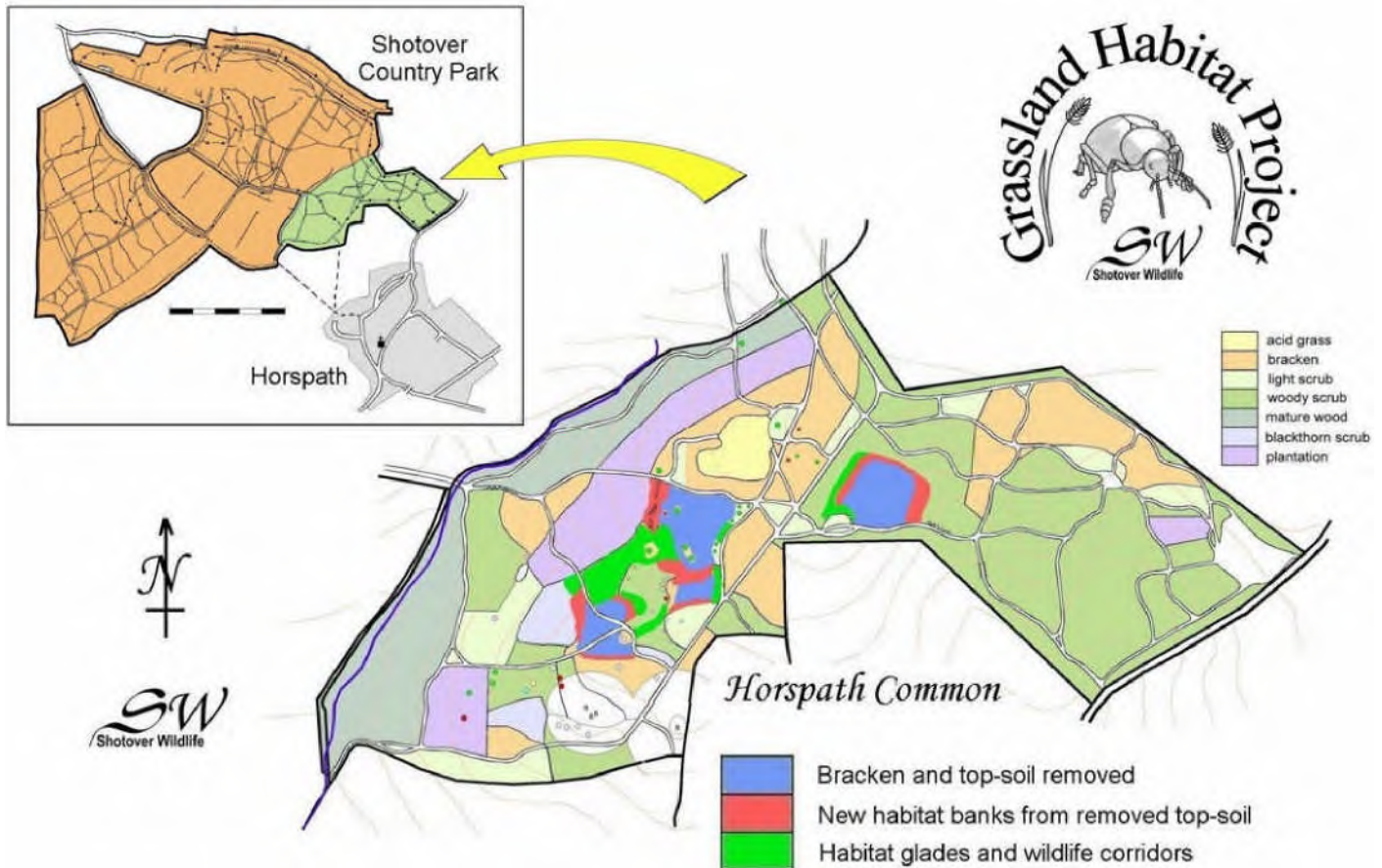


Shotover Wildlife Grassland Habitat Project



Forthcoming habitat work on Horspath Common

In September 2008 **Shotover Wildlife**¹ embarked upon an important project to convert areas of bracken to acidic grassland in Shotover Country Park and Horspath Parish. **Lowland acidic grassland**² is a nationally recognised habitat, and is characterised by short grass, **locally rare flowers**³ that are specific to the new habitat, and patches of bare soil. The bare soil is particularly important for **Shotover's rare insects**⁴. Compared to the areas of bracken, the improvement to wildlife diversity will be considerable.

An integral part of this project is to create pleasant new places to sit, and areas to look at while walking on Horspath Common.

Both [Natural England](#) and Oxford City Council support the project for two reasons. Firstly, the area is within a **SSSI**⁵, and secondly, much of the wildlife that will benefit from the project has declined in the UK from loss of habitat. Although most of these species are already on Shotover, many are in decline here too. This is because the acidic grassland of the past has been gradually replaced by bracken and scrub since grazing ceased in the last century. The new areas will undoubtedly help to secure some of Shotover's special plants and animals: hopefully for many years to come.

