

Nature Recovery Fund: A Wilder Woolhope Dome

Proposal for recovering nature across the Woolhope Dome
landscape and nature reserves



Herefordshire
Wildlife Trust

A Wilder Woolhope Dome

The Woolhope Dome offers a fantastic opportunity to restore habitats and species within a distinct landscape area. To complete our first phases of project development to create a wilder Woolhope, we are seeking contributions to raise £100,000 through our Nature Recovery Fund.

Introduction

Nearly one in six species are currently threatened with extinction from Great Britain¹. In Herefordshire, once common, iconic species such as turtle dove and nightingale are already locally extinct, while others, such as curlew, water vole and adder, remain only in small, isolated populations, and are on the brink of being lost from our county.

We face major challenges in Herefordshire. As a rural and agricultural county, the pressures from modern agriculture loom large. Farming practices can lead to loss and fragmentation of habitats including floodplain meadows converted to arable farmland, loss of headlands and field margins, grubbing up of orchards and filling in of ponds. It can contribute to water pollution of soil and nutrients into streams and rivers. Increasing development puts further pressures on our landscapes from adding to nutrient and pollutant run-off into waterways to further fragmentation of habitats and creation of barriers and in the landscape. Changing rainfall patterns, periods of drought and extreme weather events, resulting from the crisis of our changing climate, are disrupting ecosystems, altering species distributions and exacerbating existing environmental pressures. Further threats come from invasive, non-native species which can out-compete native flora and fauna, spread disease against which native species have no resilience and damage habitats.

These conditions all continue to contribute to the biodiversity crisis with devastating declines in the abundance, distribution and diversity of species.

Herefordshire Wildlife Trust's mission is to bring about nature's recovery through local action – enabling individuals, communities, local governments, farmers and businesses to act for nature.

We aim for 30% of land across our county to be well-managed for nature by 2030.

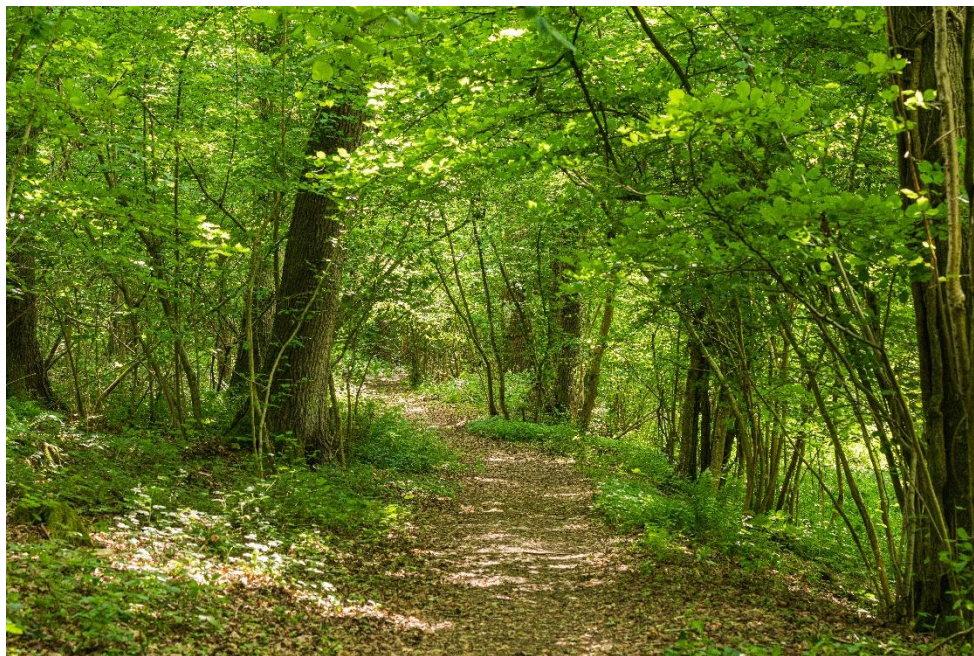


Pied flycatcher © Mark Hamblin/2020VISION

¹ [State of Nature 2023 - report on the UK's current biodiversity](#)

We are working to achieve this in our current strategy (2023-6) period by:

- **advising and influencing landowners** and managers through our consultancy and increased project work in the wider countryside. Our ambition is to directly deliver conservation projects on at least 500ha outside of our own estate and influence a further 10% of the management of land area within the county, with positive outcomes for nature, through projects and advice services;
- taking a **strategic partnership approach** through e.g. the Local Nature Partnership, Wye Catchment Partnership, and Nutrient Management Board and partnering with other key organisations e.g. Farm Herefordshire, Herefordshire Meadows, Plantlife, Herefordshire Council;
- scoping exercises to identify partners **and deliver landscape recovery projects**. This proposal describes the first of these on the Woolhope Dome and we are working to the following schedule:
 - Phase 1 2025-6 Research and development
 - Phase 2 2026-7 Project development, partnership building
 - Phase 3 2027-2032 Project delivery
 - Phase 4 Impact assessment
- **reviewing our own landholdings** to ensure they compliment a wider landscape recovery strategy and are managed to be the best they can be for wildlife;
- **collaborating with local communities**, connecting people with nature and supporting them to take action for the wildlife and wild places in their county.



