

Ponies graze new Dunwich Forest habitats

There are times within every generation when people look at their business, how it has developed and made it mark and then look at turning back the clock on their landholding. One such business that is doing just that is the Forestry Commission. The partnership should be congratulated for their vision. The Alde Blyth Project is a new partnership involving Suffolk Wildlife Trust and the RSPB; however, in the future it might be that many more landowners might want to join the project.

The purpose of the project is to recreate a network of habitats from a conifer plantation. The ecological network will create vital links between adjoining reedbeds and heathland in east Suffolk that is known for its rich natural variety.

A large proportion of the land within the project area is under management for environmental objectives and the partners share a common vision to move away from micro level management and where possible encourage landscape management that will synchronize habitats and allow wildlife to move naturally through it.

The main benefit of this project is that it moves away from traditional approaches to land management and conservation that have often focused on individual habitat types and species. The project area is large enough to think differently and across fence lines and ownership boundaries and put together jigsaw of habitats that create multiple benefits.

So what are the benefits?

Habitats

- **New, improved and expanded reserves for nationally important habitats.**
- **Wood pasture = less than 20,000 ha in the UK. Approximately 320 ha will be created in the Dunwich area.**
- **Heathland = 58,000 ha in the UK. 135 ha to be created in Dunwich Forest.**
- **Wet woodland = less than 30,000 ha of ancient semi-natural habitat in the UK. Dunwich Forest will develop its river valleys and reed bed edges to help this habitat type.**

Connectivity

- **Connecting habitats – encouraging natural vegetation to develop on its preferred soils types.**
- **Increasing species security – creating space for flora and fauna to establish, thrive and move around.**
- **Making landscapes larger and function in a more robust manner as natural resources.**

Species

The Dunwich Forest will benefit a wide variety of existing species and encourage more to migrate into the area, increasing species diversity and interest.

- **Nightjar**
- **Woodlark**
- **Bats**
- **Beetles**
- **Lichens**
- **Butterflies**

People

- **Access; the project will keep people connected with and enjoying the forest.**
- **Landscape: will become more pleasing on the eye and new habitats will create new interest and diversity through all the seasons.**
- **Increasing sense of place; the Dunwich Forest Project is of national interest and will increase awareness of the Suffolk coast as a whole and this may alleviate current pressure on known hot spots.**

Heathland: Swards of amethyst heath and grassland will reappear as the conifers are gradually removed and harvested. The aim is to allow some areas to revert to open lowland heathland, as over 80% has been lost here since the turn of the 20th century.

Lowland wood-pasture is a product of land management. It consists of open grown or dense tree cover in a matrix of grazed woodland that can support numerous habitats including grassland, heath, river and wet areas. Wood pasture is now scarcer than lowland heath and this project represents an 18% contribution towards our regional habitat target.

People and recreation: Dunwich Forest will continue to be a peaceful and beautiful place to walk, cycle and picnic. The project area will remain accessible to both walkers and horse riders via many gateways around the perimeter.

