

# EXPANDING THE FRESHWATER NETWORK

## *NEW CLEAN WATER PRIORITY HABITATS BEING CREATED*

The New Forest has been identified as an Important Freshwater Landscapes, one of the key remaining areas for wetland habitats and species in the UK. The area is so special because it has escaped large developments and intensive agriculture, and has a long continuity of traditional management through grazing by Commoners livestock. However, threats still remain from a range of impacts such as habitat fragmentation, non-native invasive species, development, pollution and disturbance, which can all impact on habitat availability particularly for rare wetland species.

### *WHAT AND WHY ?*

Freshwater Habitats Trust (FHT) and partners have developed the Freshwater Network to protect and create a national network of healthy unpolluted and interconnected landscapes made up of Important Freshwater Areas, Historic floodplains and Wetland Opportunity Areas.

Implementing this network in the New Forest, partners including FHT, secured funding from the Green Recovery Challenge Fund and Environment Agency's Water Environment Improvement Fund to deliver a new project. The New Forest Blue Horizons scheme aims to expand the New Forest Freshwater Network and to engage people in the recovery of nature. Running until March 2023, one aspect of the scheme, the Woodlands and Wetlands Project has been underway for a year now and this article gives an introduction to some of the work being undertaken.



*Woodland and wetland project officer Angela Peters on a site where improvement works have taken place.*

Woodlands and Wetlands Project Officer Angela Peters joined Freshwater Habitats Trust in October 2021 and started work towards the delivery of these aims, to create new clean water habitats and expand key areas of wetland habitat within woodlands, with the objective that Priority Species in particular are able to expand their range and strengthen populations to become more resilient in the future.

### *WHERE ARE WE WORKING ?*

In recent years, Freshwater Habitats Trust's New Forest team and our partners in the New Forest Catchment Partnership have made positive landowner connections across the Forest. Through this work, we and our partners have delivered habitat restoration within woodlands, meadows, mires, and more, all of which have the common thread of wetlands within them. Opportunities through new and existing landowner contacts have been used to develop and prioritise practical habitat enhancement work, that can be funded and delivered through this project. We are focusing on identifying where work is needed on non-designated, but high quality habitat, where

connectivity opportunities exist, building out from or linking sites. The FHT New Forest Team, then shortlisted sites using desk top review and site visits, based on their potential and priority within the New Forest Important Freshwater Landscape in terms of getting maximum biodiversity gains balanced against achievability and sustainability.

Objectives for the project have been to restore ten wet woodlands, or wooded areas with wetland features and to create or restore five wetland sites. These objectives aim to directly benefit Priority Habitats - ponds, fen meadow, rush pasture, wet woodlands and marine habitats within and adjacent to the New Forest National Park.

## CASE STUDY- HARROWWOOD

The New Forest Land Advice Service and the New Forest National Park Authority have worked with Richard Frampton at Harrow Wood (Site of Importance for Nature Conservation) in Bransgore for several years. Work has focused on the restoration of the woodland and heathland to a high quality habitat by removing the invasive and non-native *Rhododendron ponticum* from the site, along with clearing some selected young birch, willow and Scot's pine.



*Wet and dry heathland species developing after recent clearance of Rhododendron, birch, Scot's pine and willow with machinery by Landowner Richard Frampton.*



*Landowner Richard Frampton in his new clean water pond, post construction!*

Following the clearance work and surveys it became apparent there was an opportunity to not only restore an area of former wet heathland, but to also create new wetland habitats. By creating a shallow clean water pond within the degraded area of the site adjacent to wet heathland we would immediately increase its biodiversity value. Degraded sites are often topographically “flattened out” and lose the dips, divots and pools which are a vital part of a site's biodiversity value. Creation of a pond here would also provide opportunities for a greater range of important aquatic and wetland heathland species to re-colonise this former heathland site. Many wetland species are



excellent at dispersing naturally and are just waiting for the habitat to be available for them to drop in. With a very enthusiastic landowner it was a very exciting site to explore this option further.

Some initial survey work was undertaken to assess the site for its suitability for wetland creation. This included gathering habitat data, looking at historic maps, water quality testing and digging a test pit to explore the substrate and to investigate how the pond might be fed as well as its ability to hold water. The woodland is designated as a Site of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC), and although this is not a statutory designation it was able to flag the site up as already supporting Priority Habitat. Through previous SINC survey work, the site had been identified as plantation on heathland, and through targeted management work some heathland restoration and woodland management has already taken place. Additionally, the site is strategically located in the south-western edge of the protected landscape of the New Forest, adjacent to SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest) heathland and wetlands, so in a key location for extending the area of high quality New Forest habitats to increase connectivity for important wetland species.

To create a pond within the New Forest National Park requires Planning Permission as it is deemed an engineering operation. The project covers this stage of the works, including preparing and submitting the application on behalf of the landowner. Once the application is submitted the turnaround is 8 weeks before permission is granted.



*Small pools created during construction, creating further associated wetland habitat on edges of the new pond, within the new heathland habitat which is re-establishing after early rhododendron clearance work*



*Varying water levels create many niches throughout the seasons. The pond retained some water even though the dry conditions during the summer.*

The planning application process included writing a “Design and access statement”, “Ecological appraisal” and providing various detailed maps and drawings outlining the plan and vision for the site. Plus, all the data to back-up why the work would result in biodiversity net gain. Planning Permission was granted and the pond was dug over a couple of days in early Spring, by the landowner, when the weather and ground conditions were suitable.

During a visit to the site in August 2022, the pond appeared to be settling in well. It was holding water, even though we were experiencing drought conditions, and wet heathland vegetation was already colonising the new habitat we'd created. The pond edges supported toad rush, marsh bedstraw, purple moor grass, bent grass, and soft rush. On the drier areas of the site ling heather and cross-leaved heath are also returning.

The landowner is ready to tackle invasive species seedlings, including rhododendron, willow, birch and Scots pine. Some really nice areas of bare ground, including clays and gravels have been left exposed, which provide early succession habitat for some of the New Forest rarities - we're keeping an eye out for pillwort which would be a classic for this type of pond margin. The shallow pools, around the edge of the pond, with their varying depths and substrates are also providing niches for a range of species. These shallow, wet ground areas along with the shallow edges or drawdown zones of the new clean water pond, are biodiversity hotspots for aquatic insects and their larvae, including dragonflies and damselflies, newts, water beetles, flies and molluscs. Amphibians, including frogs, toads and newts will also make a beeline for the pond and associated pools in the spring. These in turn will attract predators like grass snake and bats, and a host of other species who will use the ponds as a source of fresh unpolluted water. Undoubtedly a great new area of diverse wetland habitat has been created here and we will monitor it over time to see how it develops further.



*Only a short period of time after creation, this new pond has become an important part of this heathy wooded site, contributing to the biodiversity and offering a stepping stone from the New Forest Special Area of Conservation.*

**Green Recovery Challenge Fund**

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