

BASC Information Sheet

WOODLANDS - SHOOTING AND BIODIVERSITY

Farm woodlands can offer excellent sporting opportunity for pheasant shooting on a formal or informal basis; they are also very important habitats for wildlife. A carefully designed conservation management plan will enhance not only the wildlife value of the woodland but also the shooting. Where new planting is being considered, careful planning is required to ensure the woodland achieves its full potential for wildlife and shooting.

Existing woodland

The longer a woodland has been in existence, the greater its value for wildlife. Ancient woodlands are particularly important for wildlife and before any management work is done it is always best to discuss your plans with the BASC Conservation and Land Management Team, or other suitably qualified organisation.

The aim of any conservation management plan for woodland should be to provide a habitat that is as diverse as possible, in age and structure. This diversity will also prove to be very attractive to game, including pheasants and woodcock.

In older woodlands the canopy should be well established, it is important therefore to make sure that younger maiden trees are coming forward to replace the older trees when they eventually die. The shrub layer is an important area for wildlife and game, the denser this area, the warmer the woodland and the better its holding capacity.

Glades / coppice compartments

Creating glades or coppice compartments provides an opportunity to regenerate the shrub layer, and the chance to select the better quality trees which will be allowed to grow on into mature standards. Because the process of clearing a glade allows light to reach the woodland floor, plant seeds that have been dormant are given a chance to grow and set seed for future generations. Glades can be maintained as such, or rotated around the woodland as coppice compartments. This latter option ensures that all of the wood in managed in rotation, providing diversity in age and structure, and therefore a better habitat for wildlife. Glades or recently coppiced compartments are important areas for game birds, providing nesting and feeding habitat. They can also be very useful when deer management is being carried out. The length of rotation for cutting each glade or compartment will vary depending on the size of the wood, and the amount of labour available. However, as a guide only, a rotation of between 15 – 20 years should be adequate.

When trees and shrubs are coppiced and rabbits and deer are present in a woodland, there is a risk that the tender new shoots will be damaged by browsing. Where rabbit and deer numbers are high, coppice growth can be severely damaged, in some cases sufficiently badly to kill the shrub. Coppice compartments can be fenced, but this is very costly and only justifiable where the regenerating ground flora is particularly important. Coppice stumps of both shrubs and trees can be covered with small branches to a height of about 80 cm to protect the young shoots from damage by deer and rabbits. The remaining lop and top can be made into a dead hedge around the area that has been coppiced. This will provide a refuge for insects and will also help to keep out the smaller deer species. The larger branches which are not to be taken for firewood can be stacked away from the base of trees, and out of full sunlight. They provide 'eco' heaps for insects, fungus, lichen and small mammals.

Rides and woodland edge

Rides and woodland edge increase the diversity of woodland flora and fauna in a way that is disproportionate to their area. The edges of woodlands and the rides support large numbers of light demanding species which may be absent elsewhere in the wood. Well managed rides can provide opportunities for scarce grassland plants and large numbers of grassland and scrub invertebrates. Pheasants are birds of the woodland edge and by creating and maintaining rides you are providing more edge habitat for them to benefit from. For this reason it is important to manage these areas to ensure they reach their full potential.

Because of the dependency on light, it is important to keep shading of rides and woodland edge to a minimum. Three factors are responsible for shading: ride width, the height of adjacent trees and orientation. Where woodland or ride edges face south try to increase this area by cutting scallops into the vegetation. This will provide sunny sheltered areas which will be very attractive to insects. Pheasants will use ride and woodland edges for nesting, and the abundant insect supply in the vegetation will help ensure good chick survival. Well positioned and maintained rides will also provide better gun stands.

When managing rides it is possible to create a great deal of structural diversity, which in turn attracts a wider range of species. A central area of short grass and herbs is usual, the cover being cut two or three times per year. At the edges of the rides the vegetation can be left to grow tall, to flower and set seed. Suitable management for the ride edges would be to cut one side each year in late autumn. To increase the diversity of plants along woodland and ride edges it is best if cut vegetation can be removed. This need not be taken off site, but can be piled up into heaps along the ride edges. These will provide habitat for a number of insects and small mammals and may also be used as egg laying sites by grass snakes if they are present. The shrub layer along the edges of rides can be coppiced in rotation, the length of which will be determined by the amount of shade created.

Felling Licences

Felling more than 5 cubic metres of live timber in any calendar quarter (2 cubic metres if sold) normally requires a felling licence from the Forestry Commission in England and Scotland, Natural Resources Wales or the The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (Northern Ireland). Dead or blown down trees are not counted in this calculation. It is wise to check if you need a licence before you start work.

New Woodland

Management objectives (e.g. shooting, conservation, timber production, shelter and screening) must be established at a very early stage as these will affect the design and layout of the new woodland. They will vary depending upon your particular interests and needs and it is invariably possible to design a woodland to meet a number of different objectives.

The choice of species to plant will to some extent be influenced by soil type, although most native trees will tolerate a wide range of soils. In general, taller growing trees should be kept towards the middle of a new woodland with shorter species and shrubs around the margins and edges of rides. Trees should be planted in small groups of the same species, to improve growth and simplify thinning in the future. Groups of shrubs can also be included in the body of the woodland, to benefit game and other wildlife. Small numbers of conifers can be included for warmth and shelter, but in lowland areas these may not be appropriate in the local landscape.

Protection

Newly planted trees can be damaged by rabbits, hare and deer. There are two ways to protect young trees, either with individual tree shelters or a perimeter fence. The size of the new planting and the type of pests present will dictate which is the most cost effective way to protect new trees. Where trees are left to regenerate naturally, the best form of protection is a perimeter fence.

Grants

Grants for establishing new woodlands are available under from Forestry Commission in England and Scotland, Natural Resources Wales or the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (Northern Ireland). Some grants are also available from charities like the Woodland Trust.

Further Advice

The BASC Conservation and Land Management Team will be pleased to discuss any of the above information with you. *We are here to help*, contact us at:
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