



Rewilding Roborough Fields Newsletter

Trip to the Fields

A couple of weeks ago Nick went down to Devon to keep the Roborough Fields project moving. Here are some photos and news.



Front field



Soft rush in back field

The two fields provide very contrasting pictures now. The two hay cuts taken from the front field this summer by a local farmer have done what we intended in that they have opened up the grass sward and left it short and easy to manage. The back field on the other hand has not been cut and is now waist-high in soft rush (*Juncus effusus*) and greater bird's foot trefoil. Because this field has been undisturbed, it has already become a haven for wildlife with three roe deer and lots of woodcock, as well as lots of other species, spending a lot of time here.

Neighbours

Nick spoke to all three of our immediate neighbours. One of them is a very friendly Devon farmer with sheep and a medium-sized farm. The other two neighbours are particularly positive about the plans and one of them is over the moon with what we are doing! She has a field immediately behind ours which she has allowed to regenerate. She says the roe deer have a fawn in that field every year. It makes a big difference to have another field just behind ours that is a stronghold for wildlife.

The plan for the two fields is still the same: In the back field, to dig a big, shallow pond wetland consisting of lots of connected pools. In the front field, strip the turf and create a complex of low, raised banks that will be planted with native shrubs and trees. The cut ground will either be left to see what comes up from the existing seedbed, or seeded with wildflower. We can also plant some individual field trees - a friend near Roborough has very kindly collected some acorns so we are hoping for local provenance oaks!



There is already a certain amount of regeneration going on in the back field. The photo shows an example of “the thorn being the mother of the oak”, or in this case, the willow. Where you have herbivores, plants such as bramble act to shield young trees from grazing animals, and they can then grow up into mature trees. The big banks of brambles in the back field are sheltering willow saplings which are growing well in the thorny protection from the deer.



Visit to Derek Gow

Nick went over to Derek Gow's land where Derek very kindly gave him a tour to look at what Derek and his group are doing there. Derek is a prominent proponent of rewilding. He has hundreds of acres and a big range of animals that, apart from being part of the rewilding project, also provide opportunities for scientific study and photography. These include black storks, white storks (for imminent reintroduction into Devon), wildcats (also for reintroduction), beaver (ditto), mouflon (wild sheep), sheep, cattle, ponies, water voles, boar, goats, llamas and alpacas. Derek very kindly gave us lots of tips and practical advice for the project.



Gates and Fencing

Some of the new gates and fencing has been done but there is lots more to do. There will be a double, wooden gate at the entrance to our land plus we need two sides of the back field stock-fenced so that when we bring animals in to break up the ground and graze the vegetation, they don't just run amuck in the surrounding land!

We also need to put some hardstanding into the entranceway as otherwise it will become impossible to get in or out.

Deadwood

The plan to bring in deadwood has hit a snag. Deadwood is a very important basic part of the ecology for invertebrates and fungi in particular. It turns out that in Devon it is all burnt in wood-burning stoves. This may partly explain why there are so few large, veteran trees in the area. (Ship and house building may be another reason.) This means that requests to “tree surgeons” (“tree fellas” as Annie calls them) in Devon for limbs, trunks and branches for putting on the land are met with incredulous stares! This means that so far we have had very little success with this, but we will get some from somewhere.

Devon Wildlife Trust

Derek Gow very kindly put us in touch with Tony Parsons who is a farm advisor for the Devon Wildlife Trust. Tony noticed that there are two rare species listed in the ecological baseline survey done for us by Clarkson and Woods. These are a rare tree for Devon, the Devon whitebeam, and a dragonfly that hasn't been recorded in north Devon before, the brown hawk. We are checking to be sure the records are accurate but if they are confirmed it will mean that we already have two rare species in our fields.



Summary

The back field, in particular, is already providing a refuge for wildlife. In conjunction with the neighbour's field, it forms a secluded environment where animals can get away from the farmed areas of short grass. In addition, the baseline survey shows us that the fields already form a good environment for animals and plants. This means that we have a really good base to start from. It is going to be very interesting to see how the wildlife respond to the habitat creation that we will do.

Next Visit

The plan is for four or five of us from Edinburgh to go down in mid January for two weeks and do the bulk of the major work on the fields. It is a good time of year to be working on the fields as we won't be interfering with breeding birds etc. However, it will be very wet and muddy so with this in mind we are looking at getting a specialist long reach excavator to cope with digging the pools in the heavy clay in the back field. In addition we may well get another digger in at the same time to work on turf stripping and bank creation in the front field. If we can do this then we can start planting hedgerow shrubs and trees this winter which will be really exciting. With luck we may also get lots of the front field ready for seeding in the spring as well plus we will leave some areas of bare soil to see what germinates naturally.

Best regards,

Nick