

Draft Wootton Ridge management plan 2024-34 summary

- 1.1 The full draft management plan (available as a separate document via the Exmoor National Park Authority webpage) provides a site description, including full background information about the Wootton Ridge area, and identifies key factors that the plan takes into consideration. It also provides more information about likely management techniques. This summary document is taken from Section 3 of the full draft plan.

Vision and objectives

Vision

- 1.2 The box overleaf outlines a 10-year vision for the open areas of the Wootton Ridge. It has been informed by the outputs of a face-to-face workshop and subsequent conversations with the site's landowners, and it describes the typical experience of a visitor to the Ridge in early June 2033.

Management rationale

- 1.3 The open areas of Wootton Ridge support examples of habitats and species that are rare or scarce within lowland Britain. These habitats are all semi-natural, resulting from the interaction between humans and their environment over many centuries. Ongoing management of some form is therefore needed to ensure that the plant and animal communities that are rare or no longer commonplace, and are dependent on these habitats, can be maintained and, where possible, enhanced. This will allow the site to act as a reservoir and refuge from which species can spread to the wider countryside.

Cresting the Wootton Ridge after climbing one of the many well-maintained bridleways that provide access, an inspiring vista opens out. Clear views of the sea, and the hills further inland, are framed by extensive areas of lowland heathland. Along the ridge, Heath Fritillary butterflies dance amongst abundant Cow Wheat and Bilberry, Dartford Warblers sing scratchily from the yellow-flowered Gorse, and Snipe hunker in damper hollows. After dark, Nightjars hawk the slopes for a myriad of insects before returning to the furze as dawn approaches.

A small number of docile, hardy-breed, cattle graze the heathland, helping maintain a diverse open sward with small patches of bare ground and isolated trees amongst the Heather. Blocks of taller, mature, Heather and Gorse are scattered across a mosaic of variously aged heathland stands. Away to the east the ramparts of the ancient Hillfort stand clearly against the horizon. Any risk of wildfire has been reduced through effective fuel load control and invasive Rhododendron is no longer a feature of the site.

Ongoing communication and knowledge-sharing between the different landowners means that management of the site is joined up and, although landowners may have different specific objectives for their landholdings, it is clear that they share a vision for a wildlife-rich site respected and loved by those who use it.

Walking along the Ridge, a handful of other people are encountered – mostly local people walking and dog walking, but also horse-riders using their right of access on Alcombe Common, and some cyclists using one of the parallel paths. There is good understanding among them of the special features of the site and the sustainable techniques used to look after them, all adding to people's appreciation of the character and beauty of the Wootton Ridge.

Management objectives

- 1.4 The following section identifies a range of management objectives for the open areas of Wootton Ridge and associated actions and indicators. Two overarching threads/objectives run through all, or most, of the individually identified objectives. These comprise:
- The promotion of climate resilience in light of the climate emergency; and,
 - Improvement to the condition of the Dunster Park and Heathlands Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) components located within the management plan area.
- 1.5 Climate resilience will be promoted through the creation of larger areas of better-connected open habitat that will benefit threatened species, and the reduction of the on-site fuel load during a period of increased wildfire risk. Management identified within the plan, including the creation of improved/extended areas of Heath Fritillary butterfly habitat, will also contribute to the improvement of the SSSI's conservation status.
- 1.6 The map overleaf indicates the likely locations where different management techniques will be carried out. This will be refined when a work plan is created to ensure that, for example, Gorse management results in a varied structure throughout the site. It may also be adapted following monitoring of management carried out. Possible grazing compartments have not yet been identified, as this will be done as part of a more detailed grazing plan, but are likely to include areas where scrub has been cleared to help reduce regeneration and maintain open, heathy, conditions.

Objective 1: Wildlife

- 1.7 Heathland supports the greatest diversity of plants and animals where it is open with a varied structure of uneven-aged stands of Heather and appropriate management prevents the dominance of Bracken, European Gorse, scrub, and trees. The heathland on Wootton Ridge is currently in unfavourable condition and ongoing management is needed to reduce scrub and bracken cover in order to increase structural diversity and retain open areas for characteristic species.

- 1.8 The Heath Fritillary population on the Wootton Ridge is recovering, but remains disconnected and its future is far from secure. The creation of areas of suitable habitat across the ridge, including larger populations of its foodplant, will allow the population to both increase and provide greater connectivity between smaller-scale breeding sites. The species exhibits interannual variation in the location of such sites, so increased habitat connectivity and extent will provide the Heath Fritillary with a greater area for selection.
- 1.9 Area of mature heathland and European Gorse should be retained within any the habitat matrix so that specialist species, such as the Dartford Warbler, remain in the landscape.

