

Biodiversity in the New Forest  
Conference at Balmer Lawn Hotel, Brockenhurst  
Tuesday 25th and Wednesday 26th September, 2007

This meeting was held in support of the recent designation of the New Forest as a National Park. While the New Forest is widely recognised as an internationally important haven for wildlife, the current status and distribution of many species that occur there remain poorly understood, and much remains to be discovered regarding its ecology. The meeting provided an opportunity to produce an overview of current information and identify where knowledge gaps lie. On the first day, specialists presented a series of talks on different groups of organisms, including birds, bats, reptiles and amphibians, fish and freshwater invertebrates, dragonflies and damselflies, saproxylic beetles, butterflies and moths, vascular plants, lichens and fungi. These presentations highlighted the contrasting fortunes of different species groups: while some bird and reptile species appear to be faring well, for example, many butterflies are declining. For others, such as fungi and many invertebrates, insufficient information is available to determine trends in abundance.

The second day provided an opportunity to consider the condition of different habitats, including freshwater ponds, woodland, heathland and mire, the latter of which have been the focus of recent restoration action. While the New Forest has clearly always been dynamic, the area is now arguably on the threshold of unprecedented rates of change, given the introduction of increasing numbers of exotic species, increasing visitor numbers and the potential impacts of climate change. However the current efforts of the Forestry Commission to restore heathland through conifer removal and recent efforts at wetland restoration have achieved some notable successes. One of the many interesting questions to emerge during the meeting was what the impacts of such restoration might be on populations of large vertebrates, and consequently on other organisms. The meeting closed with a consideration of current management challenges, informed by presentations on grazing animals and food webs, concluding in a lively discussion.

The meeting was attended by over 140 delegates, illustrating the high level of interest in this exceptionally important area for biodiversity. Attendees enjoyed an outstanding series of presentations, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who helped make the meeting such a success. It is hoped that the meeting will help inform the Biodiversity Action Plan currently being developed for the New Forest, and a publication based on the meeting is currently under preparation.

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