Over recent years, and particularly in 2008, members of *Shotover Wildlife* have surveyed and recorded wildlife over the whole area to make sure that the work will not harm existing plants or animals. Also, by comparing our work with that of **previous naturalists**⁶ we can get an idea of how species have declined or been lost over time, and investigate the reasons for these changes.

Most of the heavy project work will be done by mechanical excavator, and will remove the bracken and topsoil. This material will be used to create special new habitats for a variety of animals. The excavator will be on site for about a week in August 2009 and 2010. Then in addition to this, the detailed structuring of the habitat will be completed by *Shotover Wildlife's* regular [Conservation Work Days](#), and you are very welcome to come and join us.

Please do go and have a look at the work, which includes new views and log seats, and we hope that you will enjoy the change in habitat.

The Shotover Wildlife Grassland Habitat Project is supported by the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment and the Waste Recycling Group through the Landfill Communities Fund.

If you have any comments or concerns please get in touch with [Shotover Wildlife](mailto:irwright@shotover-wildlife.org.uk) [irwright@shotover-wildlife.org.uk] or [Oxford City Council](mailto:countryside@oxford.gov.uk) [countryside@oxford.gov.uk] or give Ivan a call (Hon. Chair: *Shotover Wildlife*) on 01865 874423.

¹ **Shotover Wildlife.**

Shotover Wildlife was founded in 1999 to research and communicate the importance of Shotover Hill for wildlife. Our work is a mixture of species surveying, conservation days, talks, research, helping students and sharing our knowledge. We currently have about 75 members. For more information and copies of our wildlife leaflets, please visit the [SW web site](#).

² **Lowland dry acidic grassland.**

Lowland dry acidic grassland is a nationally recognised and protected habitat under the [UK Biodiversity Action Plan](#). Shotover Hill still has areas of very good quality acidic grassland and it is a natural habitat on the hill linked to the sandy geology. The habitat is rare in Oxfordshire, which is why some of the associated plants and insects are also rare in Oxfordshire.

To some extent it is a historic habitat, linked to hundreds of years of animal grazing. Without the grazing it becomes overgrown with bracken, gorse and scrubby woodland. This is why it is generally considered necessary to intervene from time to time, to reset the succession and allow the special wildlife diversity to flourish.

³ **Locally rare flowers.**

Locally rare species are those that may be somewhat more common in other places in the UK, but in the local context (e.g. Oxfordshire), seldom occur.

Locally rare flowers on Shotover include Sand Spurrey, Bird's-foot and Trailing St. John's-wort (see SW's leaflet [Heathland Flowers on Shotover](#)), all of which would be significantly reduced in the County if lost from Shotover. These and many others of Shotover's heathland plants are on the Oxfordshire Rare Plants Register.

⁴ **Shotover's rare insects.**

The unusual dry and sandy soils of Shotover are host to many specially adapted insects as well as the acidic grassland plants. Over recent years much effort has gone into establishing whether Shotover is still important for groups of insects that were studied by Oxford University over 80 years ago.

Shotover Wildlife has established that Shotover remains a nationally important site for bees and wasps, with nearly 200 different species recorded over recent years (see SW's leaflet [Bees and Wasps on Shotover](#)). Studies of other insect groups are still in progress, but already there have been recent records of nationally scarce beetles and flies.

Apart from sandy features such as the well-known Sandpit, it is only the worn paths of the Country Park that provide some species with the bare soil that they require. This is why the grassland project will be leaving areas of soil bare, to eventually become covered with vegetation, but only very slowly.

⁵ **SSSIs.**

A Site of Special Scientific Interest, or SSSI, is a wildlife site that has been designated by *Natural England* for its special contribution to national wildlife diversity. Part of Shotover Hill was designated as a SSSI in 1984 because of the habitat for wild flowers and insects provided by Brasenose Wood and Shotover Hill.

Oxford City Council, as the site manager, has an obligation to *Natural England* to maintain the integrity of the habitat and ensure that no activities occur that could damage the wildlife.

For this reason *Natural England* take an active role in ensuring that the special wildlife interest is maintained, and this includes encouraging habitat creation and restoration projects such as the [Grassland Habitat Project](#) described here.

⁶ **Historic recording on Shotover.**

The study of natural history around Shotover Hill goes back over 300 years, mainly through Oxford University being so near. From Bobart's early mosses collecting in 17th Century and G.C.Druce's pioneering County Flora, right through to David Steel's book *The Natural History of a Royal Forest* (1984), Shotover is particularly rich in historic records.

For insects, much work was done in the early 20th Century and published in the *Victoria County History*. There are many specimens from Shotover in both the Oxford and London Natural History Museums.