

## Wyre Forest Conservation Volunteers

PHIL RUDLIN AND CHRIS DONCASTER

In 2001 the Forestry Commission was approached by some of the children from the local Watch Group. (This is the junior branch of the Wildlife Trust). They had learned a great deal about the forest during their time in the group, but some of the older ones wanted to carry out some practical conservation work. This was a timely enquiry as for many years the Wyre Forest Society had run a conservation volunteer group, which had done some great work across the forest. However, they had recently had to hang up their boots as, at their own admission, they were getting too old and too few to carry on effectively!

It was agreed to start up a new workparty and on 1st November 2001, five children and their families came along to work in the Arboretum, burning conifer brash after felling. Photo 1 below shows the original team. The group went from strength to strength and is now in its 10th season. Believe it or not, 9 of the people pictured in photo 1 still come regularly today. Can you spot 6 of them in photo 2, taken in April 2011?

It is a very mixed group – currently the age range is from 7 - to 70ish! The reasons for volunteering vary, with some people looking to gain experience for future employment, some wanting to be involved in conservation work and to make a difference, and some just enjoying working outdoors and the social side of it! Over the years we have had 90 different people come along and have a go. Some come just the once and find it is not for them or cannot commit to coming regularly. Others have become part of the 'core family' and make

up the backbone of the group. We have had up to 40 on workparty days, but usually average at least 20 each time. We have worked all over the forest, helping to create wildlife corridors or temporary open space, to benefit many species of plants, invertebrates, reptiles and birds.

The main winter work (also the most popular) is burning – everyone seems to like a bonfire! This clears the forest floor of any brash (smaller branches left after felling operations). In most cases if this was not carried out, no light would get to the ground and few flowers, if any would stand a chance of germination. Log piles are created and allowed to rot down on each site to improve dead wood habitat, which is uncommon in the Wyre Forest.

The main summer work is the annual battle of the Balsam! The Forestry Commission has been controlling Himalayan Balsam in Shrawley Wood for 12 years, using various methods, including machinery. However, you cannot beat people power. The group have had a major impact on the plant in the woodland and are undoubtedly the main reason why the amount of this alien plant has been significantly reduced in Shrawley. 1510 Man hours of their time has produced great results, although, I fear we shall need to continue this effort for many years to come!

Other tasks carried out over the years include:

- Raking grass to improve 3 meadows which are too small or inaccessible to graze or use machinery on.
- Flower surveys on meadows to chart improvements.



Photo 1 2001 above - Chris Doncaster Conservation Workparties Photo 2 2011 below - Phil Rudlin



# Wyre Forest Study Group



Hurst Coppice stream valley before and after the burning, March 2008 Phil Rudlin

- Removal of deer fences from 4 regeneration coupes in New Parks, which have grown out of browsing height.
- Removal of over 2000 tree tubes from Oversley Wood, in Warwickshire.
- Removal of young conifers on reptile sites.
- Removal of young regenerating conifers and broadleaves on heathland sites
- Removal of young regenerating conifers and broadleaves on wetland sites.
- Identifying, recording and tagging future senility trees and trees to be ringbarked to create standing deadwood for the future.

There are many fine examples of our work across the forest. However, the Dowles Brook corridor between the Mercian Warrior and Experimental Pool sums up what a difference a few volunteers can make!

From small beginnings the group has grown into a well established and respected workparty. No one element or person has created this. It is a combination of hardworking individuals who have a pride in making a significant difference to the biodiversity of the Wyre Forest. It may also have something to do with the fine BBQ and homemade wine at lunch time! However, without this group the Wyre Forest would be a poorer place. Much needed improvement and maintenance of a wide range of habitats would not be carried out without them. The importance of such groups cannot be underestimated, especially in the current climate, with resources stretched to the limit and more reliance on volunteers.



Dowles corridor before and after felling, December 2003

Phil Rudlin



Dowles corridor – after burning, March 2004 and May 2005

Phil Rudlin