

Ledbury Naturalists Field Club

## **Field Survey 2011**

### **Putley Common**



**February 2012**

## Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

The site chosen for the 2011 club survey was Putley Common. Putley is one of the first parishes in Herefordshire to have a Parish Biodiversity Action Plan written by Gabe Cook, an M.Sc. Advocacy for Sustainable Development student, in 2008. The need for such a plan was identified in Putley's Parish Plan and following this, the Putley Wildlife and Advisory Group (PWAAG) was formed. The group recognised the need to manage the Common to benefit its flora and fauna. In particular, it wanted to know what flora and fauna were present in order to decide on the best way to manage and maintain it. To achieve this PWAAG asked Ledbury Naturalists Field Club for expert advice and help. There had been a previous survey of the Common's flora in 1996 by Aberystwyth University and the area is listed as a "Special Wildlife Site" by Hereford Nature Trust.

As the Common was only a small site the club also surveyed Hill House Farm Cradley in 2011 which is reported elsewhere.

## Background

The Common covers about four hectares on a gentle east facing slope just north of Putley village at SO 638381. It is underlain by Silurian Limestone of the outer ring of the Woolhope Dome which is a geological inlier eroded into concentric rings of limestone and shale and surrounded by Old Red Sandstone.

The Common is bisected by the minor road going towards Woolhope and consists of several areas of grassland, patches of woodland and a neglected pond to the north of the road. There is a small strip of woodland going down to a stream on the other side of the road and several cottages adjacent to the Common with access tracks and some informal paths across it.

Putley Common is registered as a Special Wildlife Site and an extract from the Herefordshire Putley Common and Surrounding Woodlands Special Wildlife Sites Register (28/9/90 ) states-



**Putley Common**

*"Priggles, Commander's and Mains Woods. Bulls Grove. Putley Common. Whitfield Coppice. Slade Coppice.*

*There is a small area of grassland on Putley Common which has a very rich flora, including abundant orchids.*

*The surrounding woodland is ancient. Whitfield Coppice and Slade Coppice are still semi-natural, the latter mainly consisting of coppiced Wych Elm. The rest of the woodland has been interplanted with conifer. Oak is dominant and the ground vegetation includes abundant orchids, the rare Violet Helleborine and a rich variety of fungi."*

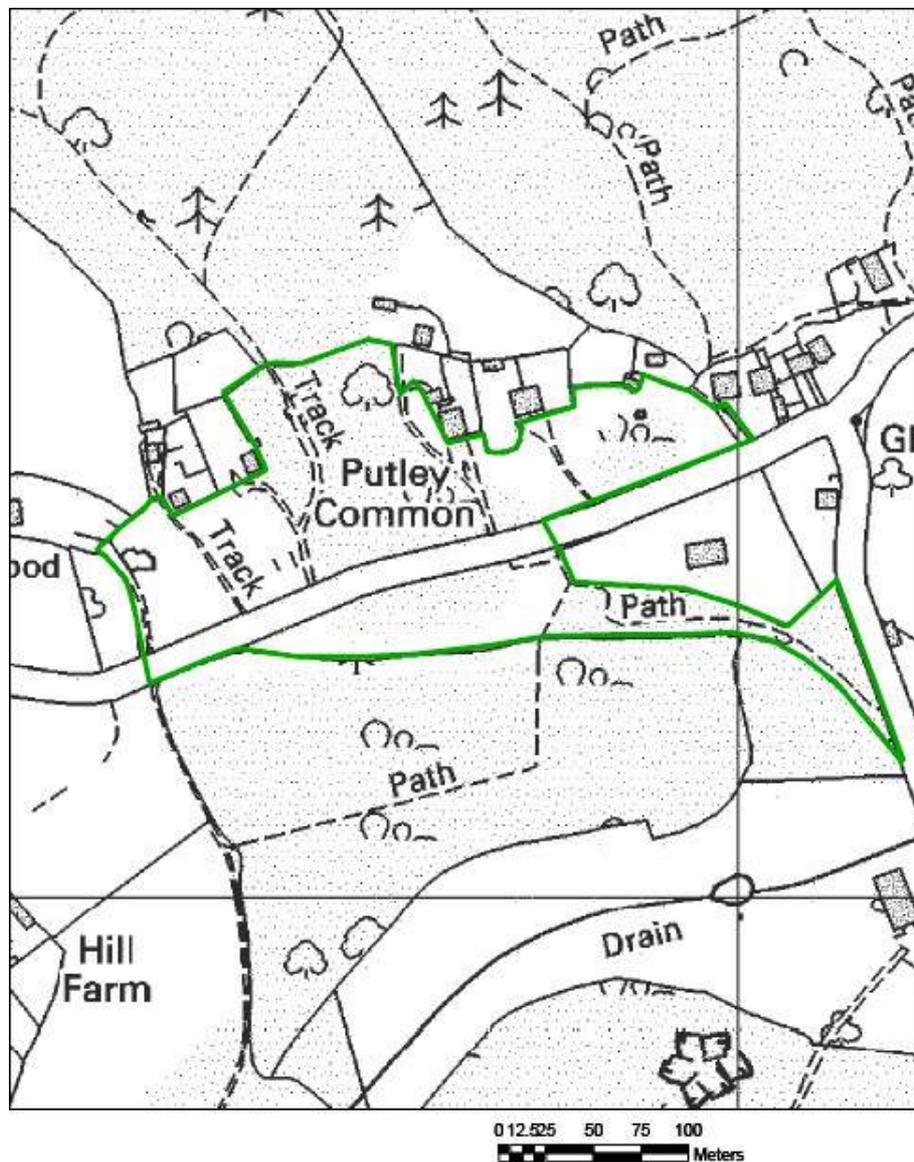
This indicates the site and surrounding woodland are of great biological interest and the current survey aims to substantiate this giving a basis for future management. At the moment some householders adjacent to the common mow grassy areas to keep it tidy, while other parts are grazed and some parts are unmanaged including the woodland sections. It is used as

