

# Bramble in woodland – bane or benefit?

21 June 2006. The Great Oak Hall, Westonbirt National Arboretum

Approximately 50 people attended this meeting that was held on 21<sup>st</sup> June 2006 at the Westonbirt National Arboretum. Excluding the speakers there was only one academic and one research scientist amongst an audience that was dominated by foresters, consultants and other land managers or advisers who have a practical interest in the management of bramble. The day was divided into an indoor morning session comprising four short formal lectures, and afternoon outdoors to discuss practical aspects of management within a woodland setting.

The interest of the group was such that they were seated and ready to begin five minutes before the allotted start time: quite remarkable. The aim of the morning's lectures was to provide a variety of basic biological and ecological information that would help managers understand bramble as a plant and its role within woodlands and other habitats.

Despite suffering 'ordeal by powerpoint' Keith Kirby managed to provide a general overview of the ecology and distribution of bramble in Britain. This included the observation that bramble can have an adverse effect on small species in the ground flora and the suggestion that its apparent scarcity in W9, W11 and W17 woodlands, may largely be due to the amount of grazing at the time the NVC survey was carried out. Andrea Kiewitt described an experiment that had studied the growth and flowering of bramble within a woodland that had been thinned at different intensities to provide a variety of canopy covers. Results indicated that it may be very difficult to control bramble by manipulating canopy cover and that the increase in fruiting in bright conditions appears to be caused by an increase in the number, rather than size, of inflorescences. In order to explain the complicated reproductive proclivities of bramble Clive Stace was given the luxury of a 40 minute slot. There were a few glazed eyes as he explained apomixis, pseudogamy, etc. and much amazement when he revealed that there are at least 323 microspecies of *Rubus* in Britain and only about 5 people who can identify them. Chris Hewson's remit was to provide an overview of the role of bramble for wildlife in general. The importance of bramble as a food plant is reflected by the number of invertebrates that eat it, some of which are Red Data Book species. Bramble also provides structural habitat in which larger species live, this was demonstrated by reference to a number of bird species.

The afternoon's discussions took place within an experiment in Silkwood. This is an ancient semi-natural woodland with an overstorey dominated by neglected ash - field maple coppice with some oak standards; the ground flora is typical of that found in NVC W8 woodland. Gary Kerr outlined the experiment which is investigating management using continuous cover forestry by applying a number of different thinning treatments and includes areas in which bramble is controlled. The site was used as a backdrop to discuss the various methods of bramble management that were described by Rik

Pakenham. These included physical cutting and combing using a spring tine cultivator; herbicides; manipulation of overstorey canopy cover; animals.

The meeting finished with a tour of the arboretum led by Simon Toomer, the curator.

And what of the question posed by the title of the meeting? No conclusion was reached – bramble can have great benefits, but can cause significant problems if growth is rampant.

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[Brief highlights of the presentations are available on the Forest Ecology Group's web page on the Society's website.]

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