

Gorse at Greenham and Crookham Commons

Alex Cruickshank, BBOWT Senior Land Manger (Berkshire) May 2015

Introduction

Following the cessation of mowing by the RAF and USAF on the 'lozenges' at Greenham and Crookham Commons, large areas of the site are now dominated by mature stands of dense gorse.

A report produced by West Berkshire Council in 2012, using aerial photography from 2010, showed the extent of gorse on the main area of the common to be around 33.5ha out of a total area of 248ha. This equates to approximately 13.5% of the open Common plateau.

It was agreed by the Commission in 2012 that a programme of annual cutting of 6.5ha of gorse would be instigated to achieve the following objectives:

- To diversify the gorse structure to maintain a variety of ages
- To reduce the overall extent of the gorse by around 10% in favour of grassland and heather
- To break up the continuous gorse cover into isolated thickets
- To install fire breaks of at least 10m each where continuous gorse stands occur

This programme has been implemented annually since then, with a reduction to c2ha in 2014/15 due to problems with machinery. This will be rectified in 2015/16 by cutting 10ha. Despite this work, there is still a large amount of even-aged gorse present on site and it is agreed by all parties that this needs to be reduced.

A way forward

All parties are agreed that there is too much mature gorse on the plateau of Greenham and Crookham Commons. This is one of the main reasons that Natural England consider the Site of Special Scientific Interest to be in 'unfavourable recovering' condition rather than 'favourable' condition.

At present, the amount of gorse cleared each year is restricted by the following constraints:

- Financial. 6ha of gorse clearance costs approximately £18,000. The disposal of arisings is also expensive.
- Ecological. Gorse is a very valuable habitat for a wide range of fauna.
- Public perception. Each year, a number of complaints are made about the cutting work undertaken.
- Logistical. Cutting large areas of gorse requires specialist machinery; the timings of the cutting are restricted to between October and February due to nesting birds and no ideal solution has been found for dealing with the arisings.

In order to overcome these restrictions, BBOWT plan to:

- Re-map the extent of gorse using aerial photography. The most up-to-date that BBOWT have access to on their GIS system is from 2013. This will provide an idea of change of extent since 2010 and highlight the work that has been undertaken in that period.
- Work with Natural England to secure increased funding for additional scrub and gorse clearance through HLS.
- Investigate new solutions for the disposal of arisings. This may include bio-baling, composting and biomass power generation.
- Follow up all areas that have been cut by contractors with annual visits, and the work required to meet the 'indicators of success' in the HLS agreement will be identified for the following winter work programme. This work may comprise of further cutting, mowing, herbicide application, root removal, litter scraping or no additional action may be required. The indicators of success include:
 - Manage Gorse by cutting and removing selected stands, to ensure that vigour is maintained and that the full range of age classes is represented.
 - Cover of Common / Western Gorse should be between 2% and 10%.