

Update for 7th December 2020

Longslade Bridges

These bridges were installed in 2004 and have reached the end of their design life. They are unsafe for public use and as a result isolated from the network to prevent harm to members of the public whilst a solution has been sought. Due to the nature of the New Forest, this requires a great deal of planning and consultation to ensure all stakeholders are satisfied with the proposed solution.

These bridges are now on Forestry England's replacement programme and were due to be replaced during 2020. However, the evolving Coronavirus pandemic has led to a number of delays in projects.

We now have quotes for both bridges, including the removal of the existing bridges and installation of the new ones. We have engaged with the NFNPA planning authority to provide clarity on the planning situation. We have to apply for planning permission.

The timeline regarding this is as follows; Nov/Dec - Planning Submitted, January - Planning Granted, Jan/Feb - Removal of existing Bridges, Feb/March - Installation of new bridges. Obviously, this is dependent on planning permission and the process to satisfy the planners.

Current Operational/Car Park/Cycle and Walking route Closures

Work has started in Poundhill Inclosure, near Blackwater car park, and Fletchers Thorns, to remove some trees to make space for the remaining trees to go and to remove some of the Corsican pine trees that were planted there in 1977 and birch trees, in order to allow the area to go back to open forest. The long-term plan for this area (about the size of two football fields) is to create new links that bring together the open forest and realign the fencing so that the area can be grazed by Commoners' livestock.

Work is currently underway to remove large conifer trees from an area on the western-side of Perrywood/Ironshill Inclosure. This area was previously thinned and this is the final felling operation to return the area back to open habitat. The second phase will be in an area on the eastern-side of the same inclosure that is currently fenced off to allow for the trees to naturally regenerate. We shall be removing the mature conifers from within this area and thinning out some of the younger trees to provide more light to those growing below their sheltering canopy.

Winter Car Park Closures 2020/21

Every year we shut a small number of car parks over the winter, those in need of maintenance or likely to be damaged by bad weather. This year we are keeping some of these open a little longer than usual as we recognise that greater numbers of people want to spend time outdoors during lockdown restrictions and this will help reduce congestion across our car parks.

The winter months are a particularly busy time for Forestry England's Recreation and Civil Engineer teams, who are working hard to repair and re-surface the car parks after the very busy summer period when the volume of traffic was high.

Ground Nesting Birds 20/21

Over the coming weeks we are starting to plan for next year's ground nesting bird season, a time when several rare species of birds including the Nightjar, Curlew, Woodlark and Dartford Warbler, start their breeding cycle. Unlike most birds they choose the rather risky tactic of building their nests on the ground rather than in the trees making them extremely vulnerable. If disturbed, they may flee their nests and expose their eggs and chicks to predators.

This season's plans weren't fully achieved due to C-19. Certainly, our on-the-ground engagement couldn't happen. Lockdown meant that the Forest was quieter, and we certainly saw an increase in successful breeding pairs. The easing of lockdown back in late Spring saw huge increases to the numbers of people out on the Forest undertaking their daily recreation. We kept some additional car parks closed where we had successful breeding pairs and it demonstrated that if undisturbed, birds can successfully breed. There were of course some disappointments and unsuccessful fledging due to additional disturbance after lockdown.

The New Forest is a favourite spot to nest for these birds, one of the reasons that much of the Forest is a Special Protection Area for birds. This is why each year we close a small number of car parks in areas that provide important habitats for these birds. The car parks affected are Crockford, Crockford Clump, Hincheslea Moor, Clay Hill in Burley and Yew Tree Heath. Closing these car parks helps us to create quiet zones around these very sensitive sites offering the birds greater protection, which we hope will make it more likely that they will be able to breed successfully.

