

Swannington Commons Part 3: Commons as Oases of Wildlife

Mark Hassall



Harvesting peanuts from what was previously Amazonian tropical rainforest in Brazil (Tridge.com)

The biggest challenge to mankind in the 21st Century, after climate change, is world food security. The exponential increase in the global population has resulted in agriculture becoming both more extensive and intensive than ever before. Since the beginning of this year an area bigger than Norfolk in one of the most diverse terrestrial ecosystems on earth (the Amazon rainforest), has been felled and replaced by single species crops such as peanuts. Conservationists are trying very hard to preserve islands of the tropical rain forest for species such as jaguars, tapirs and tamarins.

In the UK, commons form oases of wildlife within relative biodiversity deserts of intensive agriculture. They

can potentially act as sources from which beneficial species, such as pollinating insects, can recolonize neighbouring agri-environmental schemes. To retain this potential they have to be carefully managed to prevent them from becoming completely overgrown with the consequent loss of key species.

How can the twin strategic aims of maintaining both the recreational and biodiversity values of commons be achieved? Fortunately they both involve maintaining areas free from becoming overgrown by scrub and trees. For the three decades from 1980 to 2010, the parish was helped enormously by the Norfolk Wildlife Trust which contributed over £300,000, to restore key areas of both SSSI commons and then maintain them using four-legged scrub bashers: the "Flying Flock" suited to the rough grazing that used to be carried out by parishioners' stock.



A hoverfly, one of a suite of pollinating insects that feed in flower rich grasslands on commons (harvesttortable.com)



Animated mowing machines: members of the "Flying Flock" on the meadow at Ugate

In 2010 internal reorganization of the NWT involved temporarily withdrawing from projects in the wider countryside to focus on their own reserves. Without their help, during the last decade the open spaces on the commons, so critical to both recreational use and wildlife, have become progressively more overgrown. The good news is that the NWT has now expanded its remit to become more heavily involved with managing common land throughout the county and can potentially again help with managing our commons.

The conservation volunteers have mounted a valiant rear-guard action by clearing scrub. Without appropriate grazing to maintain the cleared areas it has been rather like painting the Forth rail bridge as the scrub regrows to its original height in 4-5 years. The extent to which the open habitats have become overgrown now requires larger scale clearance with mechanical

equipment. This intervention has to be followed by sustainable levels of grazing by hardy breeds of goats, sheep or cattle, all able to digest more fibrous foods than commercial breeds.

Managing two separate Sites of Special Scientific Interest requires specialist conservation biology expertise. Just as doctors, dentists, and veterinary surgeons train for 5-6 years before practising, so also conservation biologists train for 5-6 years learning how to diagnose what causes habitats to deteriorate and how they can be treated to restore their biodiversity value. Provided that we accept the help of appropriate expertise, it is not too late to restore some of the open spaces on the two SSSI commons to maintain **both** their amenity value for parishioners and their biodiversity. I wish the Council all the very best in managing the commons sustainably, in collaboration with professional conservation biologists.



Some of the bagot goats used for grazing on Cromer cliffs have been offered to the parish for grazing our commons in winter.