



Sherwood Forest

National Nature Reserve





Oyster fungus on birch, Birklands




Introduction

In the heart of Nottinghamshire lie the ancient forests of Birklands and Budby, an extensive area of old pasture-woodland and heathland on the dry nutrient-poor soils of the Sherwood Sandstone. Together they represent a rare and wonderful fragment of the great forest of Sherwood, one of the most famous forests in the world. Today, over 420 hectares of this internationally important forest is now managed as a National Nature Reserve (NNR).



Ancient wood-pasture, Birklands

A photograph of a gnarled, ancient tree in a woodland glade. The tree has a thick, textured trunk and several large, spreading branches. It stands in a clearing surrounded by lush green ferns and other trees. The lighting is soft, suggesting a dappled sunlight effect.

**“By itself it stands, and is like
no other spot on which my eyes
have looked, or my feet have ever
trod. It is Birkland...”**
(Charles Reece Pemberton, 1835).

History

Birklands, which is an old Viking word meaning 'birch land', was first mentioned in documents in 1251 and is likely to be at least one thousand years old. It was part of the vast Royal Forest of Sherwood that once covered over 41,000 hectares of the county. The wood remained the property of the Crown for nearly 600 years and was used as a source of timber, grazing land and as an exclusive hunting ground rich with wild deer for successive kings and queens of England.

Contrary to popular opinion, much of the historic Sherwood Forest was, in fact, tree-less, being dominated by wild open plains of heathland such as Budby South Forest. This uncultivated forest land was once grazed by wild deer, rabbits and livestock; and its trees, gorse and bracken were collected by local people for fuel and fodder. During the early 20th century, Budby South Forest became part of a large military training area, being extensively used for tank training, and troop training continues here today.

By the 19th century, both the woods and heaths had passed to the Pierrepont family at Thoresby, who have ensured its survival as a unique part of England's natural heritage. Nottinghamshire County Council, Forest Enterprise and Natural England now jointly manage Sherwood Forest as an NNR in partnership with the Thoresby Estate and the Defence Training Estate. The NNR was first declared in the presence of His Royal Highness The Duke of Gloucester in 2002 to mark the Queen's Golden Jubilee.



Old Oak

Wildlife

“I never knew what a tree was until I beheld the giants of Sherwood...”
(January Searle, 1850)

The ancient woodland of the NNR is dominated by both native oak trees – sessile oak and pedunculate oak – which occur in great numbers along with other native trees such as silver birch, rowan, holly and hawthorn. Scattered amongst the bracken-filled glades of the wood are more than 1,000 large oaks most of which are known to be more than 500 years old. The most famous of these ‘veteran’ trees – the Major Oak – is the largest of the group and may be nearly twice that age. These ancient oaks owe their shape and character to a time when grazing animals such as deer and sheep kept the woodland open.

These giants of the forest – each one with its own distinctive character – are host to an exceptional array of wildlife found almost exclusively amongst their hollow trunks, rotten wood and decaying bark. An incredible 1,000 species of beetle and spider have been found, many of which are rare and dependent on these old trees for their survival.

Other wildlife is abundant in the NNR. Animals that also depend on the old trees include birds such as the great-spotted woodpecker, tawny owl and redstart, and a number of bat species such as the noctule bat. The woodland in autumn reveals a rich community of fungi, with over 200 different species recorded both on the trees and on the woodland floor. The NNR is one of the few sites in the UK where the rare oak polypore fungus is found.

Large tracts of sandy heathland, dominated by native heathers, were once widespread across the great Forest of Sherwood, and important remnants of this landscape are found on Budby South Forest and other open areas of the NNR. Birds such as the woodlark and tree pipit are commonly seen singing high over the heaths in summer, whilst the more secretive nightjar can often be heard 'churring' eerily across the



Longhorn beetle, *Strangalia quadrifasciata*

forest at dusk. The heathy-grasslands are particularly important for ants and spiders and are favoured feeding areas for green woodpeckers. The warm, bare sandy soil provides egg-laying habitat for bees, wasps and tiger beetles, and acts as basking and feeding areas for reptiles such as the common lizard. Sherwood's last remaining herd of wild red deer is occasionally glimpsed on the open heaths.



Heathland on Budby South Forest

© Steve Clifton/Natural England





Ancient oaks following removal of pine trees



Longhorn cattle grazing wood-pasture, Birklands

Management

The woods and heaths of the NNR require careful management if they are to survive as true remnants of Sherwood. Of greatest importance is the continued survival of the old oaks. In parts of the wood, they have become surrounded by non-native trees, such as pine, beech and sycamore, which are slowly being removed and replaced by native oaks and birch. Similarly, new generations of native oak trees are being allowed to grow on into old age.

Many of the rare and specialised invertebrates associated with the old oaks depend upon decaying wood to survive, so any fallen trees and branches are deliberately left to decay where they fall. Hardy breeds of grazing livestock, such as longhorn cattle and Jacob sheep, are used to maintain the historic tradition of grazing in the forest landscape. They help to keep the habitats free of encroaching scrub and in good condition for wildlife.

Visiting and access

You are welcome to visit Sherwood Forest NNR at any time of the year. Car and bicycle parking can be found at Sherwood Forest Visitor Centre (open all year, dawn to dusk) north of the village of Edwinstowe along the B6034. The NNR can also be reached by bus direct from the City of Nottingham; telephone Traveline 0871 200 2233 for details.

A number of footpaths and bridleways cross the NNR and a series of way marked trails, including those accessible to less mobile users, start from the Visitor Centre. A regular programme of guided walks and events organised by Nottinghamshire County Council take place within the NNR each year and the County Council Ranger Service run a full education programme; please telephone 01623 823202 for details.



Part of the NNR at Budby South Forest is mapped as Open Access Land. To protect sensitive ground-nesting birds whilst visiting this area, dogs must be kept on a lead between 1 March and 31 July, or at any other time near livestock. Elsewhere, please keep dogs under close control at all times, and please clean up after them. For further details on Access Land and exercising your right of access on foot, visit **www.countrysideaccess.gov.uk**

Given the large extent of the woodland and that old trees are occasionally liable to shed their branches please take care and keep to the designated footpaths whilst visiting the site.

Parts of the NNR are used for military training. Please observe the warning signs and do not touch any debris you may find.







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Front cover photograph: Birklands and Bilbaugh SSSI
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Catalogue Code: NE183

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Printed on Defra Silk comprising 75% recycled fibre.