic: bare ground, scrub, grassland, wetland, woodland, and everything in between. Grazing animals, water, soil, and vegetation interact to create ever-changing niches for wildlife. It is a land management technique that embraces uncertainty, celebrates complexity, and consistently surprises us with the species it supports.



2021

From wildlife clinging on...

Prior to Dorset Wildlife Trust purchasing the site, it was farmed intensively for agricultural production. The fields were a patchwork of bare stubble, rye grass pasture, and nutrient-rich soils. Wildlife clung only to the margins - hedgerows were the best feature. One early survey across the 170 hectares recorded just two meadow brown butterflies. Only two skylarks sang across the entire site, and breeding success was unlikely. All the baseline surveys in the first year pointed to a place of ecological scarcity.

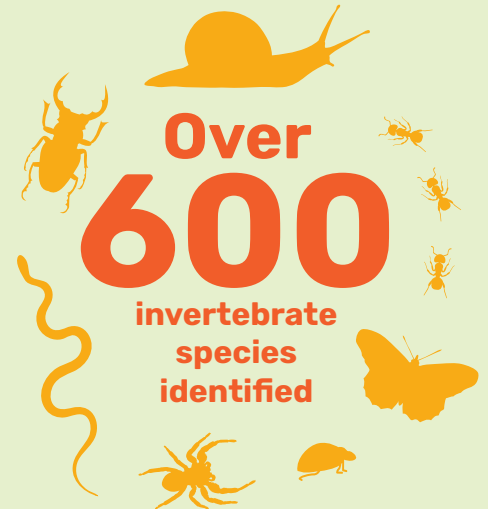
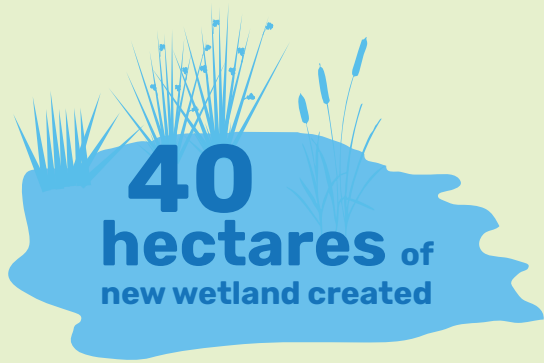


2025

...to nature leading the way

Wild Woodbury has transformed into a thriving, ever-changing mosaic of ephemeral wetlands, scrub, grassland and emerging woodland. In just five years, water has been restored to the landscape; wildlife has returned in abundance, and natural processes are once again shaping the land. Mixed grazing, community involvement, and extensive monitoring have accelerated recovery, creating a richer, wilder place for both people and nature. Wild Woodbury now stands as a leading example of large-scale rewilding in Dorset.

Wild Woodbury in numbers



Transformation at Wild Woodbury: Vegetation

Arable fields

The stubble fields proved ideal for natural regeneration. With no dominant species, the seed bank burst into life. In year one, carpets of field pansy, speedwell, scarlet pimpernel, and nitrogen-loving species such as thistle and poppy. On clay soils, charlock thrived; in one field, oats re-emerged in dense swathes.

By year two, diversity was increasing with the appearance of fleabane, mayweed and grasses, while bramble and willow began pushing into the centre of fields. As nitrogen levels dropped, the vegetation shifted toward a more balanced, structurally varied sward. One rye grass field, initially the most ecologically barren, surprised us. A mound of acidic sandy soil in the centre quickly supported stork's-bill and sheep's sorrel – an early sign of the site's emerging heterogeneity.

Pasture fields

The permanent pasture fields changed more slowly. Without grazing animals initially, rye grass remained dominant. But river restoration transformed half of these fields into ephemeral wetlands, now rich with sedges and rushes.

The introduction of pigs in 2024 accelerated change dramatically: their rootling exposed bare ground and triggered a flush of over 25 new plant species in previously species-poor fields. Supplementary planting of hawthorn, blackthorn, dog rose, crab apple, and wild pear – protected by scrub piles – helped kickstart scrub development.

