

# Action for the Stoke Park Priority Area



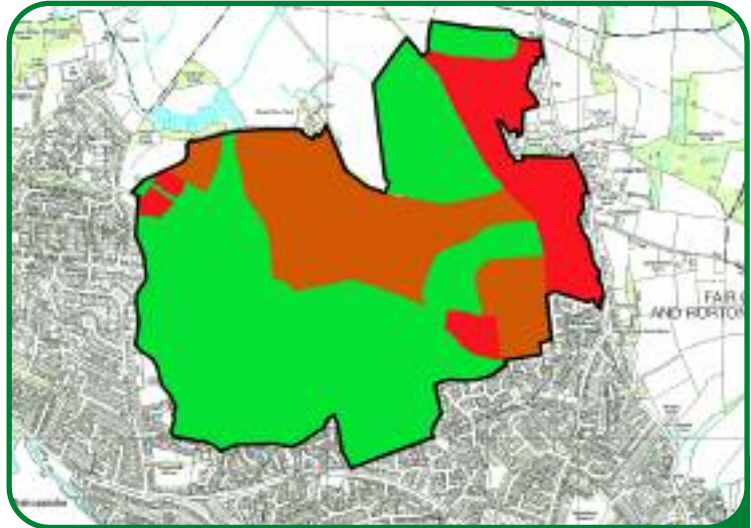
## Quick facts

Total area: 207 ha  
(two-thirds of Bishopstoke and Fair Oak)  
Designations: SINC – 60%

## Location

The Stoke Park Priority Area is located to the north of the borough directly abutting

the northern edge of Bishopstoke and Fair Oak and delineating the northern boundary of this development. It is set within a farmed landscape with large areas of woodland remaining.



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## Description

Stoke Park Priority Area has the highest concentration of woodland present in the borough. It includes Stoke Park Wood which is a mainly coniferous plantation owned by the Forestry Commission and Crowd Hill and Upper Barn Copses owned by the woodland charity, The Woodland Trust. A smaller area of privately owned semi-natural woodland, Hill Copse, is the furthest block of woodland north within the Priority Area.

The Forestry Commission manages Stoke Park Wood to produce softwood products such as paper pulp and timber. To supply this demand, non-native coniferous trees have replaced the native stands of broadleaved trees that were once present in these woods, changing the character and ecological value of the woods.

Unlike broadleaved trees, most coniferous trees retain their leaves (needles) all through the year, continuously growing new needles to replace old. Coupled with the need to densely plant coniferous trees to yield maximum crop off the land, conditions under coniferous trees are very shaded all through the year. As their needles fall to the ground and begin to rot, they produce chemicals that make the soil very acidic. This prevents many

shrubs and plants that normally grow underneath trees from surviving. Many of our most familiar woodland plants such as bluebell, wood anemone, lesser celandine and primrose grow and flower in the spring months before broadleaved trees come into leaf, but in coniferous woodlands this window of opportunity is absent.

However it is not all bad news. The maintenance of wide woodland paths (rides) through the woodlands enable sunlight to reach the ride edges and in many areas especially along the perimeter of woodland blocks, native trees still grow. It is these sunlit edges that are the most valuable areas of the woodland for biodiversity, enabling a rich and varied flora and therefore fauna to establish. Indeed, Stoke Park Woods has one of the most diverse and species-rich plant communities of any woodland in the Borough. In a botanical survey of the woodland in 1990, forty species of plants were recorded that are particularly associated with sites that have been wooded for a considerable length. These plants are called ancient woodland indicator plants and are typical components of botanically rich ancient woodland communities. Species such as moschatel, otherwise known as town hall clock due to its four-faced flower spike, wood spurge, tutsan and wood sorrel make up part of the diverse floral community.

The large areas of woodland within the Stoke Park Priority Area provide suitable conditions for many species of animal that are primarily associated with woodland cover.

The dormouse, a diminutive woodland mouse that feeds on nuts and berries is known to live in the woodlands in this area, as well as badgers and roe deer.

### The dormouse

The dormouse is a species identified within the UK Biodiversity Action Plan as a species in need of priority action to halt its decline and to help restore populations. In the past 100 years it has become extinct in 7 counties and surviving populations have become more and more isolated as woodlands and linking tree cover has been grubbed up. Although nocturnal and difficult to spot as it climbs amongst the branches of trees and shrubs on food forays, its presence is often given away by the collection of neatly gnawed hazelnuts at the base of its favourite shrubs.

An annual butterfly census scheme within the woods has recorded the purple emperor and the silver-washed fritillary, the former being of particular note as this is a rare butterfly that has declined considerably within woodlands throughout the UK and is a priority species for action within the UK BAP process. It frequents the treetops with males defending a territory around a notable tree seeing off any intruding males and trying to attract passing females with which to mate. This butterfly needs willows on which to lay its eggs and for its caterpillar to feed and woodland management to ensure that willow is retained within woodlands is recommended by Butterfly Conservation, a charity dedicated to butterfly conservation.

