

Are Ancient Woods Slipping Away?

Roderick Leslie is concerned that we are losing sight of the very things that make our ancient, coppiced woods so special.

"I wish people wouldn't just revere Oliver Rackham but actually read him." J.W. Spencer, 2022.

Oliver Rackham loved his 'canards': woodland myths that had grown up and become embedded in woodland thinking on the flimsiest of evidence. Gory mutilations for poaching deer, beloved of schoolboys, a medieval England of enormous oaks and a lack of timber for shipbuilding in the 19th century all fell under the hatchet of his multifaceted research.

Sadly, they have not gone away as a new flight

of canards increasingly bedevils ancient woodland conservation and management. The fate of the biodiversity of ancient woodland is the mirror image of farmland: in place of farming's super-intensification, lack of management exacerbated by deer browsing is leading to the county-by-county retreat of early succession woodland species (Figure 1).

Please note this article is about ungrazed, coppiced ancient woodland and not about wood pasture.

It seems to me that there are six birds in the new flight of canards.

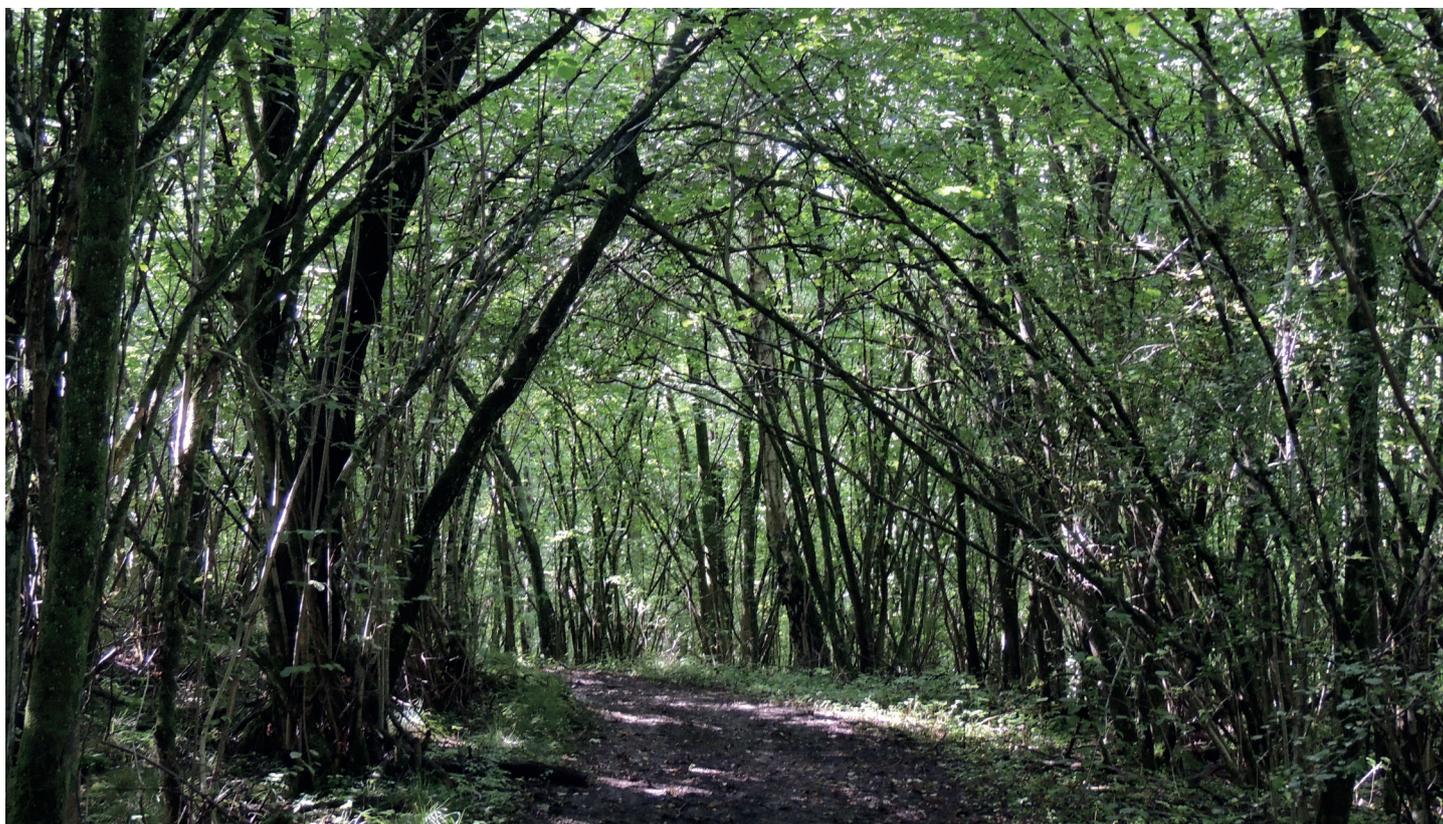


Figure 1. Darkness at noon: the dramatic impact of long stood over coppice; little light reaches the ground, eliminating the ground flora and preventing the development of early succession thicket so vital to a suite of wildlife.

Canard 1: Management by removing wood is not essential to ancient woodland survival

This is the fundamental canard.

The hard evidence that shading through lack of wood removal is the principal factor in the decline of early succession biodiversity is growing all the time, most visibly through the loss of key early succession species from wood after wood, including far too many nature reserves.