Target 1: Expand the extent of open heathland, ensuring an uneven age-structure within Heather and Gorse stands, while decreasing the fuel load.

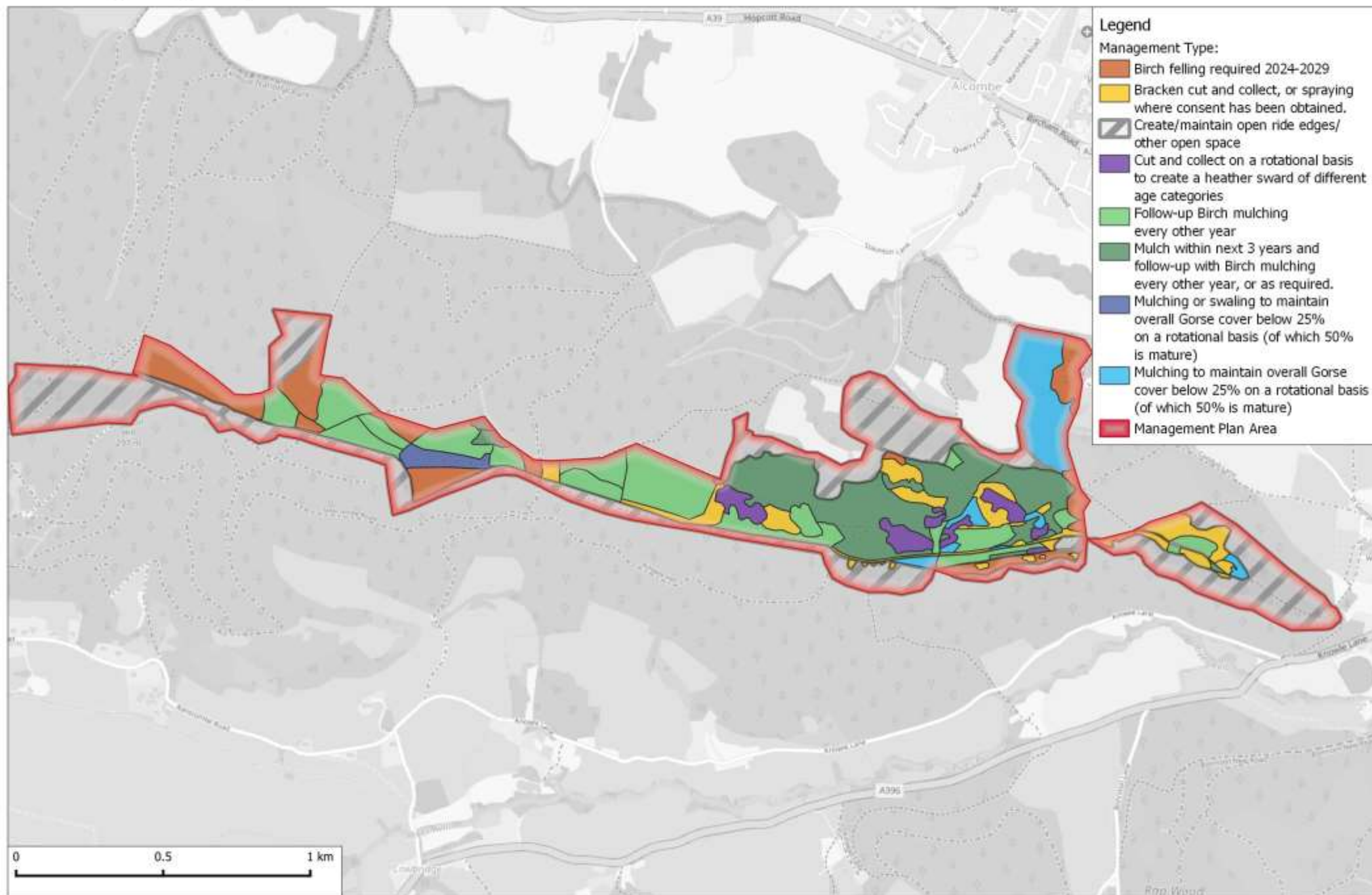
Target 2: Expand the distribution of Common Cow-wheat and Bilberry and increase the connectivity of existing patches.

