

**Wisley & Ockham Commons**  
**Ranger Notes Spring 2010**

This winter has seen a huge amount of work undertaken across the whole of the site with few areas unaffected by the continuation of the heathland restoration project being undertaken to expand this globally rare habitat.

The theme of restoration and maintenance of existing heathland is a particularly strong one in Surrey, since we are fortunate enough to have a large proportion of the country's remaining sites. There is strong historical evidence for the presence of heathland on Ockham: Rocque's 1768 map of Surrey, names the site as Ockham Heath and the tithe map of 1838 suggests the area is heathland. Aerial photographs from 1948 to the present day however chart its progressive decline. The Scots pine plantations have limited ecological value, often consisting of a single species of tree and a bracken understorey whereas heathland supports a much greater biodiversity. The presence of heathland specialist like Dartford warbler, nightjar and woodlark on Ockham has resulted in the area being designated a Special Protection Area under the EC Birds Directive. Appropriate management of Ockham also enhances wildlife in and around Boldermere which includes rare species of plants and dragonflies.

This work can leave the area looking rather raw especially where scraping was undertaken to promote heather regeneration, but in time nature will blend it back into the general environment. The scrapped material, comprising accumulated organic matter has been spread over an area of secondary woodland next to the SSSI and will quickly disappear under spring growth. Tracks have been re-graded where they are part of the permissive horse-ride system, however where timber was extracted through the plantations to avoid rutting existing tracks or paths, we have chosen not to re-grade these to prevent them becoming unmanaged routes. I would again request that visitors use the existing path network, rather than wander through heathland areas where ground nesting birds can be disturbed especially by dogs.

All of the tree clearance work was confined to the Ockham and Chatley Heath area with 5.42 ha of clear felling achieved, coupled with associated thinning work. We were also able to undertake 10.37 ha of sub-licence birch thinning as a result of additional funding from Natural England.

This funding also allowed us to clear an additional 19.29 ha of birch/pine scrub and 7.08 ha of rhododendron across the site using specialist contractors, supplementing the tremendous effort of our regular Sunday volunteer group. Their generous support is invaluable where resource hungry tasks like this are required; information concerning volunteering opportunities can be found under 'How you can help'.

The Surrey Hills Conservation Volunteers and the Lower Mole Project also contributed to this work, both helping to clear dense rhododendron near the Mausoleum where mechanical removal was not possible.

We now have a dedicated herd of 20 + Belted Galloway cattle (the ones with a distinctive white belt round their waists) on Wisley, allocated from SWT's grazing herd. These animals are vital for heathlands where the aggressive grass species need to be controlled and as a result of the tremendous efforts of our Grazing Manager and his team we are at last self-reliant.

We hope you enjoy visiting Ockham Heath and Wisley Common.

John Wilsher AIEEM.  
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