The supporting literature would fill pages but the story of one iconic species, the nightingale (Figure 2), and people’s personal experience tells it all: “we went to our usual spot but didn’t hear any”; “the last nightingale on Salisbury Plain”; “there used to be 20 pairs, now there are none”; “[early succession] species moving towards the edge of the wood” and so it goes on, usually without really questioning the loss, let alone linking it to the growth of the trees and loss of understorey thicket.

Abandoning traditional management equally cuts the cultural connection reflected in our wonderful medieval wood-framed buildings that is implicit in ancient woodland.

“Shading through lack of wood removal is the principal factor in the decline of early succession biodiversity.”

Neglected/abandoned woodland is currently nearly 40% of England’s woodland area. Large areas are ancient semi-natural woodland that have never been altered by conifer planting or other severe disturbance.

It is important to emphasise that there is nothing inherently wrong with middle-aged woodland – it originates from young woodland and moves towards old.

All the stages have ecological value. The problem is in the present proportion: British native woodland is currently overwhelmingly in that one class, with young and old age classes under-represented to the extent that their unique ecosystems and species are under threat.

For the old, we can help along the way but mainly have to wait.

For the young, we can and must act immediately. With the enormous current area of neglected coppice, the chances of the resource of older stands disappearing or even being seriously eroded are negligible, and the limited (but substantial) area that must be brought back into coppice will have little effect on the overall structure of our woodland resource.

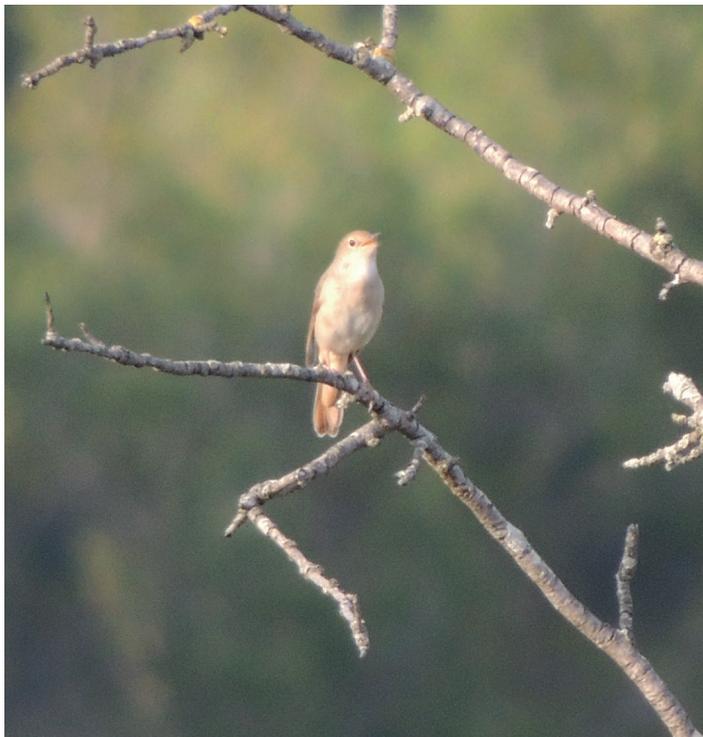


Figure 2. The iconic bird of young coppice, nightingale; in England it declined by 90% between 1967 and 2022 and there is little doubt abandonment of traditional coppicing is the principal cause.



