

Case Study

Nature Improvement Area (NIA) project:

Graffham Down

Background

Situated within the wooded downs of West Sussex, Graffham Down lies on the crest of the northern escarpment. Remote from roads and traffic noise, the site is well-served by a number of public paths, including the South Downs Way National Trail and is open for anyone to explore and enjoy.

Designated as a Site of Nature Conservation Interest (SNCI), Graffham Down is a mosaic of semi-natural habitats extending to 31 hectares that includes herb-rich grassland, scrub and woodland and provides a home to notable butterfly and dormice populations.

The site is managed under lease by the Graffham Down Trust (GDT), a volunteer group with an enthusiastic membership drawn largely from residents of Graffham village.

Seeking to increase both habitat quality and connectivity along the South Downs Way corridor, Graffham Down was quickly identified as a valuable site for the Nature Improvement Area (NIA) project.

Habitat is an ecological or environmental area that is inhabited by human, a particular species of animal, plant, or other type of organism; it is a place where a living thing lives, where it can find food, shelter, protection and mates for reproduction. A habitat is made up of physical factors such as soil, moisture, range of temperature, and availability of light as well as biotic factors such as the availability of food and the presence of predators.

Corridors are a primary conservation tool to increase connectivity, promote individual movement, and increase gene flow among populations in fragmented landscapes.



Planning open spaces to create a more favourable, varied habitat.

The Authority (SDNPA) staff and match-funded by the local branch of Butterfly Conservation. Along the southern edge of an old forestry plantation, large 30m x 20m 'scallop' were created, and stumps removed to help future maintenance. Other areas had become isolated and shaded; careful felling of sections created new 'windows' that revealed and re-connected areas of downland. Elsewhere, teams of volunteers widened woodland rides and cleared scrub to open up sunny glades.

Funds were allocated from the NIA project to allow the GDT to purchase tools and equipment for weekend work parties. This included the purchase of a brush-cutter, combined with training and assessment for an operator, in addition to hand tools and protective equipment.

Poorly-drained sections of the South Downs Way running through the middle of the site were infilled with stone, using the neighbouring Forestry Commission track for lorry and plant access, and new oak gates were installed at key locations.

“This support was badly needed and has given a boost to the management of the reserves. We are very pleased with the results.”

Paul Dimmer, Trustee and Manager of Reserves

The outcomes

The broad support from other agencies and organisations working together, and the provision of tools and training, has helped to build additional capacity and confidence within the volunteers of the Graffham Down Trust, which is evident in their future plans for taking the site forward.

Assessing the impact of habitat management is difficult in the short-term and future monitoring will be necessary to determine ‘real’ success. However, the recent changes in vegetation structure and increased light levels are evident throughout the site; there are already encouraging signs of reinvigorated wild flower populations. The real measure of success as part of a landscape-scale project will be if, as is hoped, key butterfly ‘indicator’ species currently not present, respond to the changes and colonise the site.

There is also a sense that the site is now more inviting for people. The clearance works have created enticing, sunlit views, enhancing the experience of visitors, helping to develop a greater sense of cohesion and identity for the site as a whole.

The package of works was designed to complement, and build on, an existing Stewardship agreement for the site, highlighting the role that SDNPA plays in bringing added value to the work of others.



The future

Grazing with livestock is essential for grassland management; the GDT has formed a partnership with a local farmer to facilitate sheep-grazing. In addition, the GDT has negotiated with a neighbour to secure a connection to an agricultural water supply. This is an important development for the long-term management of the site. A piped water supply will allow cattle to be introduced to the site; their grazing habits and sheer weight will be beneficial in tackling coarse grasses and woody re-growth.

The GDT is also keen that its work is seen, understood, and enjoyed. It is developing interpretation panels and other media to promote the site and the relationship between Graffham Down, the South Downs Way and Graffham village.

As a woodland-grassland mosaic site, tree management will be a key consideration for the future. A professional woodland manager has been appointed to develop and deliver an appropriate forestry plan, tailored to the site and its unique character.

The NIA as a project has now ended having successfully achieved its aims and objectives.

For further information please contact; Nigel James, Area Manager, Central Downs, SDNPA

nigel.james@southdowns.gov.uk