WOODLANDS FOR GREATER HORSESHOE BATS

DEVON GREATER HORSESHOE BAT PROJECT

Photo: Simon Williams

Woodlands

Although the greater horseshoe bat is not often thought of as a woodland species, it will frequently use woodland edges and clearings within wooded areas to hunt insect prey. The dense interior of woodland (especially coniferous) is of relatively little value for greater horseshoes, however creating wide rides and glades to open areas up can provide very good feeding grounds for bats; such areas are typically rich in nocturnal invertebrates, they provide some shelter from the wind, and the trees offer potential feeding perches for the bats to use.

Greater horseshoe bats echolocate at a high frequency, using a very directional call. This means that it disappears rapidly if it has nothing to bounce back from. Woodland edges and wide rides help them to navigate through the landscape by providing linear features that they can travel along. Greater horseshoes are rarely found more than a few metres from a navigational feature such as a hedge, woodland edge or tree.

As well as being of benefit to foraging greater horseshoes, many other bat species will use woodlands for roosting and feeding such as noctule, barbastelle and Bechstein's bats. A whole range of other mammals, birds and invertebrates will also take advantage of healthy woodland habitats, and the presence of a patchwork of woodlands will enable these species to move and spread across the landscape more easily.

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In addition to creating rides and glades, there are a number of other key woodland management practices to consider that will benefit the local wildlife:

- Coppicing – typically undertaken on a 10-15 year rotation, this can be a great way of allowing more light to reach the ground and stimulating the development of a rich ground flora. As the coppice grows and becomes denser, it will gain value for nesting birds and small mammals such as the hazel dormouse. Coppice is a great place for woodland invertebrates, which in turn provides food for bats and other small mammals.

- Thinning – to remove less healthy/desirable trees and allow those remaining more space to fully develop. This will also let more light reach the woodland floor, thereby increasing the diversity and abundance of woodland wild flower and shrub species.

- Retaining dead wood – standing and fallen dead wood should be retained as this will provide habitat for fungi, mosses, lichens and invertebrates. Several bird species including woodpeckers will search for insect food in these trees, and old nest holes/ cracks/fissures on standing dead or dying trees may be used by roosting bats.

- Controlling non-native invasive species – plants such as Rhododendron and laurel can take over areas of woodland and form dense thickets which completely shade out the woodland floor. They smother the native plants and so should be controlled and prevented from spreading throughout the wood.

- Managing deer/grey squirrels – many UK woodlands have high deer populations, which can severely impact upon the level of natural regeneration in the wood, and the presence of grey squirrels can seriously damage young woodlands as the animals strip the bark to feed on the sap beneath. Specialist advice should be sought to assess appropriate control methods.

Woodland management can provide economic benefits too. Large-scale woodlands with good vehicle access may be the most commercially viable, but even small woodlands can produce timber for building repairs, fencing, gates etc. or firewood to heat the home; smaller material can be used for beanpoles and pea sticks. British woodlands have historically been actively managed, and such practices should be encouraged as the benefits to both humans and wildlife are considerable.

Further information on managing woodlands for wildlife along with details of current woodland creation and management grants can be obtained via the Forestry Commission website.

Photo: Darren Smith

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