Figure 3. Symbolic of our coppice heritage, how many times has the famous ‘2000-year-old’ small-leaved lime stool at Westonbirt National Arboretum been cut over the centuries?

What are the causes?

- Simple ignorance.
- If you don't do anything, you won't do any harm.
- Know there should be management but unable due to lack of skills and/or money.
- Forestry's strong bias towards growing saw timber through high forest silviculture.
- Nebulous ideas about natural woodland.

Canard 2: Low intensity management

This conjures up a folksy image of volunteers with hand tools cutting pocket handkerchiefs and neatly stacking brush in a dead hedge. It couldn't be further from the truth. Coppice is by far the most intensive system in forest management (Figure 3); Rackham's Hayley Wood was cut on a 7-year coppice cycle in medieval times, each coupe a clearfell.

Canard 3: Big machines do more damage

Actually, the opposite is true. Purpose-built forestry machines have lower ground pressure and less damaging drive systems than agricultural machines, and band tracks lower ground pressure even further (Figure 4). If you stop and think about it, these machines are designed to work on very wet and soft sites – if they had the impact their size suggests they'd sink like a stone. Horses are most damaging of all (along, in the past, with the narrow rimmed cart wheels which dug out our sunken lanes over centuries) but have become seen as environmentally sensitive because today they only extract small volumes of small poles. I've just watched a charming video of a horse extracting a 0.1 m³ pole. It will take 100 passes to extract a single forwarder load.

During the work on the 'Keepers of Time' policy, a veteran forester, Rodney Newborough, told us about a horse extraction of big oak logs in the New Forest early in his career. He recollected that "by the end they could have gone under the gate without opening it" (such was the level of ground disturbance caused by the operation). It's accepted that ancient woodland soils have not been disturbed by ploughing or fertilising, and that has been interpreted to mean no disturbance.

The literature and records stop abruptly when it gets to the practicalities of actually working the coppice. It would generally be in winter, regardless of soil. A 19th century advert on a pub wall near Haugh Wood in Herefordshire advertised a whole wood of 40 acres to be worked as a



Figure 4. Owston Wood is the largest woodland SSSI in Leicestershire – and it is incredibly wet, heavy clay. The 'corduroy' road made of cut timber for the large forwarder shows how skilful management can avoid damage to even the most fragile wood.

single coupe. Imagine what that would have looked like by the spring. We can't see that today but many readers will have tried to walk a well-used bridleway on heavy soil in a wet winter – that gives you some idea.

Taking it a step further, would disturbance not have been a feature of the ecology of ancient coppiced woodland? On hands and knees, there's an amazing amount of life in water filled ruts and Keith Kirby in his book *Woodland Wildflowers* gives a hint that it may have supported biodiversity now lost to sight.

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Canard 4: Economic viability is a bad thing

Wood from ancient woodlands was second only to food in the medieval economy (Figure 5). Never again has a single material so dominated: it was brick, concrete and steel; oil, gas and coal; carts, coaches and ships. As Rackham points out time and again, woods were conserved because without them, people would go cold. The written record shows not just how intensively they were managed but also their financial value.

Commercial management is as important today, not least because it pays for the work of conserving ancient woodland. Recent values are some excuse for the lack of management: after a long decline, by 2000 small

hardwoods were effectively worthless. However, thanks to the advent of wood energy, by 2010 they could be worth £30/tonne standing, a value which in many situations covers costs to the extent of paying for a deer fence and leaving a healthy surplus – of both cash and early succession wildlife. And, crucially, once there is a surplus, the work that can be undertaken becomes unlimited – and it needs to because, off the top of the head, I would estimate we need to shift at least 50,000 more tonnes of wood from coppice per annum to give our coppice wildlife a chance of survival.

And before anyone comes out with the “it’s only good for firewood”, when did you last hear “it’s only oil” or “only gas”? Let’s reinforce the memory that our ancestors would have gone cold, without cooked food or even shelter, without their coppice produce – it was quite simply central to life.

An interesting issue is that medieval coppicing removed all the cut material – branchwood played an important part as faggots for fuelling bread ovens. Now, extracting the whole pole including branchwood is equally practical when the wood is going to be chipped for biomass energy.

