

## H6 Woodland HABITAT ACTION PLAN

### 1. Habitats covered

1.1 Woodland is a broad habitat type which can be split in to sub-types depending on woodland origin, age and dominant species. This plan considers both the Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) habitats from the UK BAP as well as more recently planted woodlands that have important functions for Biodiversity in Monmouthshire.

1.2 The 3 main types of woodland are:

- Ancient Semi-Natural Woodland (ASNW) - land known to have been continuously wooded since records started in 1600.
- Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS) - ancient woodland sites that have been replanted with coniferous, broadleaved or mixed woodland.
- Recent woodland - planted woodlands that date from post 1600.

1.3 Semi-natural woodlands are important for the wealth of biological diversity they support, for example lesser horseshoe bats, common dormouse, woodland birds such as lesser spotted woodpecker, wood warbler, hawfinch and a rich woodland invertebrate fauna, including woodland butterflies such as wood white, silver washed fritillary and white admiral. Lesser butterfly orchids and Tintern spurge are amongst the wealth of important botanical species associated with woodland in Monmouthshire.

1.4 The following UK Biodiversity Action Plan Priority Habitats occur in Monmouthshire and are covered by this Action Plan:

1. Lowland beech and yew woodland
2. Upland mixed ashwood\*
3. Lowland mixed deciduous woodland
4. Upland oakwood\*
5. Wet woodland
6. Coniferous plantation woodland

\* The area covered by this plan i.e. Monmouthshire less the Brecon Beacons National Park, is considered in topographical terms to be lowland. However, the two 'upland' woodland types listed above are typical of many of the woodlands of Monmouthshire despite the suggestion in the name that they are upland habitats.

## **2. Habitat descriptions and Current status**

### **2.1 Woodland in Gwent and Monmouthshire**

2.1.1 The full extent of woodland in Monmouthshire (native and non-native) is currently unknown. Native woodland alone is thought to cover 5475ha (Forestry Commission Wales, 2007). This is an estimated 6% of total land area of Monmouthshire, and is 5% of the total native woodland in Wales.

2.1.2 The Forestry Commission's National Inventory of Woodland and Trees recorded that between 1895 and 1998, Gwent's woodland cover jumped from between 9-11.9% to between 12-14.9%. In 1895 Gwent was the most wooded County in Wales but by 1998 Glamorgan and Powys were recorded as being the most wooded Counties. This increase is attributed to planting for commercial forestry or 'afforestation'. In Monmouthshire afforestation of previously un-wooded sites has been largely restricted to heathland areas on the Trelleck Ridge. Although the majority of sites are coniferous plantations, there are some beech and oak plantations, for example in the Wye Valley and at King's Wood near Monmouth.

2.1.3 Due to trends in forestry between the 1930s and 1980s, a large proportion of ASNWs were clear felled and converted to conifer plantations. In Gwent in the last 40-50 years it is estimated that 67% of the ancient woodland resource has been lost, particularly in parts of the Wye Valley and Wentwood (The Birds of Gwent).

2.1.4 Monmouthshire, along with parts of Gloucestershire and Herefordshire, is home to the Wye Valley Woodlands Special Area of Conservation (SAC), an internationally important area which comprises one of the largest continuous tracts of ASNW in the UK. It covers 365.6ha of woodland in Monmouthshire, which support a number of woodland types, including some unusual stands comprising lime-sessile oak dominated communities and beech woods with co-dominant lime, elm and oak. Rare and local species include large-leaved lime, whitebeam and hornbeam.

2.1.5 Woodlands are included within 5 different UK BAP Priority Habitats and are included within WAG's 'Section 42' List of Species and Habitats of Principal Importance for Conservation of Biological Diversity.

### **2.2 Lowland beech and yew woodland**

Monmouthshire supports the western limit of beech forests in Wales. In the Wye Valley, beech-dominated woodland stands occur as part of a mosaic with a wide range of other woodland types, which is an unusual feature for woodlands in the UK. This is attributed to small scale variations in relief, soil type and geology in the Wye gorge. In places species including lime, elm and oak are co-dominant with beech.

For example, Blackcliff - Wyndcliff SSSI comprises beech coppice and small-leaved lime woodland and supports a number of whitebeam hybrids. Harpers Grove & Lord's Grove SSSI, is mixed woodland with extensive stands of pedunculate oak, sessile oak, small-leaved lime and large-leaved lime and beech. The site is notable for hornbeam and is thought to be the only natural stand in the county.