Grazing animals

Mixed grazing with rare breeds is central to the success of rewilding. Different animals create different ecological pressures – browsing, trampling, rootling, dunging – and together they shape a dynamic landscape.

Traditional Hereford cattle arrived first: hardy, year-round grazers that surprised us by favouring the wettest areas, often wading belly-deep. Exmoor ponies followed, trampling bracken and creating bare ground. Mangalitsa and Berkshire pigs, introduced in 2024, had the most dramatic impact on species-poor pasture, unlocking the seed bank through rootling and exposing wet mud used by grub-seeking wetland birds. Sika and roe deer were present from the start; numbers were reduced through careful management to prevent over browsing. Dung beetles and other coprophagous invertebrates have flourished thanks to wormer-free dung, restoring vital nutrient cycling.



Transforming Wild Woodbury: River restoration

Before restoration, Wild Woodbury was heavily drained. Deep ditches and terracotta pipes funneled the Sherford River, carrying sediment, nitrates, and phosphates downstream. Aquatic life was almost absent; dragonflies, amphibians, and wetland invertebrates were scarce.

Hydrological surveys revealed historic flow paths and opportunities to rewet the land. Contractors filled selected ditches, lowered bunds, smashed field drains, and created leaky dams. The effect was immediate: water spread naturally across the landscape, forming long ponds, marshes, and shallow pools.

Forty hectares became an ephemeral wetland mosaic. Water sampling now shows crystal-clear flows and dramatically reduced nutrient levels. Species that depend on water - frogs, toads, grass snakes, dragonflies - have returned in abundance.



Transforming Wild Woodbury:

Species diversity and abundance

Mammals

Wood mice were the first to explode in number, excavating hundreds of burrows and aerating compacted soil. Over time, harvest mice, water shrews, dormice, voles, stoats, and weasels have all increased. Badgers and foxes remain regular visitors. Pine martens have not yet been recorded on site, but their presence nearby suggests it is only a matter of time.

Birds

Bird recovery has been one of the most striking successes. From 65 species in year one, Wild Woodbury now supports 125 species, including 28 birds on the UK Red List. Skylarks increased from two singing males to over 55 in just 18 months. Tree pipits now hold 17 territories where previously there were none. Nightjar, snipe, and even prospecting curlew have appeared. Winter visitors include hen harrier, short-eared owl, and large mixed finch flocks.

Butterflies and moths

Butterfly transects show abundance more than doubling since 2022. Five new species have been added, including the silver-studded blue. Moth trapping has revealed a rich and growing assemblage, including red-listed dingy mocha - now supported by widespread sallow regeneration.

Invertebrates

Volunteer surveyors have recorded over 600 species of beetles, spiders, flies, and true bugs, including species new to Dorset and others not seen since the mid-1900s. Trends are beginning to emerge as we record invertebrates often found on heaths or highly associated with dung. Fields are alive with grasshoppers and crickets including the arboreal oak bush-cricket.

Amphibians and reptiles

Before restoration, no amphibians were recorded. Within months of rewetting, frogs, toads, and smooth newts appeared. Frogspawn now forms carpets across multiple fields in the spring. Grass snakes, adders, slowworms, and common lizards have all increased. Adder is a particular success story at Wild Woodbury and it is changing how we think of this species, how it spreads and the conditions it is looking for. This year we recorded a female adder in the middle of an ex-arable field where we have assumed it would take decades for the habitat to support adder.



Transforming Wild Woodbury: Community

From the beginning, Wild Woodbury has been shaped not only by ecological processes but by the people who walk its paths, volunteer their time, and share their stories. Over five years, a vibrant community has grown around the project, helping to monitor wildlife, restore habitats, and champion the value of rewilding.

New access for the community

A major milestone came in the third year with the creation of a new car park and the opening of 13 hectares of community open-access land. Funded by Dorset Council to mitigate pressures on sensitive heathlands, this area opened in 2024 and has transformed how local people experience Wild Woodbury. The new car park has significantly improved accessibility, while interpretation boards now help visitors understand the vision for Wild Woodbury and navigate the landscape with confidence.