Between the woods the land is cultivated with a network of hedgerows dividing the large fields and providing linear corridors of cover through which some woodland life can move from woodland to woodland. However, hedgerows have been lost

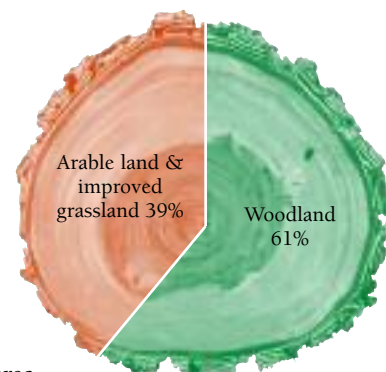
from the area in line with the declines seen all over the UK during the last century which have been estimated at about a 21% net loss in hedgerow length between 1984 and 1990. Hedgerows can be lost through either their outright removal to make way for development or to produce larger agricultural fields to allow the use of bigger machinery in or through neglect.

### Hedgerow management

Due to modern high labour costs and loss of traditional skills many hedges are not cut or laid. Such hedges tend to change into lines of trees and develop gaps losing their importance as dense cover for wildlife. At the other extreme, too frequent and badly timed cutting leads to poor habitat conditions for wildlife within the hedges. For example, if hedges are trimmed annually as opposed to every two-three years, flower and fruit production is much reduced as only branches that have grown for a couple of years or more produce these products. Flowers and berries on hedgerows are important food sources for many hedgerow species such as butterflies and birds.

During 2000, a population of the rare plant, lesser quaking grass was recorded from the large arable field to the north of Stoke Park Woods. This species of grass has declined considerably within the UK over the past century due to changes in farming practice and has been identified as a priority species for action in Hampshire. It grows on disturbed, bare soil in the spring and in the past ploughed arable fields provided this. However, today, many arable fields are sprayed with herbicides to remove any unwanted species of plants from the commercial crop and many others are sown with crops during the winter months that subsequently grow over any bare ground so there is none present in the spring when wild plants are germinating.

### Area of habitats within the Stoke Park Priority Area



NB: 3km of hedgerow also within the priority area.



# Action

## Issue 1 Management for priority species

### Current action

Forest Enterprise own and manage Stoke Park Wood and are preparing Forest Design Plans for all their woodland holdings throughout the UK. These include many ecological beneficial management proposals which must be informed by up to-date information on the location and status of priority species present.

### Proposed action

Complete a Forest Design Plan for Stoke Park Wood by 2003 taking particular care to include specific management recommendations for priority species.\* (FC)

Promote the Forestry Commission's Woodland Grant Scheme to private woodland owners in the area.\* (EBC/FC)

Seek to ensure suitable management of arable land which supports lesser quaking-grass by advice and promotion of appropriate incentives schemes.\*\* (DEFRA/FWAG)

Encourage specialist recording groups to visit the area and particularly to record and feedback any priority species located.\* (HBIC)

Endeavour to ensure data collection schemes such as butterfly transects, bird surveys etc have sufficient manpower to continue for the foreseeable future.\* (BC/EBC)

## Issue2 Habitat isolation

### Current action

To ensure there is no further loss or fragmentation of semi-natural habitats as a result of development, the Local Plan identifies important wildlife sites that must be protected from development.

### Proposed action

Continue to work with landowners to plant hedgerows and field corners to provide links between woodland blocks.\* (EBC/HCC)

Uphold the SINC designations for the woodlands within the PBA on the review of the Local Plan.\* (EBC)

Ensure the connections between semi-natural habitats, provided by green corridors are preserved and enhanced through the development control process.\* (EBC)



WOOD-SORREL

### ACTION TIMESCALE

\* within next 3 years

\*\* within next 5 years

\*\*\* within next 10 years

### KEY TO ORGANISATIONS

BC Butterfly Conservation

DEFRA Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

EA Environment Agency

EBC Eastleigh Borough Council

EN English Nature

FC Forestry Commission

FWAG Farming and Wildlife Advisory group

## Eastleigh Priority Species recorded within the Stoke Park Priority Area

### Recorded in last five years

- Dormouse\*\*
- Purple emperor\*\*
- Silver-washed fritillary\*\*
- Lesser quaking-grass\*\*

\*\* Priority species in Hampshire and Eastleigh Borough

## Relevant Hampshire species or habitat action plans for Stoke Park Priority Area are:

- Pipistrelle bat
- Seed-eating farmland birds
- Hedgerow
- Ancient semi-natural woodland
- Arable land

# Action for Seed Eating Farmland Birds

## Why action is needed

Birds that frequent our farmland rely on both the food and cover it provides for them to survive and breed successfully. Seed eating farmland birds are, as the name suggests, a group of birds that mostly eat seeds but also need other food such as insects on which to feed their young in the spring and summer. Such birds include the yellowhammer, skylark, linnet, tree sparrow and grey partridge.