Pierce, Alcove & Piercefield SSSI is mixed semi-natural woodland comprising beech, yew and lime with a relict coppice structure with some standards. In Pierce Woods a transition from acid to calcareous soils affects the woodland types that occur. Species include rare or localised large-leaved lime and several species of whitebeam. The cliffs support the only heronry in the lower Wye Valley and the caves are an important roost for a number of bat species.

### **2.3 Upland mixed ashwoods**

This is the most abundant woodland type in the Wye Valley. Ashwood communities occur on base-rich soils and support a wide range of tree species, typically comprising ash-hazel-oak mixtures. In the Wye Valley they are frequent on poorly drained clay sites. For example Blackcliff-Wyndcliff Wood, Cleddon Shoots, Harpers and Lords Grove. Lower Hael Wood SSSI is a well structured mixed coppice with standards comprising pedunculate oak and sessile oak as the dominant canopy trees and frequent beech, lime, wych elm and ash, with a rich ground flora.

Croes Robert Wood SSSI, a relict coppice woodland on steeply sloping ground comprises wych elm, ash, birch and wild cherry. Gaer Wood SSSI, south-east of Raglan, comprises an uncommon species assemblage, with species such as wych elm, field maple, ash and locally common beech. Priory Wood SSSI, near Usk supports former hazel coppice with pedunculate oak standards, sessile oak, silver birch and downy birch in the west to ash and wych elm dominated woodland with a rich ground flora in the east.

### **2.4 Lowland mixed deciduous woodland**

This habitat type is now represented in the newly adopted UK HAP and includes all other lowland deciduous woodland, (NVC types W10, W14). For example Bushy Close SSSI, near Portskewett, is a small relic of pedunculate oak woodland on clay soils, comprising oak standards and hazel coppice. South-west of Monmouth, Caer Llan SSSI, comprises slopes dominated by pedunculate oak and wych elm.

### **2.5 Upland sessile oakwood**

This woodland type comprises a relatively small woodland community in Monmouthshire. Characteristically found on steep slopes with acid soils, it supports predominantly sessile oak with frequent pedunculate oak, birch, hazel, rowan and holly. One of the characteristic features of this upland woodland community is the

presence of uncommon moss and lichen species. Park House Wood on the Trellech Plateau and Parc Seymour at Wentwood support former sessile oak coppice with species-rich ground flora including bilberry, wood sorrel, bluebell, hairy woodrush.

## 2.6 Wet woodland

Monmouthshire supports a small quantity of wet woodland, typically adjacent to rivers and streams on poorly drained or seasonally wet soils. Woodlands are typically dominated by alder, birch and willow. For example, Gaer House Woods SSSI at Grosmont, adjacent to tributaries of the Monnow, comprises the largest area of ancient semi-natural wet woodland in the County. The canopy is dominated by alder with other species including hazel, goat willow, ash, elm, hawthorn and holly and a ground flora comprising meadowsweet, opposite-leaved golden saxifrage and wood sorrel. Parts of the Wye Valley woodlands support wet woodland on lower slopes along stream sides. Lady Park wood supports a small area of wet woodland dominated by alder along stream-sides, with ash, goat willow and opposite-leaved golden-saxifrage.

## 2.7 Coniferous woodland plantation

There are a number of large conifer plantations in Monmouthshire, namely Wentwood, Chepstow Park/Hale Wood, King's Wood, Wye Valley and Trellech Plateau. Conifer plantations contribute to between half to a third of the total woodland area in Monmouthshire. As such a significant habitat area, they are important for the bird life they support, which includes species such as siskin, crossbill, sparrowhawk and goshawk.

Certain bird species are associated with specific stages of plantation growth, such as nightjar in clear felled plantations and a number of birds prefer the young conifer growth, such as white throat, bullfinch, grasshopper warbler, willow warbler, stonechat and tree pipit. Woodland rides in plantations often reflect the flora of the previous habitat, and can include ancient woodland indicators such as wood anemone or wood spurge. For example former heathland at Trellech supports heather and bilberry. Grassland/marsh species such as common spotted orchid and common centaury may also occur. On limestone soils at The Minnets/Slade wood, wild liquorice, St. John's wort, and greater and lesser butterfly orchids can be found.

## 3. Current factors affecting the habitat

3.1 **Lack of management/neglect:** cessation of traditional management practises such as coppicing can have adverse affects on woodland structure, regeneration and biodiversity.