The new open-access land is being left to naturally regenerate into scrub and woodland, with a network of accessible

and cut paths leading visitors through emerging habitats. Feature areas - including a food forest and wildflower meadow - offer places to explore, learn, and unwind, with more to come. The improved access has also enabled our first accessible guided members' walks, designed for visitors with limited mobility and led by the Wild Woodbury Rangers.

Learning together

In 2024, we launched a new series of events: ***An Introduction to Rewilding***. These guided walks have been fully booked since their inception, reflecting the growing public appetite for understanding how rewilding works in practice. They have become a powerful way to bring supporters onto the land, share the science behind our decisions, and show the changes unfolding before their eyes.

We have started to see repeat attendees who have been heard to marvel about the changes since their last visit.



Volunteering and citizen science

Volunteers remain at the heart of Wild Woodbury. They have contributed hundreds of hours to species surveys, path maintenance, scrub planting, and event support. Citizen scientists have expanded our ecological knowledge through butterfly counts, bird records, camera trap data, and water quality monitoring. Their observations often provide the first clues to new species arriving on site. Volunteers have formed new friendships based on their shared love for the natural world.

Education and youth engagement

Schools, youth groups, and university researchers now use Wild Woodbury as an outdoor classroom. Children have dipped ponds, tracked animal footprints, and learned how wetlands store carbon.

For many, it is their first encounter with a truly wild landscape – an experience that can shape a lifetime of environmental awareness.

The site has become a valued walking destination, supporting local pubs and accommodation providers. Visitors frequently tell us that time spent at Wild Woodbury leaves them feeling calmer, more grounded, and more connected to nature. These stories are as important as any ecological metric, reminding us that rewilding benefits people as much as wildlife.



What we've learned

Successes

Nature rebounds faster than expected when given space and trust.

Water restoration delivers immediate ecological benefits.

Enthusiasm for Wild Woodbury has continued to grow.

Community involvement amplifies impact and builds long-term stewardship.

Mixed grazing creates structural diversity that no single species can achieve or human can replicate.

Inspiring other landowners in Dorset to take a similar approach with the help of our Land Advisors.

Challenges

Artificially enriched soils slowed early plant diversity in some fields.

Managing high deer numbers is essential to prevent over-browsing and allow tree sapling survival.

Rural crime – the theft of gates, materials and even trees

Cleaning up historical agricultural waste from the barns and land

Without free-roaming large herbivores able to move across multiple land holdings, some plants are unable to spread to new locations without human intervention.

Finding underground field drains is not always straightforward!

Surprises



The level of amphibian recolonisation and species diversity observed following river restoration.

The speed of adder recolonisation has been amazing.

The enthusiasm of local people to participate in monitoring and storytelling.

The appearance of species not recorded in Dorset for decades.

Dramatic changes to species abundance following the introduction of grazing animals.

Skylark numbers have increased more than twenty-fold.

Looking forward

The next five years will focus on:

- Expanding wetland and scrub habitats
- Supporting natural woodland regeneration
- Evaluating and strengthening the extensive mixed grazing regime
- Deepening community involvement through events, volunteering, and youth programmes, ensuring Wild Woodbury is a space for everyone
- Continuing long-term monitoring to understand ecological change
- Strengthening partnerships and securing funding for future restoration
- Continuing to use Wild Woodbury as an example for other landowners

The long-term vision 20 to 30 years from now is a landscape rich in complexity: a dynamic patchwork of wetland, scrub, woodland, and open ground, shaped by water, grazing, and time. A place where wildlife thrives, where people feel welcome, and where the lessons learned can inspire rewilding across Dorset and beyond.



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The Wild Woodbury project was made possible through the generosity of Dorset Wildlife's supporters, the commitment of BCP and Dorset Councils, the Green Recovery Challenge Fund and Montanaro Asset Management. We are grateful to environmental campaigner, Julia Davies, whose Funding Nature Project played a pivotal role in helping to secure the land for nature.

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