

# Stanmore Common and the restoration of Bluebell Heath

## Simon Braidman

This joint meeting with the Harrow Nature Conservation Forum heard a presentation by Simon Braidman, Voluntary Head Warden at the Stanmore Common local nature reserve, which is owned by the London Borough of Harrow. The reserve is 120 acres of woodland, grassland and wetland, with lovely bluebells on Bluebell Heath. The conifers there were previously thought to be only Scots Pine and European Larch but recently a Black Pine was recognised.

The Bluebell Heath project is an acid grassland restoration project, which followed on from the earlier New Heath project. From 2006 to 2009, the London Biodiversity Partnership operated the lottery-funded London Heathlands Heritage project under the London Biodiversity Action Plan. New Heath is 0.6Ha of lowland heath, which has been created from a sea of bracken by bulldozing the topsoil and re-seeding the surface of the Stanmore Gravel beneath. These are rounded gravels of uncertain origin, possibly a wetland delta deposit. It has large gaps between the gravels and nutrients are washed out when it rains.



**New Heath**

Bluebell Heath used to be more open but it has lily of the valley, which is an ancient woodland indicator, so it was probably originally wooded, the trees were removed, leaving it as open land and it has become re-wooded over time. Within it are patches of acid grassland, which have developed from the fast-draining topsoil strata with soils below pH7 due to the leaching of Mg, Ca and Na ions.

The result is low botanical diversity but it is home to specialised species able to tolerate acid conditions. Typical acid grassland plants include Brown Bent grass (*Agrostis vinealis*), Heath Woodrush (*Luzula multiflora*), Green-ribbed Sedge (*Carex binervis*), Tormentil (*Potentilla erecta*), Heath Bedstraw (*Galium saxatile*), Sheep's Sorrel (*Rumex acetosella*) and Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*). Invertebrates include the wet grassland green leafhopper *Cicadella viridis*, a wolf spider (*Alepecosa pulverulenta*), a hoverfly (*Sericomyia silentis*) and the predatory solitary wasp (*Cerceris quadricinta*), which lives in a hole in the bare soil.

Threats to Bluebell Heath include the woodland succession, soil enrichment and invasive species, including native species, particularly holly and bracken.



**Bluebell Heath**

In January 2012 an application to the Heritage Lottery Fund resulted in the award of £41,000, half of which was to pay contractors to remove the small trees with a section of adjacent woodland then being felled and re-seeded with heather. This was under the aegis of the Harrow Nature Conservation Forum (HNCF), the umbrella conservation element of the charity Harrow heritage Trust, which recruits supports and represents the wardens of the local nature reserves, working closely with Harrow Council. Surveys to determine the action needed was based on John Dobson's 2010 botany survey. Detailed surveys were undertaken, including tree surveys for bat roost potential, a bat activity survey, a fixed point photographic survey and a search for reptile hibernacula. And the project was publicised by various means.

Trees to be preserved and those to be felled were clearly identified for the contractors and grass snake hibernacula, which are used for life, and a Common Pipistrelle bat roost were protected. Guided walks for publicity included walks on invertebrates and mosses. The contractors, T & T Earthworks are experienced in nature conservation work and had up to 7 people working on site chain sawing scrub and unwanted trees and poisoning stumps from October 2012 to end-January 2013. A section of Flushing Wood was felled and the topsoil scraped off and bulldozed into south-facing banks, bracken was hand -sprayed and holly control undertaken. The second year comprised botany surveys, training volunteers and digging out tree saplings. Community involvement included teenagers from The Challenge, a charity that puts teenagers into community programmes, the Chinmaya Gujarati Foundation and Hatch End Mosarti Synagogue. 1,876 person hours were involved and 60 new volunteers trained of whom 23 made significant contributions.



**Flushing Wood**

The next steps are to continue control of invasive bracken and bramble and to dig out tree saplings, construct banks or fences to intercept dead leaves, continue survey and construct a nature trail. An exhibition was held at Harrow Museum in June 2015 and the project finished in July 2015. Continued maintenance involves volunteers, who meet at Warren Lane car park on dates advised by HNCF