- Lack of commercial value and timber price fluctuation of some (under-managed woodlands) can lead to further neglect/threat of loss of

habitat. Woods on farms are generally of little commercial value and do not bring quick returns, therefore sites may be used for stock shelter and grazing on farms rather than be managed for their timber and conservation value.

- In aging woodland stands, particularly beech and yew woodlands in the Wye Valley, large, older trees can be more susceptible to wind damage, drought and disease.
- Wet woodland is particularly prone to neglect and poor management and is at high risk of habitat loss/destruction by land drainage.

3.2 **Inappropriate grazing** of woodlands by deer and/or by livestock can result in trampling of ground, bark stripping and eating young tree saplings, preventing regeneration of trees and suppressing growth of ground flora.

3.3 **Climate change** is predicted to change habitats and ecosystems and may alter communities. The following immediate and knock-on effects are considered to be the most important by the Woodland Trust:

- Changes in seasonal patterns making it difficult for plants and animals to maintain an annual cycle.
- Increases in frequency and severity of water shortages and droughts can lead to an overall weakening of trees and soil moisture deficit.
- An increased risk of pest and disease incidents.
- A higher frequency and severity of extreme weather conditions resulting in damage to woodland fragments and older trees
- Changes to where species are able to live. More mobile species will be able to migrate northwards, whilst others may not be able to respond fast enough, and are likely to become scarce, or even extinct.

3.4 **Management of woodlands on a large scale** during the bird nesting season can cause considerable destruction of nests, due to the highly mechanised nature and extent of areas worked.

3.5 **Woodland fragmentation and isolation** as a result of development and road building and other land use change. Most remaining woodlands are remnants of formerly larger stands. Increasing reduction in size and connectivity of woodlands has implications for the viability of certain species populations particularly those that are unable to move freely between isolated woods.

3.6 **Lack of statutory protection** of smaller woodlands, copses, individual trees and hedgerows means that these are lost for reasons above.

- 3.6 **Invasive plant species**, including non-native tree species such as sycamore, and western hemlock, shrubs such as cherry laurel and rhododendron, can spread uncontrolled in semi-natural woodland, creating dense shade and acidic soil conditions.
- 3.7 **Localised nutrient enrichment**, for example via fertilizer drift from adjacent farmland, or from (rainwater) run-off from arable/improved fields, can damage the woodland ecology and reduce the habitat quality of woodland.
- 3.8 Changes to forestry management policy including plans to retain 20% of mature conifer stands in Wales. This will mean a **reduction of clear fell** which provides habitat for species such as nightjar.
- 3.9 Damage by pests e.g. **Grey squirrels**. Grey squirrels can cause damage to trees by stripping bark from young trees. This exposes them to fungal pathogens that can introduce disease leading to premature tree death. There are also impacts on native species through competition, disease transmission and predation.

#### 4. Current action

4.1 The FCW estate within Monmouthshire accounts for a total of just over 4,000 hectares of woodland of which 1,836ha are broadleaves (46% of the total area). National Forestry policy as operated by the Forestry Commission now advises against clear felling of any privately owned semi-natural broadleaved woodland. Felling licences are required for removing more than 5m<sup>3</sup> of timber from a site in any calendar quarter that are not in conjunction with a Forestry Commission approved plan.

4.2 The Forestry Commission Wales scheme 'Better Woodlands for Wales' provides grants for several aspects of woodland management including enhancing conservation value of woodland, replanting and woodland expansion.

4.3 The Forestry Commission Wales are currently carrying out an annual programme of conifer removal from PAWS to facilitate the restoration of site native broadleaf species. Examples of this work can be seen in the Whitebrook Valley and at Manor Wood.

4.4 The Forestry Commission Wales are managing our areas of ASNW under Low Impact Silvicultural Systems (LISS), and are continuing to maintain a sustainable, productive conifer element in appropriate areas such as the Trellech Plateaux where clear fell /restock regimes plus 41ha of heathland restoration work promotes open space for important species such as nightjar.

4.5 The Countryside Council for Wales is working with owners of woodland SSSIs to get them into favourable condition or under favourable management. CCW can offer landowners management agreements to ensure the SSSI is appropriately managed.

4.6 Coed Cymru, a Wales-wide woodland management project has an important role in adding value to timber extracted and providing advice on marketing.

4.7 The Woodland Trust purchased 352ha of Wentwood in 2006. A management plan has been written and the main vision for the site is restoration of the ancient woodland. In addition to this, the Woodland Trust has recently purchased Cefn Ila, a 72 acre site in the Usk Valley where a 'well designed' new native woodland will be planted.

