

Life on the edge – A Project To Save The Nightingales

Introduction

One of the greatest pleasures of an evening walk on Bookham Commons has been hearing the soaring, melodious notes of the nightingale's song... In the past few years we have seen the number of nightingales on the commons fall sharply and this has caused great concern, not only among the ornithological world, but for every visitor who cares about the countryside. This has led us to take a long, hard look at what is happening to these birds and the changing world in which they are trying to survive.

Reasons for the decline

The numbers of many bird species have declined drastically in recent times and nationally, the nightingale population has fallen by 30% in the past twenty years. Every year these amazing birds fly all the way from tropical Africa (right down by the equator) and have to pass through countries where it is still considered a worthwhile tradition to shoot or trap small songbirds. Nightingales are "insectivorous" – all they eat is insects!

Changes in agricultural practices have led to a loss of suitable habitat – efficient farms have no areas of scrub to nest in and fewer insects to feed on.

In Britain we have seen dramatic changes in the countryside since 1945, with intensive farming needed to feed a growing, economically-pressed human population, the cessation of un-economic grazing on heaths and commons, along with the rapid change brought about by myxomatosis in rabbits from the 1950's. The decline of hedgerows, less demand for coppiced woodland produce and planting of conifer plantations have all contributed to a loss of habitat. In Surrey, many heaths and commons are now covered with even-aged young trees that are shading-out interesting plants and the insects that live on them. On Bookham Commons we have increasing noise and light pollution from the motorway and more air traffic. When the grazing died-out in 1949, followed by the rabbits not long after, much of the scrub that grew-up along the woodland edge (where large numbers of birds used to nest) is now becoming over-mature and shaded by young trees.



Typical Current Vegetation



Ideal Habitat On Central Plain

What can be done?

We have a problem. Our grassland is very rare and precious. Nationally, we have lost at least 95% of these "unimproved", species-rich grasslands – they haven't been ploughed and re-seeded, or even had fertilisers to promote the vigorous growth of grasses. This is why they are full of wild flowers. But we need tight, impenetrable, predator-proof young scrub to attract nesting birds. Our problem is that we cannot keep-on letting the scrub invade these grassland areas. There are (unfortunately) no similar areas next-door – what we have, is all that we have!