We want to continue to build on the campaign and to highlight the importance of GNB. The campaign will again be supported by car park closures, dedicated GNB seasonal rangers to engage and educate with users and on-site informational and instructional signage. We have chosen 3 sites (Burbush, Yew Tree Heath, Moonhills) this year to focus efforts with signage. Orange Informational signage will detail the importance of GNB and their habitat generally around a protective zone from car parks. Red Instructional signage will be present further towards a protective breeding zone. We will be looking to further minimise disturbance and access to these key target areas by reducing the opportunity for unofficial parking outside of car parks



Hatchet Pond (A bit heavy but worth a read for those who are interested)

There are over one thousand ponds and lakes in the New Forest, and they are exceptional habitats for wildlife. They support an extremely varied and rich community of freshwater plants and animals, almost unmatched in any other lowland landscape in the UK. Hatchet Pond is a shallow lake created at the end of the 18th century by damming a stream to provide a head of water to power Hatchet Mill. It is the largest body of fresh water within the Crown Lands of the New Forest and is managed by Forestry England. While the neighbouring Little Hatchet Pond and adjoining unnamed pond are probably of natural origin, Hatchet Pond was formed by flooding 6.7 hectares of marl pits, previously dug to produce lime for improving local agricultural land. The headwaters of the Hatchet stream upstream of Hatchet Pond drain part of the surrounding open semi-natural heathland common of Beaulieu Heath, which is grazed by livestock including cattle, ponies and donkeys.

Hatchet Pond is a year-round destination for visitors to the New Forest and is particularly popular in the summer. The site has a car park with public conveniences which are now closed. It is easily accessible from the B3054 just west of Beaulieu. People come to Hatchet Pond to walk their dogs, to sit and admire the scenery, and to walk or picnic. Swimming and boating (including kayaking and paddle boarding) are not permitted. People occasionally ride horses into the water. Other prohibited activities include wild camping, littering, feeding livestock, barbecues and campfires. The number of visitors has been increasing in recent years, and saw a peak in the summer of 2020, associated with wider travel restrictions due to the Covid 19 pandemic. This period also saw a steep increase in the number of incidents of damaging and prohibited activities.

Coarse fishing is offered under a Forestry England fishing permit. Anglers fish for bream, tench, roach, perch, pike and eels and describe the site as challenging but good.

Over the past 200 years Hatchet Pond has developed into a wildlife habitat which supports 133 wetland plant species - more than a third of those found in the UK. The pond has a similar diversity of invertebrates. In total, 99 species of freshwater macro-invertebrate (insects, snails etc.) have been recorded, including eight species of conservation importance due to their rarity or threatened status. Hatchet Pond has the highest possible conservation status and is protected at both a national and international level. It is a feature of the New Forest Site of Special Scientific Interest and is also part of the New Forest Special Area of Conservation, an international designation under the European Habitat Regulations. As well as being protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Act and the Habitats Regulations, Hatchet Pond has additional status as it is listed in the EU Water Framework Directive River Basin Management Plan. It is one of the UK's reference-condition lakes of a very high quality.

The particularly high species-richness of Hatchet Pond is explained by a number of historic factors: its previously clean unpolluted water, low-intensity land management and the variety of habitat types within the Pond. This variety allows the pond to support species which live on bare mineral soils alongside those requiring vegetation; and a combination of calcium-needing species (like snails) and species preferring acid water.

Although right now the pond is exceptionally rich in wildlife, its delicately balanced water chemistry is showing significant signs of changing in a way which may threaten the special qualities of the pond if preventative measures are not taken. Such measures, taken now, can ensure that Hatchet Pond does not suffer the degenerative nutrient enrichment which has befallen similar water bodies in the region.

The quality of water in ponds and lakes can be measured by looking at its chemical constituents and its biological features. The most important chemical characteristics are usually abundance of phosphorus (which is effectively a fertiliser) and pH (which shows the acidity of the water). High levels of phosphorus can encourage excessive growth of algae, which stains the water green or brown and reduces the light available to larger aquatic plants, thereby weakening them and affecting food and shelter for invertebrates. When the algae die, it is broken down by bacteria and the increase in bacterial activity uses up much of the oxygen dissolved in the water, with further damaging effects on plants, invertebrates and fish. If the acidity of the water also drops, these effects can become more marked. Water samples taken from Hatchet Pond have shown increasing phosphorus levels, and decreasing acidity - both worrying signs.