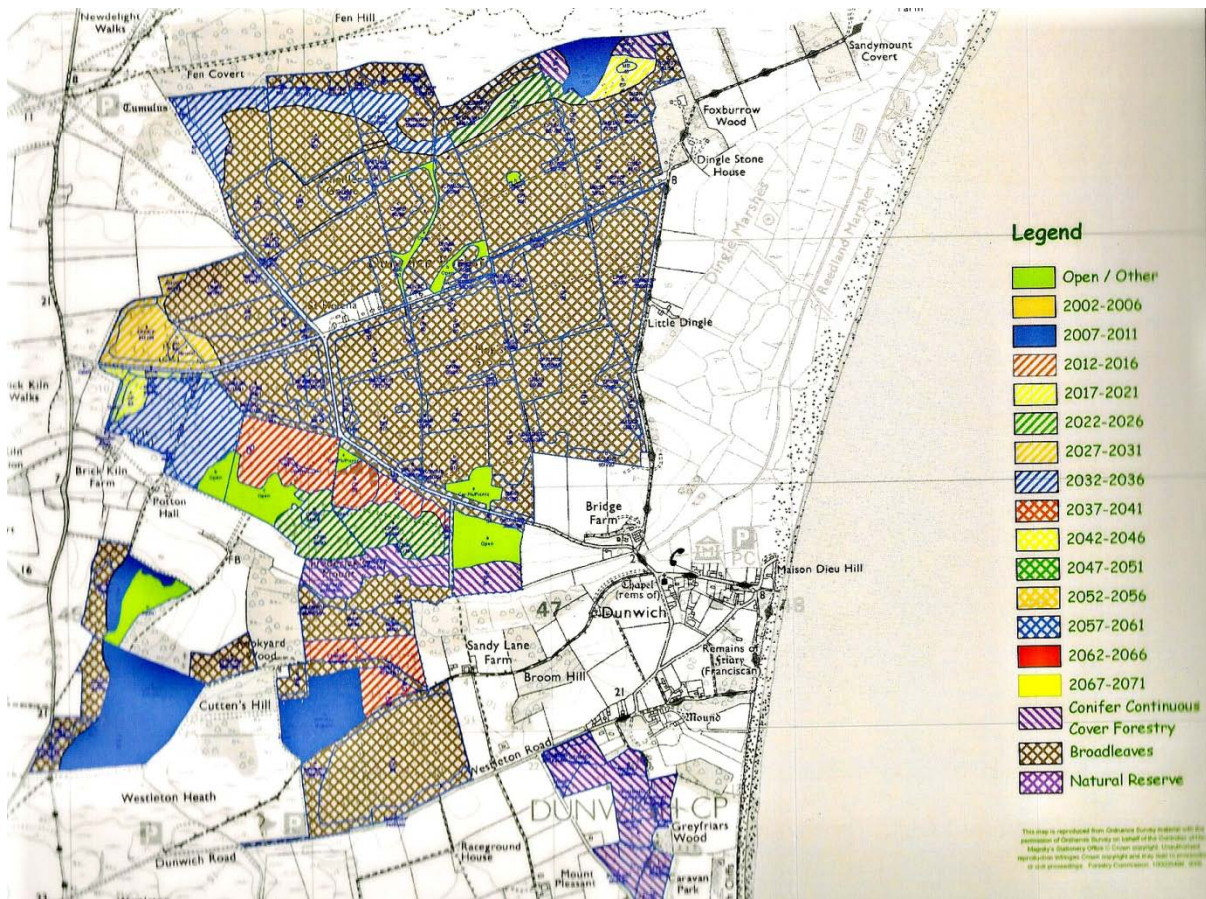
Dunwich Forest has been voluntarily dedicated to public access under the Countryside and Right of Way Act 2000. This ensures that public access on foot to enjoy this special area is a legal right and the Forestry Commission gives permissive access for cyclists and horse riders for informal recreation. With this “Right to roam” comes responsibility and the Forestry Commission ask that dogs be kept on leads due to the presence of grazing animals.

How will they do it? Dunwich Forest is currently mostly a pure pine plantation. To reduce the impact on the landscape and to wildlife and people the transformation will take place over the next 35 years. To create the wood pasture and wet woodland habitats normal forestry thinning will continue to gradually remove the pine trees to favour the naturally regenerating broadleaves that are already seeding in the forest.

Management: grazing is the traditional method that will be used to manage the heath and wood pasture. Ponies, deer and rabbits will also be instrumental in maintaining the character of these habitats and their dependant wildlife. Fences are necessary to contain the grazing ponies and sheep will play an important role in the management of Dunwich Forest, however, wherever possible these fences will be placed inside the forest boundary to reduce their visual impact. In this way, management should be kept sustainable and will reduce the need to use machinery and other high impact methods of vegetation management. The long-term vision for the Alde-Ore area is one where fences can be removed out to the boundary of the project area, as this would create an open New Forest style landscape. The partnerships aim to promote and engage this vision with new stakeholders, local communities and local authorities who must all be involved to make it happen.

Project Facts

- Twenty-eight ponies have been released.
- No stallions (in order to maintain control of numbers and for safety of equestrians)
- At least two mares are in foal (any colts will be castrated).
- The ponies have settled very well and are checked regularly by Suffolk Wildlife Trust's experienced stockman.
- The Forestry Commission are very pleased to be benefiting from the stock management skills of our Suffolk Wildlife Trust partners.
- Dung will bring a new dimension to the Forest ecosystem.
- All current access activities - walking, cycling, horse riding, will continue as before.
- Husky training will be reviewed after some experience is gained as to the interaction between ponies and huskies.
- Birds, bats and butterflies will be monitored as will open ground extent and tree cover.



The Map shows the programme of work and the aerial photograph of shows Dunwich Forest as it was in 2008



Simon Leatherdale points out the key features of the project to Gen Broad, Suffolk Biodiversity Partnership Officer.



The Dartmoor ponies got used their new environment in a corral before being released into Dunwich Forest.



Simon Leatherdale from the Forestry Commission points out the newly created natural landscape and biodiversity benefits of sustainable land management.



New gates and cattle grids have being installed to cater for access around the Forest. It is hoped that as the project area increases the fences will be relocated around any new project boundary.

This project is a partnership between the Suffolk Wildlife Trust, RSPB, The Forestry Commission, Natural England, and the Suffolk Coasts and Heaths and is supported by the SITA Trust.

This project is also supported by the Suffolk Woodland Group that is a working group of the Suffolk Biodiversity Partnership.