

RESERVES

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Reserves Update - December 2013

I think it is safe to say that we are now on top of everything and our Hampshire Reserves are thriving under the continued management of our wonderful volunteers and staff alike. Since acquiring the Allotments in Oct 2012, my time has been taken up with securing funding from various sources. These include landfill funding from BIFFA and Natural England as part of our Nature Improvement Area (NIA) status. If you want to look at the work that we are doing, copy and paste the following link into your browser, <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/conservation/biodiversity/funding/nia/projects/southdowns.aspx>

Personally this has provided a positive way of moving our Reserves forward and looking at the whole Landscape scale approach to managing habitat for butterflies and moths, and acknowledging where our Reserves sit, and the part that they play within that Landscape. As a committee member on the NIA/Winchester Focal Area Group, I am particularly proud of that we have achieved since the launch of the partnership. Below is an excerpt of how we are working together with partner organisations to fulfil these objectives.

"..In August project partners in the Winchester Focal Area acquired seven Shetland ewes to help establish a breeding flock. The Shetland flock was used to graze Butterfly Conservation's Magdalen Hill Down Nature Reserve and a new chalk grassland restoration project at Hockley Golf Course. In September one of the project partners acquired 18 British White cattle which have since multiplied to a herd of 20 grazing four sites; the project continues to deploy graziers' herds of 27 Dexters and 12 British Whites at project locations within the NIA.."

9 of the Dexters currently graze Magdalen Hill Down, along with various recruits from the British White herd. They all have their positive attributes, and when grazing with conservation in mind, it is important to consider their strong points when deciding on which is the best breed for the job in hand. Below is an article that was included in the last Branch newsletter.

Grazing our Hampshire Reserves

We are often asked the following question: Why do we graze our Reserves, which livestock do we choose, and why?

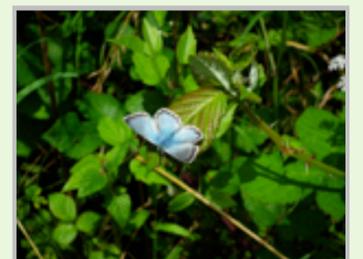
Livestock play an important role in conservation, and our three Reserves – Magdalen Hill Down, Yew Hill and Bentley Station Meadow - all rely on cattle and sheep to take off the summer growth between late summer and the spring of the following year.

Our aim is to create a varied range of turf heights to suit the myriad permutations that Lepidoptera require throughout the complex stages of their life-cycles. Many of the caterpillar food-plants require open ground in which to establish, and cattle, apart from taking off the out-competing coarser grasses, will also poach the ground with their hooves, leaving bare-ground that will readily be colonised by the low growing herbs such as Common bird's-foot trefoil *Lotus corniculatus* and Horseshoe vetch *Hippocrepis comosa* – important for the larvae of the Common Blue *Polyommatus icarus* and the Chalkhill Blue *Lysandra coridon* butterflies respectively.

The type of animal we choose largely depends on what is available, but getting the right 'teeth' for the job is an important factor in determining the end result.

Not all livestock will readily eat the stuff we would like to control such as nettles, thistles, hogweed and scrub, but there are certain breeds that are particularly suited to rough grassland and these tend to be our more native, hardy breeds.

The Rare Breeds Survival Trust (RBST) was set up in the 1970's to save the disappearing breeds that are native to the British Isles, and monitor them through a 'Rare Breeds Watchlist'. Livestock are rated on a scale of 1 - 5 (Critical, Endangered, Vulnerable, At risk, and Minority). As they progress through the categories, they are taken off the Watchlist and placed into category 6: Other Native Breeds.



Chalkhill Blue



Livestock handling system

If you visit Magdalen Hill Down this Autumn/winter you will come across a herd of British Whites grazing the Reserve (with the odd Sussex mingling amongst them). This breed are currently rated a category 6, having progressed through all 5 categories. Their ancestry can be traced back to the ancient breed of Park Cattle, which gave rise to the White Park (horned) and the British White, which are naturally polled (hornless). The breed is widely used in conservation grazing, due to their ability to thrive on rough grazing, where they readily eat thistles, nettles, and invasive scrub species such as bramble and birch. Such grazing helps to maintain the floristically rich chalk downland habitat that we aim to preserve.

If you venture on to the steep slopes of Magdalen Hill Down, you will meet the Dexter cattle. This breed is a little feisty at times, and although it is one of the smaller breeds of British Cattle, it has a big attitude. It was introduced to England in 1882 from the south west of Ireland from where it originated.

This particular herd has recently been used to successfully graze nearby Longwood Warren; a privately owned strip of remnant chalk grassland that had been heavily invaded with scrub.

Once the summer growth of tall vegetation has been taken off, the sheep arrive. Either to follow-on from the cattle, or, later in the spring to take off the first flush of grass growth to enable the chalk grassland plants the opportunity to establish.

Chalk downlands are typically calcareous grasslands developed over limestone on thin, unimproved soils. This habitat was formed by centuries of sheep grazing and wild animal interaction. As rabbit numbers have declined in recent years, mainly due to disease, the sheep play an ever more vital role in maintaining the close-cropped turf, crucial for Rock-rose *Helianthemum nummularium* – an evergreen shrub, and the foodplant of several species of butterfly such as the Brown Argus *Aricia agestis*, and Green Hairstreak *Callophrys rubi*, both of which can be found at our Hampshire Reserves.

Shetland sheep, another rare breed, are favoured for their hardiness and ability to take a wide range of problem species. We have had a small flock of wethers permanently grazing Magdalen for 2 years now, affectionately known as 'Gerry and the Pacemakers'; Gerry is the

leader, and with an average age of 9 years, they are certainly getting on a bit, but do a fantastic job in controlling two of our most problematic species – Hogweed *Heracleum sphondylium* and Wild Clematis *Clematis vitalba*.



In November 2012 a Hebridean flock arrived to graze Northdown. Here is a picture of Yocklett, a Moorit lamb, who was born there on the 21st April this year.

A further three British Whites will spend the winter at Yew Hill, and at Bentley Station Meadow, two very charismatic Highland cattle – Black Beauty and Scarlett – will attempt to sort out this years extraordinary grass growth.

I hope this article goes at least some-way to answering the question as to why and how we graze our Reserves, and who knows, maybe be the dog-walker at Magdalen who made the following comment – “you are deliberately putting cattle here to annoy the dog-walkers” – might also find it insightful?

As always, without volunteers, none of this would be possible. All the livestock have to be checked daily (very time consuming), and the logistics of catching, loading and moving cattle and sheep are mind-boggling. Thank you, you know who you are.

Do take a look at the Rare Breeds Survival Trust’s website for more information on our native breeds <https://www.rbst.org.uk/>

Jayne Chapman - Reserves Officer

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Registered Office: Manor Yard, East Lulworth, Wareham, Dorset, BH20 5QP, Tel: 01929 400 209

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