Similarly, measures of biological health include assessments of the number and kinds of creatures and algae floating in the water, and the presence and abundance of characteristic aquatic plants. Hatchet Pond does not currently score well for any of these measures under the Water Framework Directive.

Nationally important places for nature conservation are also assessed periodically by the government wildlife agency, Natural England. They classify sites as favourable or unfavourable and Hatchet Pond has been assessed as 'unfavourable-declining', because of high levels of algae covering the vegetation indicating high nutrient levels, the presence of the introduced invasive plant, New Zealand pygmy weed *Crassula helmsii*, and the presence of introduced fish species.

Bottom-feeding carp are a non-native species, which stir up the sediments as they feed, causing the water to fill with suspended silt which reduces light levels (i.e. the water becomes turbid). Disturbance to the sediments is also caused by people wading into the water or dogs swimming out to retrieve sticks or balls. Sediments also come from soil erosion around the pond caused by visitor activity and by livestock. Livestock have been present for decades, but increased recreational use is more recent. Surveys over the last twenty years have noted increasing amounts of suspended silts in the waters of Hatchet Pond and aerial photographs show a marked increase in erosion around the margins. Erosion of the banks has also led to an increase in flooding of the car park, raising the risk of a pollution incident from the toilet block. Though smaller than Hatchet Pond, the case of another New Forest water body, Cadman's Pond, provides a cautionary example of the consequences of these changes if unchecked. Cadman's Pond suffered a similar range of issues which were not recognised at the time and it is now considered by experts to be seriously biologically degraded, as well as looking unpleasant for the visitor with muddy, silt-laden water. In recent surveys of Hatchet Pond, the submerged plants have been found to be covered with a thick layer of algae, which is a symptom of high nutrient levels, something not recorded in previous surveys. Nutrients could be reaching the Pond from the atmosphere (from industry, transport and agriculture, which we can do nothing locally to control), from drainage from surrounding land (the car park/toilet block, the road or the wider landscape), from erosion of the banks of the Pond, from the use of ground bait by anglers, or from food given to waterfowl which accumulates on the bed of the pond or even from relics from the use of the area during the Second World War. With climate change and the movement of plants for horticulture from around the world, an increasing number of exotic plants are becoming introduced into the UK. These plants can spread rapidly, having few natural enemies to keep them in check, and in extreme cases can smother native flora and affect their associated fauna. Some are difficult or expensive to control. The best opportunity for removing these species and preventing their spread is when they are first found in limited numbers and areas. There are three invasive plants in Hatchet Pond and although elimination of these is not currently possible, their spread can be limited. Containing or reducing the presence of introduced invasive plant species in Hatchet Pond and preventing any additional introductions would be an important step in the right direction.

Following feedback from the public and a range of stakeholders, and on-going monitoring and assessment, a range of measures have been agreed to halt the decline in quality and restore Hatchet Pond. Actions already taken include an environmental DNA survey of the fish within the pond followed by the removal of non-native carp in 2019, a process repeated in 2020. Changes have been made to the car park to help prevent drainage flowing directly into the pond and increased signage has been installed to highlight the prohibition of activities including water sports, swimming and petting or feeding livestock. Engagement with visitors has also been boosted through increased ranger presence at the site.

Additional measures that are at the planning stage include better public information about the importance of the pond for wildlife and how visitors can help to protect it, removing the toilet block to avoid the major risk of pollution (alternative toilet facilities are very close by in nearby Beaulieu and other local villages) and moving the car park (subject to planning consent) further away from the pond while retaining views of it. This will reduce runoff from the car park during rainfall events going directly into the pond. The implementation of these measures aims to turn the clock back on the pollution entering the pond and protect its special features.