amenity land by local people and there are some “bike jumps” in the woods.

## The Survey Area

As the area was not too extensive, most of it was covered though some of the woodland was rather impenetrable in summer

The Survey Area



## Conducting the Survey

Volunteers from Ledbury Naturalists’ Field Club paid four visits to the site on alternate months in 2011 to carry out the survey. The dates of the meetings were April 18<sup>th</sup>, June 20<sup>th</sup>, August 15<sup>th</sup> and October 17<sup>th</sup>. The weather was fine and warm for each visit though dull at times. The land became very dry towards the end of the year. On each occasion members spent about 3 hours in the afternoon walking around the site. All flowering plants, grasses, trees, fungi, mosses, ferns, birds, insects, and other invertebrates found along the way were recorded.

Kate Wollen acted as local liaison officer. Hilary Ward supervised the botany whilst John Meiklejohn focussed on invertebrates. Cherry Greenway identified the fungi. Gillian Davies and Lorraine Weaver from the University of Worcester came to help with the moss records. The club is fortunate to have the support of these experts in their fields, and great trouble was taken to verify each record to ensure the reliability of the survey as far as possible. However the records are doubtless an underestimate of the species present due to the limited time spent and in some cases due to lack of expertise available for example with spiders and lichens.

## Results and Comment

All species found were recorded. Complete details of the survey can be found in the Appendix.

In summary the following numbers of species were noted.

Flowers	Grasses Sedges Rushes	Trees	Fungi Mosses Ferns	Birds	Mammals and other Vertebrates	Insects and Invertebrates
116	24	28	44	34	13	109

There was a pleasing range of herbaceous plants across the Common though the greatest concentration was at the lower end in the area of unimproved grassland. Here both Early Purple and Common Spotted Orchids were recorded, the latter in some profusion in June. There was also a sizeable patch of Twayblade near the road edge which was good to see. In August this section had a lot of Common Fleabane



**Twayblades emerging**

which made a splendid sight and attracted many butterflies, particularly Common Blues. Other plants included Hawkbits, both Marsh and Hedge Bedstraws, Bird's-foot-trefoil, Betony, Meadow Vetchling, Knapweed, Devil's-bit Scabious and three varieties of St. John's Wort. There were 4 Speedwells and Meadowsweet as well as a small patch of Dropwort. This latter plant is not common in Herefordshire and particularly favours limestone grassland. There were some other plants probably, naturalised from neighbouring gardens, such as Elecampane, Honesty, Few-flowered Garlic and Cyclamen.



**Early Purple Orchid**



**Dropwort**



**Upper section of the Common**

The area of grassland at the top of the Common was less species rich, probably due to unsuitable grazing regimes in the past, and had coarse grasses and Nettles. The pond at the top had nearly disappeared with no open water visible. All the common spring flowers such as Snowdrop, Daffodil, Primrose, Cowslip and Bluebell were present in varying numbers mainly at the woodland fringes.

Fifteen species of grass were recorded in all, the finer species such as Sweet Vernal-grass were mainly found in the lower grassland section. The top section was dominated by coarser varieties such as

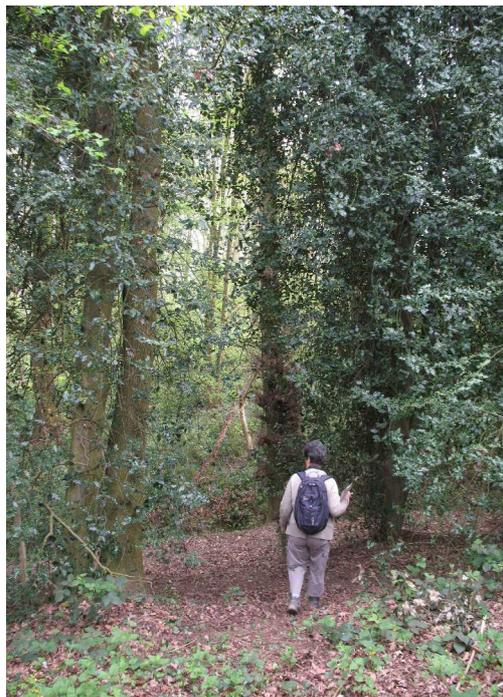
Cocksfoot and Perennial Ryegrass. There were also three species of rush and two of woodrush, mainly in the damper areas round the overgrown pond and in the lower area of grassland. In the woodland Wood Sedge and Pendulous Sedge were common. False Fox-Sedge and Remote Sedge were also found.

