

## Reptile Management on Forestry Commission Land 2015

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Much has been discussed and written about the dramatic reduction of reptiles in Wyre Forest, particularly the Adder. There seem to be many factors which can adversely affect populations, including climate change, disturbance, the increase of predators such as Buzzards and Pheasants or unsympathetic woodland management. We have learned much over the last few decades, particularly from Sylvia Sheldon's long term monitoring and recent radio tracking, about their numbers and dynamics. However, we still know little about their exact habitat requirements. There appears to be plenty of open space across the forest landscape, which should hold good reptile populations, but alas positive records are lacking in many areas. Adders, in particular appear reluctant to move from favoured areas. When their habitat degrades, they don't seem to move to suitable habitat nearby, they just disappear!

In 2012 Louise Sutherland was contracted to carry out habitat assessments, produce a plan to link suitable habitats for reptiles to recolonise and recommend appropriate management methods. Using computer modules, data from Sylvia's records and local knowledge, she concluded that the current populations were becoming isolated and would find it difficult to move between sites. Radio tracking has showed that animals rarely moved more than half a kilometre from their hibernation site, either to feed or during the spring breeding season. It was therefore

decided that habitat should be provided on sunny banks no further than half a kilometre apart and with each covering a minimum of 3ha. Consequently three areas on Wimperhill were identified as suitable sites for conifer removal and thereafter maintenance as open space. Two of these areas are planned to be felled in the summer of 2016. Both sites are adjacent to small pockets of lowland heath and these will be extended up to 3ha. Unfortunately, there have not been any records of Adders in these areas in recent years and hence it is difficult to see how they can



Photo 2. Slow Worms under refugia with ants Phil Rudlin

recolonise these relic sites given their spatial isolation. However, this type of habitat will be of benefit to other reptiles, native flora, invertebrates and ground nesting birds, possibly even Nightjars! Adder populations are



Photo 1. Refugia in heathland clearing

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still in decline and becoming increasingly fragmented. Without positive management this trend is certain to continue. Most of the other issues that affect them we can do little or nothing about, but by providing them with a network of accessible, suitable habitat they may have a chance.



Photo 3. Heather regenerating from seed

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On some of our existing sites the heather has become rather old and 'leggy' as it has never been managed. Most of it is the same age and has little variety in structure. As mowing or traditional heather burning is both impractical on such small areas and also undesirable with reptiles on site, one of Louise's recommendations was to manage this by cutting small kidney shaped areas, approximately 3mx2m. In 2014, 12 such areas were cut on 3 sites on Longdon Orchard and Wimpherhill, using clearing saws and ensuring the cut material was removed when the work was complete. This process creates much more open space within very thick, blanket like heather and good edge effect for reptiles to bask safely in a warm, sheltered micro-climate. Metal corrugated sheets, known as "refugia", were placed in some of these to help monitor reptiles. (Photo 1) Although Adders rarely use these refugia they have been recorded under them in 2015 as have Grass Snakes and particularly Slow Worms. One of the reasons Adders are less likely to use these refugia is that Ants colonise most of them very quickly and they just don't get on!! However, it is a bonus for Slow Worms as the eggs provide a ready meal. (Photo 2) Due to the age of the heather little has regenerated from the cut plants. However, each of the cleared areas have reacted slightly differently, with some now quite grassy and others with Bilberry colonising. There are also some signs of heather regenerating from seed, which is a slow process but should produce a mixed age structure of the plant in the future. (Photo 3) 11 further areas were cut on 2 sites in January 2016 and this will continue in the future.

Louise's report, *Restoration of the Adder Population in Wyre Forest* is now complete and many of her recommendations have been incorporated into the joint management plan of Natural England and Forestry Commission. It is therefore hoped that the Adder has a future in the Wyre Forest landscape and suitable habitats will be maintained, protected and increased.

A site on Longdon Orchard has been managed by Butterfly Conservation volunteers since 2012. They have fought a valiant battle with Silver Birch to maintain open heathland. However it has regenerated so fast from the cut stumps that we finally relented and treated them with Roundup, which was painted onto the stumps in January 2016. It is hoped that by killing the majority of stumps it will stay open for longer and the volunteers can manage a larger area more effectively in the future. (Photo 4)

In the winter of 2014/15 we were approached, via Jenny Joy from Butterfly Conservation, by a local tree surgery company, Howdens. They were interested in carrying out some conservation work in the Wyre Forest, using their staff as volunteers. Always keen to use free labour we found two sites, on Wimpherhill and in the Postensplain area of the forest, where work was needed to improve habitat for both reptiles and butterflies, particularly the Pearl bordered Fritillary. They provided 4 men for 3 days using chainsaws, which produced some really good results on both sites. One site in particular has shown good numbers of Common Lizards utilizing the recently cleared area. (Photos 5 and 6 show an area of conifer before and after clearance by Howdens. Photos 7 and 8 show an area of Birch in a small valley before and after clearance by Howdens.)

I would like to thank all who have made these operations possible. With limited resources we rely heavily on volunteers to carry out small scale scrub clearance and monitoring of many of the habitats created to ensure that all native creatures, including reptiles, thrive.



Photo 4. Birch scrub cut on Longdon by BC volunteers

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