Canard 5: Restoration

To most conservationists, ‘restoration’ has come to mean removing non-natives, especially conifers. But it isn’t – it is just the start, because as we’ve seen above, restoring traditional – coppice – management is the essential link to conserving the valued ancient woodland early succession species. Coppicing and protecting the regrowth from grazing and browsing is the key step (Figure 6). Further work may be needed to restore damage – it’s not just sites planted with conifers, because stood over coppice may have lost a significant proportion of stools due to shading, and the massive impact of wartime felling is rarely recognised. Also, developing new standards by planting or natural regeneration was part of the history of coppicing and is as appropriate today.

Restoration to high forest as advocated in current Woodland Trust guidelines is not restoration: it is conversion of conifer plantation to broadleaved high forest. High forest is modern forestry. It did not feature in medieval woodmanship, which was based on coppice-with-standards and wood pasture as the two



Figure 5. The historic wood-framed houses of the village of Lavenham, Suffolk, are a living testimony to the unique link between nature and human culture that our ancient coppiced woodlands represent.



Figure 6. Before (left) and after (right): newly cut coppice in Leigh Woods, Bristol, in June and the same coupe the next November. The speed of growth shows why coppice was so effective in keeping our ancestors warm!

characteristic and quite distinct forms of management.

'Restoration' to high forest leaves features like wood banks as no more than archaeological relicts of a former system. Rackham's 'meaning' on which he rightly placed so much emphasis is lost, probably forever. Any approach which focuses solely on natural ecology is at risk of this problem. Ancient woodland is unique and special because of the interaction between cultural and ecological factors.

The increase in awareness of veteran trees (which, I should emphasise, is fantastic and crucial) has also left many people expecting to see big, old trees in ancient woodland – true, of course, of beautiful pasture woodland but absolutely not coppiced woodland.

Canard 6: Planting

How many times in the last few years have you read "we've felled some trees and will be planting some more"? If it's an ancient woodland, simply don't. Regrowth from coppiced stumps is at the heart of ancient woodland (Figure 5). Beyond simply the physical, it is central to the 'meaning' of ancient woodland, the historic culture which complements its biodiversity. And, by the way, regrowth from coppice is of a different order of magnitude to a planted tree – perhaps 5 years' worth of a planted tree in the very first season. Instead, spend the treeshelter money on a professional deer fence. Once again, planting is largely about 'modern' forestry, not medieval woodmanship.

Epitaph

We were bounced off the motorway by an accident just out of the Channel Tunnel. Following minor roads, stood over coppice arched over the road for mile after mile. A brief opening as we passed Knowle, seeing the young replacement parkland trees following the 1987 storm, then back into the dark. This is what 400,000 hectares of neglected woodland looks like, the darkness of dense,

overgrown coppice trees stifling the wealth their continual management once generated. The current generation has abandoned these woods despite Oliver Rackham's inspirational story of how crucial they are to both our ecology and heritage. I was left wondering: is this where hundreds, if not thousands, of years of history end, where our ancient woodlands go to die?

Further reading

A reference list would cover pages, so here are a few suggestions for further reading. Oliver Rackham's books are the key source, and I would still recommend the original *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape*, published by J.M. Dent and Sons in 1976 and many subsequent editions.

More recently I'd recommend two books from the British Wildlife collection by Bloomsbury – number 12 *Trees and Woodlands* by George Peterken and number 8 *Woodland Flowers* by Keith Kirby.

On your shelves already, 'Woodland Management and Birds' by Rob Fuller in July 2021 *QJF* (pages 168-174) and October 2021 (pages 238-244), is a very clear explanation of the effect of woodland structure on birds. Furthermore, in October 2024 *QJF* on page 253 there is a marvellous map of coppicing in 1655 in Lesnes Abbey Wood. The oldest coupe is just 7 years old.

Finally, the Forestry Commission publication *Managing Native Broadleaved Woodland* by Ralph Harmer, Gary Kerr and Richard Thompson published in 2010 is a treasury of wide-ranging and practical information and advice.

Roderick Leslie worked for the Forestry Commission from 1976-2008. In 1985 as newly appointed national Wildlife and Conservation Officer he helped introduce the Government's Broadleaves Policy. In 1988 he attended Oliver Rackham's Flatford Mill ancient woodland course.