Seven species of fern were found, Male-fern being the most common as well as the invasive Bracken. A few specimens of the rather rarer fern, Adder's Tongue, was found in the fine grasses at the lower end of the Common. Sadly several cut off specimens were also found in the mowed sections together with the remains of many Common Spotted Orchids.



**Plants damaged by mowing**

In the damper woodland and grassland, 22 species of moss were recorded and 3 species of liverwort.



**Woodland section**

The very dry season

was not conducive to the growth of fungi but 11 species were recorded including Blushing Bracket and Birch Polypore. A search later in the year would, no doubt, have yielded more.

The woodland had 28 species of trees but was mainly Ash, Oak and Silver Birch with an under storey of Hazel, Hawthorn and Field Maple. Some of the other tree species recorded were, Yew, Holly, Willow, Hornbeam and Lime. Honeysuckle and Dog Rose grow through the canopy in places. There were no notable veteran trees. The woodland on the south side of the road was very tangled with undergrowth, mainly Bramble and so supported few other plants, though Wild Clematis climbed through to find the light. Damp areas of the woodland tracks supported colonies of Golden Saxifrage. Where light permitted, mainly in the northern side, there was Dog's Mercury,

Sanicle, Enchanter's-nightshade, Wood Spurge and Bugle.



**Lower meadow in June**

The flower rich sections provided a source of nectar for insects. Of the 109 invertebrate species noted, 37 were butterflies and moths, including Orange Tip, Ringlet, Holly Blue, Small Copper and Large Skipper. A Hummingbird Hawk moth was seen on one occasion. There were 6 species of fly and good range of beetles as well as bugs and 3 species of bee. Many galls were seen on a variety of plants caused by a range of flies, wasps and mites. There were 4 species of harvestmen and 2 grasshoppers. No dragon flies were noted during survey times. There was also a selection

of other invertebrates such as woodlice, millipedes, spiders and snails.

Of the vertebrates a Toad and Frog as well as a Slow Worm and Grass Snake were seen and evidence of a range of mammals such as Moles, Rabbits and Badgers. Fallow Deer and Muntjac have been observed by local residents.

The birds recorded in the time of the survey totalled 34. This included most of the common woodland

birds such as Willow Warbler, Nuthatch and Chiff Chaff.



**Fleabane in August**

There were both Green and Greater Spotted Woodpeckers, Mistle and Song Thrushes and Field Fare. Swallows were catching insects over the grassland in the summer and a Sparrow Hawk passed by on one occasion. The Cuckoo did not sing on survey days but has been heard by residents.



**Few-flowered Garlic**

## Conclusions.

Putley Common is already a Special Wildlife Site, a designation which is supported by this report. A large range of interesting and rarer plants in particular were found. However the richer lower grassy section had damp areas where rushes were becoming common and Bracken was starting to invade the area. The woodland was also encroaching, creating shade and changing the environment for the grassland plants. A rather regular mowing regime in places seems to be reducing the quantity of rarer species, by reducing their vigour and preventing them from producing



**Overgrown Lower section**

seeds or spores. The higher section of the Common was less species rich, no doubt due to the grazing regime. Controlled grazing at the right time and with the correct stocking levels can be advantageous for wildlife. In the absence of grazing, cutting at the appropriate time and removal of the cut grass would be a good substitute. The woodland sections were all unmanaged and becoming impenetrable in places so inhibiting the growth of plants needing light. As the area of woodland is small, any form of management should be appropriate to the scale of the wood, which cannot support too many tracks which destroy the ground flora. The pond has potential to be reclaimed and attract more wildlife.



**Woodland Track**

With a management plan, the Common could be further improved and maintained for the future. Any work undertaken should bear in mind the rich variety of flora and fauna present and be carried out at the last damaging time, such as cutting grass or grazing after the flowers have set seed and with woodland work being done in the winter when plants are dormant and there are no nesting birds.

In these times of rapidly disappearing natural habitats, the PWAAG are to be encouraged in their aim of enhancing this area by good management and maintaining it for future generations.



**Mature Twayblade**



**Adder's Tongue from other site**

## **Distribution**

1. Ledbury Naturalists' Field Club, survey team and committee members
2. Putley Parish Council
3. Herefordshire Nature Trust.
4. Natural England.
5. Herefordshire Ornithological Club.
6. Herefordshire Biological Records Centre
7. Ledbury Town Council
8. Ledbury Library
9. Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club
10. Putley Wildlife Action and Advisory Group members

## **Appendix**