Actions:

- Create a grazing plan and instigate a grazing regime using a small number of docile, hardy breed, cattle within temporary compartments using virtual fencing (invisible fencing that contains livestock using GPS collars and remotely controlled virtual boundaries), focussing on areas where scrub removal has taken place and within Bracken-dominated swards and ensuring livestock-free areas are always available.
- Mulch or cut and collect Gorse annually on a rotational basis (12-15 years), ensuring that around 50% of Gorse stands are mature at any time. Initial management should focus on degenerate stands, parts of which may be cut again after 4-5 years to increase structural diversity.
- Clear Birch scrub using a mulcher.
- Return to previously mulched areas to prevent regrowth of Birch.
- Fell larger Birch stands manually with chain saws (around 10 per hectare can be left as song posts/landscape features).
- Carry out Bracken control, focussing on mechanical means.
- Carry out a small amount of swaling in limited areas away from housing (see Map).

(Please see the full draft plan for indicators for these and all other targets).

Wootton Ridge management plan 2024-2034.



Objective 2: Landscape

- 1.10 Local people and other site users value the extensive views over rolling countryside and coastal areas seen from the top of the Wootton Ridge. It is therefore important to maintain an unobstructed vista across the open areas of the Wootton Ridge. This will include controlling taller Birch growth that may block sightlines and detract from the site's inherent landscape value.

Target: Maintain unobstructed views across the existing open areas of Wootton Ridge, and over the surrounding countryside and coast.

Actions:

- Map existing viewpoints along the ridge and identify locations where Birch and/or Gorse are impinging upon the view from them (or threaten to do so in the future).
- Remove the identified areas of vegetation, with the exception of stands identified as being specifically beneficial to biodiversity (e.g. within Dartford Warbler territories).

Objective 3: Cultural heritage

- 1.11 Grabbist Hillfort is an important Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM) located within the eastern extent of the management plan area. A large number of other heritage features are distributed across the site. Sensitive management of these features, and the vegetation growing upon them, is necessary to ensure that they are retained in good condition and remain visible to site users. Changes in management could negatively impact upon the features and careful consideration should be given to any risks posed by specific conservation or access interventions.

Target: Improve the visibility and safeguard the integrity of the heritage features located within the Wootton Ridge management plan area.

Actions:

- Produce separate heritage asset management plans for any heritage feature that may be subject to changes in management and/or access as a result of the Objectives identified within the management plan.
- Maintain a low vegetation sward across accessible on-site heritage features to ensure their visibility. The method used should reflect the contents of the relevant heritage asset management plan.
- Refer to the heritage feature map provided within this plan and the relevant heritage asset management plan before undertaking any capital works to avoid causing damage.
- Promote access within the management plan area at locations removed from heritage features, wherever possible, so that the risk of damage from recreational activities (e.g. erosion from bicycle tires) is minimised.

Objective 4: Public enjoyment, access, and engagement

1.12 Public access across, and enjoyment of, the Wootton Ridge has occurred for generations and is supported by the presence of Open Access land and PROW within the management plan area. The maintenance of appropriate public access along the Wootton Ridge is therefore a key consideration. However, certain types of unauthorised access, such as joy riding or the creation of off-road bicycle tracks, are problematic and impact upon both the biodiversity value of the management plan area and the enjoyment of other user groups. Any changes to site access arising as a result of on-site habitat management should be effectively communicated with site users in advance, using a range of media.

Target: Ensure that access is maintained within Open Access areas and along Public Rights of Way located along the Wootton Ridge for the continued enjoyment of a wide range of site users, and that any changes to management and/or access are communicated in a timely and effective way.

Actions:

- Clearly identify Public Rights of Way through sympathetic vegetation management as required (i.e. mowing or strimming) and wayposting.
- Use signage to indicate which routes are suitable for which activities and identify behaviours that are not applicable to the Ridge (e.g. the creation of off-road bicycle paths).
- Inform site users about any proposed changes to site management or access well in advance (minimum of 1 months' notice) using a range of communication methods, including online/social media and site-based/temporary signage as appropriate.

Objective 5: Landowner communication

- 1.13 Frequent communication between the landowners of Wootton Ridge will encourage knowledge sharing and allow the joint exploration of potential funding streams. It will also ensure that critical management activities (such as the identification and application of fire risk protocols) are discussed and agreed upon. Ultimately, frequent communication will assist in promoting both collegiate working practices across landowners and joined up management of the management plan area.

Target: Ensure that continued and regular communication occurs between the landowners of Wootton Ridge to promote knowledge sharing, explore joint funding opportunities, and discuss ongoing site management (including fire risk).

Actions:

- Face-to-face meetings of all landowners within the Management Plan area are held on an annual basis, with remote meetings organised on an *ad hoc* basis as required.
- Important information concerning any proposed changes to site management and/or access, as well as potential funding opportunities of relevance to the management plan area, is swiftly shared between the landowners.