4.8 Agri-environment schemes such as Tir Gofal offer grant aid to support favourable farm management initiatives including works in farm woodlands.

4.9 Monmouthshire County Council's Local Agenda 21 Biodiversity grants are given for woodland management schemes that benefit biodiversity including the dormouse.

4.10 The Gwent Wildlife Trust and Monmouthshire County Council are working in partnership to formalise a process for the identification of Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs) in Monmouthshire. Woodlands are one of the priority habitats for identification and the criteria for woodland selection are being tested this spring.

4.11 The Ravine WoodLIFE project was a three year woodland conservation partnership project which completed in 2007. The project removed 3.00ha of unproductive conifer from Wyndcliff/Blackcliff, and carried out over 5.00ha of coppice restoration that included the use of sustainable dead hedging deer exclusion methods. Significant canopy management was undertaken in Hale Wood, coupes have been felled, cleared and fenced to promote the natural regeneration of site native species and an extensive ring barking operation was done in Graig Wood that has reduced the sycamore component within the woodland, again allowing site native species to thrive.

4.12 The Deer Initiative is researching into effects of deer grazing in woodlands. The Forestry Commission Wales now have a larder outlet in the Wye Valley as a result of their extensive deer culling scheme.

4.13 The Gwent Wildlife Trust manage several key woodland sites in the County including Croes Robert Wood (14ha), Prisk Wood (6ha) and Priory Wood (5ha).

4.14 The recreational value of woodlands is now widely recognised and is promoted by organisations such as the Wye Valley AONB, MCC Countryside Service, the Forestry Commission Wales, Coed Cymru and the Woodland Trust/Coed Cadw.

## 5. Proposed targets (Source: Wales Biodiversity Partnership, Wales Disaggregated Targets, 2007)

- 5.1 Maintain the current extent of native woodland in Monmouthshire (5475ha).
- 5.2 Achieve favourable condition in 1775ha of native woodland in Monmouthshire by 2015.
- 5.3 Restore 245ha of damaged habitat in Monmouthshire by 2015.
- 5.4 Expand the present total area covered by woodland by 215ha by 2015.

## 6. Proposed actions and key partners for Woodlands

Action	Key Partners		Action Start Date (all to be underway by 2015)
	Lead	Support	
<b>1. Policy and legislation</b>			
1.1 Ensure that woodland sites are considered during the forward planning process i.e. LDP.	MCC	CCW	2008
1.2 Ensure woodland sites are fully considered when assessing any development, which may impact upon the habitat.	MCC	CCW, GWT	Underway
1.3 When there is no alternative ensure that appropriate mitigation or compensation measures for woodland are implemented during development.	MCC	CCW, GWT	Underway
1.4 Where appropriate, ensure opportunities for enhancing woodland are used during the planning process.	MCC	GWT, FCW, Coed Cadw, Coed Cymru	Underway

<b>2. Funding/resources</b>			
2.1 Grant aid and incentive schemes such as Better Woodlands for Wales, Tir Gofal and MCC Biodiversity Grants should be used to encourage owners to manage or plant woodland for biodiversity.	MCC, FCW	CCW, Coed Cymru, GWT	Underway
2.2 CCW can offer management agreements for woodland SSSIs. Top up payments are available for owners of SSSIs who have funding from FCW under Better Woodlands for Wales.	CCW		Underway
2.3 Reverse trend of woodland fragmentation by targeting land owners/managers of isolated areas for habitat agreements.	FCW, Coed Cymru, Coed Cadw	MCC, GWT, CCW	Ongoing
<b>3. Site safeguard &amp; protection</b>			
3.1 Ensure that all examples of woodland which meet the relevant criteria are designated as SINCs.	MCC, GWT	CCW	Start 2008
<b>4. Habitat and Site Management</b>			
4.1 Ensure that all County and Community Council owned woodland sites are appropriately managed.	MCC	CCW	
4.2 Maintain existing positive management for woodland on sites managed by Biodiversity Partner organisations.	FCW, Coed Cadw	MCC, GWT	Underway
4.3 Eliminate where possible alien vegetation e.g. Rhododendron, Japanese knotweed, Himalayan balsam etc.	Invasive Species Partnership	MCC	
<b>5. Habitat creation/restoration</b>			
5.1 Identify key areas for woodland expansion using a strategic approach in order to effectively target resources.	FCW, Coed Cadw	CCW, GWT, MCC	Underway
5.2. Create new native woodland on species poor sites e.g. agriculturally improved fields.	FCW, Coed Cadw	MCC, GWT, CCW, Private landowners	Underway
<b>6. Survey &amp; monitoring</b>			
6.1 Ensure extent, type and condition of all of the woodland resource is accurately recorded. Compile existing information (e.g. Phase I, CCW Upland Vegetation Survey, SINC surveys) and	MCC	CCW, GWT, FCW, Wye Valley AONB	By 2010