Between the 1970s and mid 1980s all of these species underwent dramatic population declines in the UK, the extremes being – 83% for the grey partridge and – 45% for the yellowhammer. Since then, some farmland bird populations have remained stable whilst others have continued to decrease, although at a slower rate than previously.

Changes in agricultural management are thought to be the largest single factor causing these declines. For example, the switch from spring sown to autumn sown cereals has resulted in the loss of weedy stubble fields that used to sustain birds over the winter. Now fields are ploughed and sown again after the crop is harvested in the summer leaving no food for the birds over winter. In addition, other changes in farming practice such as different crops being planted, the wider use of chemicals and a general tidying and increased productivity of farmland have all led to declines in birds.

However, the reasons for declines birds generally are not as clear cut as sometime suggested. There is a group of resident insectivores that has increased in population size in the past 30 years. The majority are associated with woodland: Green woodpecker and great spotted woodpecker, nuthatch, blue tit, long-tailed tit and, on farmland great tit and coal tit and wren. The reasons for these changes are unclear.

## Action so far

Action to halt the declines in seed eating farmland birds has to date not been very successful, with populations of farmland birds seemingly continuing to decline.

Some progress has been made by the increased emphasis and finances available to farmers to manage their land in ways that are more sympathetic to wildlife through 'agri-environment schemes'. These schemes are funded by the government and provide payments to farmers for specific management techniques such as leaving margins at the edges of arable fields for wild plants.

Since the declines in farmland birds were first noticed in the 1970s, groups of people who are interested in birds have undertaken UK-wide surveys to monitor their populations and range. This data is invaluable to monitor any further changes that occur to bird populations, be they good or bad and to suggest areas where most effort should be concentrated to reverse declines.

## Results so far

Despite the increased emphasis on wildlife-friendly farming, populations and ranges of seed eating farmland birds have not begun to increase. Linnet and tree sparrow populations have remained stable since the dramatic declines recorded in the 1970s and 80s. The skylark, yellowhammer and grey partridge have continued to decline, albeit at a lesser rate than previously.

## The future

Both the birds and their habitat need to be targeted for action if they are to recover or even spread out into other suitable habitat in the borough.

Action to maintain and increase the numbers and ranges of seed eating farmland birds in the borough:

- English Nature and DEFRA will encourage the better management of sites of importance to seed eating birds, EN through Management Statements and DEFRA through agri-environment schemes.
- DEFRA will select the best areas to target the new Arable Stewardship scheme for landowners. This scheme provides payments for specific management that benefits farmland wildlife and especially seed eating birds.
- RSPB will consider the best areas to set up winter-feeding schemes and nest box provision for farmland birds and implement such schemes in partnership with landowners, local authorities, local bird groups and the Game Conservancy.
- The Game Conservancy will continue to promote the use of gamebird crops that benefit seed-eating farmland birds as well as gamebirds to landowners.

Action to help us gain a better understanding of seed-eating birds in the borough:

- HOS and the BTO will continue to run and improve surveys for seed eating farmland birds.

## What you can do to help birds

To help to maintain and increase the numbers and range of birds in the borough you can:

- Put out food for birds in your garden. This will greatly increase the survival of many species through the winter. Please remember though that once you have started to feed the birds in the winter you must carry on as they will begin to rely on your food to sustain them.
- Put up a few nest boxes in your garden but remember to place them in areas inaccessible to cats.
- If you own a cat, keep it in at night to stop it hunting roosting birds. Also consider fixing a bell to its collar to warn birds of its approach.
- If you own or manage farmland consider entering your land into Countryside Stewardship. Consider creating conservation headlands around crops, restoring winter stubble and using target-specific sprays on set-aside. Advice on management and incentive schemes to benefit birds is available from DEFRA.
- If you currently own or manage some land for gamebirds consider planting winter food crops that benefit both gamebirds and wild birds. Advice on suitable crops is available from the Game Conservancy Trust.
- Come along to a practical conservation task in your area. Many of the management techniques you will learn benefit wild birds.
- Become a member of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the largest environmental charity in Europe. It manages many sites specifically for birds around the country also lobbies for wider action to benefit birds.

To help us gain a better understanding of birds in the Borough you can:

- Join the Hampshire Ornithological Society, a group formed for anyone interested in birds. It holds regular events such as guided tours of sites and runs countywide surveys. It always needs volunteers to join in and send in sightings.



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