

Highways England Area 1 Blackhall Farm Management A30 Devon Kier Highways & Sticklepath & Okehampton Conservation (StOC)

BIG Biodiversity Challenge Award category: Maintenance & Management Award

Project overview

The area known as Blackhall Farm is part of the Highways England operational soft estate next to the A30 in Devon which Kier Highways currently manage. Blackhall Farm is 1.5 hectares in size of which approximately 50% is grassland and 50% is woodland. In 2014/15 Kier undertook a Habitat Connectivity Study which highlighted the importance of Blackhall Farm on a landscape scale. Kier decided to take an innovative approach to managing & maintaining Blackhall Farm that goes above normal business practice to maximise habitat connectivity, biodiversity and community relations. Sticklepath & Okehampton Conservation (StOC) are a group of local volunteers that come to site every couple of months to help our in house ecologists and arborists manage and maintain the site. Stoc have helped lay the new hedges, coppice the woodland and create a new wetland. The grassland has been turned from species poor to species rich with an appropriate maintenance regime now in place.

This approach is replicable at virtually no cost, resulting in a huge biodiversity benefit.

What were the biodiversity conditions on site, prior to the enhancement?

Before the management and maintenance plan was implemented the grassland was species poor and starting to scrub over, the woodland was unhealthy, densely packed with no understory, the boundaries were unclear and unmarked and there was no wetland onsite. On the whole the site was considered to be in poor condition with little real biodiversity value.

Were there any specific reasons that led to this project?

The Habitat Connectivity Study undertaken across the Area 1 network highlighted Blackhall Farm's importance and potential benefit in terms of habitat connectivity and species movement across the landscape. However, in its previous state it was clear that this benefit was not being realised and that actually the site had very little biodiversity value.



Photo Description: StOC volunteers on a well earned break!

A project to rectify this was considered above normal business as it was not a contractual requirement and as such no funding was available. It was clear that an innovative approach to maximise biodiversity was required that would involve volunteers from Kier and the local community.

What were the biodiversity measures taken?

The management and maintenance regime was created in the knowledge that very little (if any) funds would be available because it would not qualify as normal business and was not a contractual requirement. It was clear that different approach was required if we were to make a difference. Despite this we were determined to achieve the objectives of maximising the habitat connectivity and biodiversity potential of Blackhall Farm.

The innovative approach of using volunteers and forming a partnership with StOC has meant that we have been able to create a large area of new species rich grassland seeing an explosion of wild flower species (providing foraging habitat for pollinators), thinned and coppiced a large area of woodland, planted and understory, relayed and created new hedgerows to form the boundary (providing habitat for dormice, birds, invertebrates and other small mammals) and created a new wetland (providing habitat for aquatic species, targeting a rare local damselfly). The habitat types and target species were informed by the Devon BAP and local records.

This management is being provided by volunteers from the local community and from Kier (providing the opportunity to learn new skills, some of the StOC volunteers have learning difficulties) which means it is extremely replicable, low cost and in place long term because it is not dictated by any funding stream and the maintenance at Blackhall Farm is now a permanent fixture on StOC's activity programme. Kier operates a "1 volunteer day per person" policy and Blackhall Farm has been used to engage staff, educate them about biodiversity issues and undertake team building activities. These new and restored habitats have already seen an exponential increase in biodiversity contributing the Highway England's KPI related to biodiversity net gain and the Devon BAP. Due to the sites connectivity importance this biodiversity gain can now spread across the landscape, connecting populations and aiding the free movement of species, which will be particularly important as the effects of climate change take hold.



Photo Description: Species rich grassland with Cowslips in bloom.



Photo Description: Laying the new hedge

How would you best describe the project?

Enhancement

Further information

The management and maintenance regime has now been in place for 3 years and will be ongoing for the foreseeable future. This is partly due to the low cost implementation, using a volunteer workforce. Thanks to this workforce the only cost incurred were for the materials and hire of a mini digger to create the wetland, which totalled approximately £1400. Large areas of new habitat have been created and the health of existing habitat has been vastly improved resulting in an exponential increase in biodiversity at Blackhall Farm. It is because of this that we can say that the objectives have been achieved. That said, we have several plans for further enhancement.

We have been working with the invertebrate charity Buglife and will be installing an experimental bee bank on site next to the species rich grassland to provide nesting habitat (shelter/breeding) for pollinators such as solitary bees and wasps. We will create this bee bank using left over soil and sand from a nearby construction scheme. There are also plans for the local Scout group to visit site later in the year to plant some woodland flower bulbs in the coppice woodland (bluebells, wild daffodils primroses etc.) to create an herbaceous layer and further habitat for woodland pollinators.

The safety of the volunteer workforce is paramount and for a management and maintenance regime such as this, safe access to the site is key due to the sites location on a high-speed trunk road. At Blackhall Farm we were able to access site using a layby (perfect for plant such as the mini digger) or a quite county road to the rear (perfect for volunteers with hand held tools). Safe access should be one of the first considerations.



Photo Description: Newly created wetland

What was your personal motivation for carrying out the enhancement?

There are not many locations on a high-speed trunk roads operational estate that has the size and potential to make a real difference to local and landscape habitat connectivity and biodiversity. This was why I was so determined to make it happen despite the lack of funding and motivation from a contractual driver. Truck roads are generally seen as a barrier to habitat connectivity but they can also perform as vital wildlife corridors as well, if only they were management and maintained in a slightly different way.