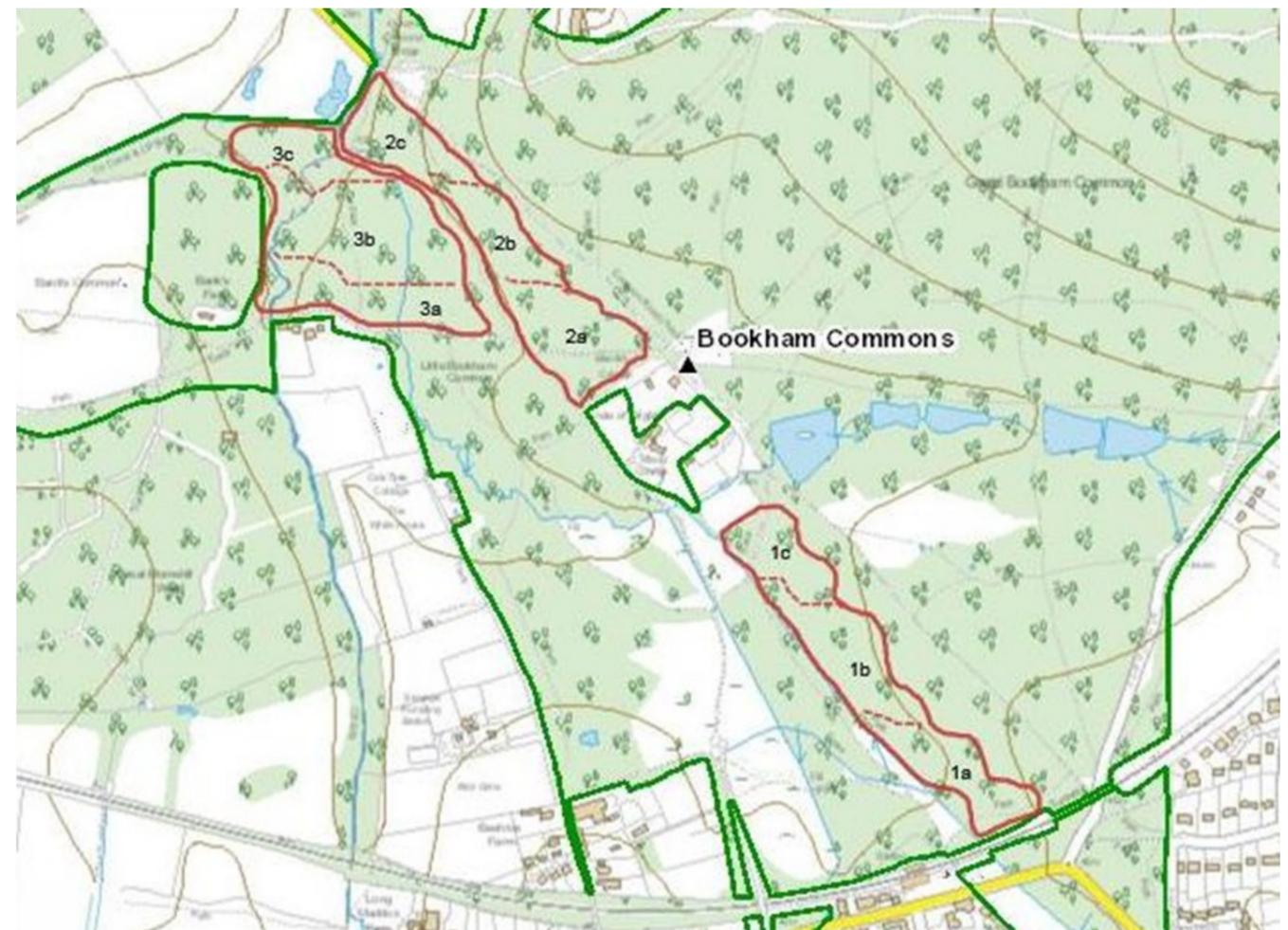
What we need to do is to "push-back" the woodland edge, by careful thinning of the trees and layering the old

scrub to provide cover for the birds. With 125 hectares (300 acres in old money) of oak woodland on the commons, we're not short of trees for people to enjoy – and we select and nurture some of the younger ones so that we will have future "veterans" to admire. To slow the advance of the woodland, it is not a practical proposition to extend the cattle grazing in the near future, so we shall need to rely on tractor mowing and rotational clearing by contractors and our other "browsing animals", the volunteers with their bowsaws! Our other problem is that all this work requires an ever-increasing amount of money.

"Friends" to the rescue!

Having undertaken a fantastic range of improvements (the bird hide, natural play area, information panels, bridges, waymarkers, etc., etc!) for the visitors to the area, we are proposing to "return to our roots" and do something to assist the wildlife and habitats of the commons – part of the core purpose of our founding "Friends". We hope to lessen the impact of this task by spreading the work over three years, sub-dividing three main areas into smaller ones to lessen any disturbance to other wildlife and users of the commons.

Not surprisingly, many other birds and many other forms of wildlife will benefit from this proposal, along with the visiting human population... Visitor surveys have shown that the majority of visitors like the varied scenery of the commons and this work will help to maintain these landscapes for future generations.



Following-on from the overall aims of our project, here are the three proposed restoration areas, highlighted with a red border on the map. The three main areas are divided into three sub-divisions. This is to illustrate that to minimise the impact of this work on both wildlife and visitors, it would be far better to work on approximately one third of all the areas every year (for the proposed three years) than to try to complete operations in one large division through a single winter. For example, we would plan to undertake tasks in divisions 1a, 2a and 3a in the first year, 1b, 2b and 3b the following year, etc.