undertake new survey work as required.			
6.2 Establish an inventory of all nationally scarce, Red Data and priority BAP species within woodland habitats in Monmouthshire.	SEWBRcC, GWT, FCW, CCW	BSBI, BCW, MBG, MMBG, SWMG	Ongoing
6.3 Encourage the general public to record and report species found in woodland habitats to SEWBRcC.	SEWBRcC	MCC, GWT, FCW, Coed Cadw, Coed Cymru	Ongoing
<b>7. Communication - Advisory</b>			
7.1 Raise awareness of the conservation importance and decline of woodland.	FCW, Coed Cadw, MCC	CCW, Wye Valley AONB	Ongoing
7.2 Provide advice on the interest and management of woodland, as required, to landowners, occupiers, the public and partner organisations. This is particularly important on sites of SINC quality.	FCW, MCC, GWT	CCW	Ongoing
<b>8. Communication - Publicity</b>			
8.1 Raise public awareness of the importance of woodland and associated species through media articles, open days, farm walks, interpretation and events.	FCW, Coed Cadw	CCW, MCC, Coed Cymru, GWT	Ongoing

### 7. Link to other plans

Woodlands are associated with many species for which Species Action Plans or Statements have been prepared. These include lesser horseshoe, dormouse, nightjar, turtle dove, Argent and sable, waved carpet, drab looper, greater butterfly orchid and spreading bellflower. Several Plans or Statements are yet to be written for species that use woodland including otter, lesser butterfly orchid, red wood ant, yellow necked mouse.

### 8. Abbreviations

AONB	Wye Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty
BCW	Butterfly Conservation Wales
BSBI	Botanical Society of the British Isles
CCW	Countryside Council for Wales
FCW	Forestry Commission Wales.
GOS	Gwent Ornithological Society
GWT	Gwent Wildlife Trust
MBG	Monmouthshire Bat Group

MCC	Monmouthshire County Council
MMBG	Monmouthshire Moth and Butterfly Group
RSPB	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
SEWBRc	South East Wales Biodiversity Records Centre
WAG	Welsh Assembly Government

## 9. References

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**APPENDIX – Key to National Vegetation Classification woodland types in Monmouthshire****Lowland beech & yew woodland HAP:**

**W12:** Beech - Dog's mercury woodland (*Fagus sylvatica* - *Mercurialis perennis* woodland)

**W13:** Yew woodland (*Taxus baccata* woodland)

**W14:** Beech - bramble woodland (*Fagus sylvatica* - *Rubus fruticosus* woodland)

**Upland mixed ashwoods HAP:**

**W8:** Ash - Field maple - Dog's mercury woodland (*Fraxinus excelsior* - *Acer campestre* - *Mercurialis perennis* woodland)

**W9:** Ash - Rowan - Dog's mercury woodland (*Fraxinus excelsior* - *Sorbus aucuparia* - *Mercurialis perennis* woodland)

**Lowland mixed deciduous woodland HAP:**

**W10:** Pedunculate oak - Bracken - Bramble woodland (*Quercus robur* - *Pteridium aquilinum* - *Rubus fruticosus* woodland)

**W11:** Pedunculate oak - Downy birch - Wood sorrel woodland (*Quercus petraea* - *Betula pubescens* - *Oxalis acetosella* woodland)

**Upland oakwood HAP:**

**W16b:** Oak spp. - Birch spp. - Wavy hair-grass woodland, Bilberry - male fern sub-community. (*Quercus* spp. - *Betula* spp. - *Deschampsia flexuosa* woodland, *Vaccinium myrtillus* - *Dryopteris dilatata* sub-community)

**Wet woodland HAP:**

**W5:** Alder - Greater tussock sedge woodland (*Alnus glutinosa* - *Carex paniculata* woodland)

**W7:** Alder - Ash - Yellow pimpernel woodland (*Alnus glutinosa* - *Fraxinus excelsior* - *Lysimachia nemorum* woodland)