Lea & Paget's Wood, Woolhope Dome © Paul Lloyd

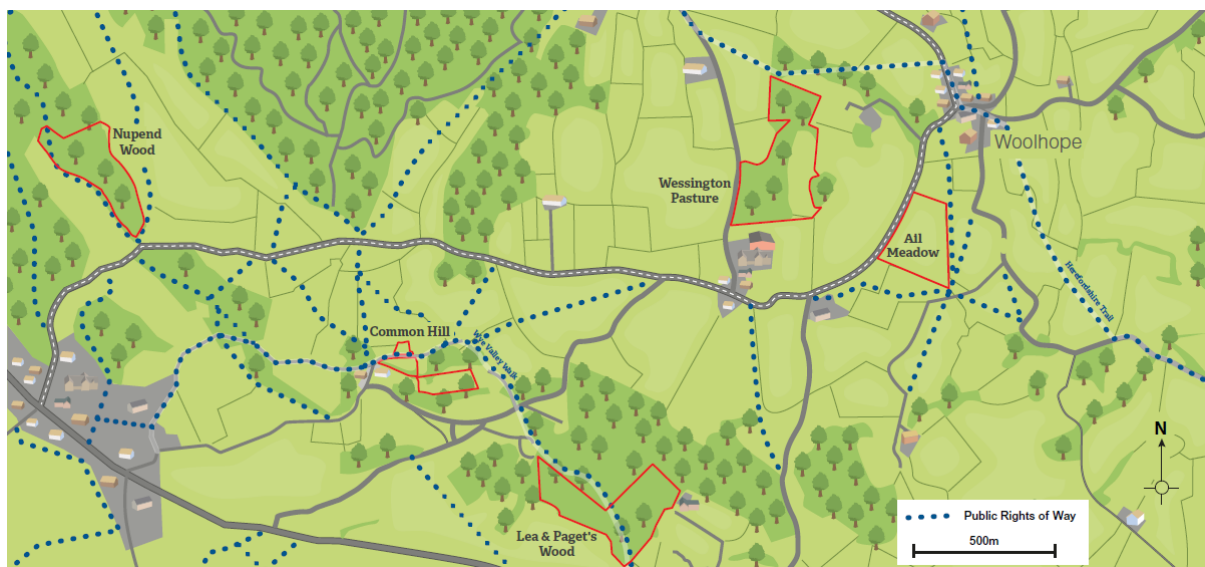
The Woolhope Dome

The Woolhope Dome is a unique geological area made up of concentric rings of alternate limestones and shales surrounding a central bed of sandstone. This topography has been instrumental in the development of the ecology. The variety of aspects, slopes, soils and the relative lack of agricultural intensification has created a unique combination of important habitats. These habitats range from semi-natural ancient woodland to grasslands rich in wildflowers, traditional orchards to unspoilt streams. The Woolhope Dome is one of the last places in the country where all these habitats can still be found together and it is believed to be home to over half the species found anywhere in the UK.

The landscape covers a total of 5,600 hectares with 2,289 ha grassland (neutral and calcareous); 1,014 ha arable; 1,582 ha woodland (57% of which is broad-leaved semi-natural woodland) and 286 ha orchard. Other important habitat types found here include parkland and wood pasture, hedgerows, roadside verges, ponds and streams and commons.

Key species of the area include a number of butterflies, in particular the wood white butterfly (now extinct in many counties but has a stronghold here); flora of calcareous grassland with plants of particular note including wild daffodil and many orchid species.

The Trust owns and manages six nature reserves within the landscape. We continue to maximise our impact by extending and connecting these sites, for example with the purchase of Rounds Meadow, adjacent to Monument Hill at our Common Hill site in 2020 and of Ail Meadow in 2022.



Wessington Pasture

As you walk through the woodland, you'll see some very large ancient hazel trees and a good mix of understorey shrubs like spindle, blackthorn and sweet briar plus a few ancient perry pear trees at the top of the glade. Birds to spot include both green and great spotted woodpeckers, nuthatch, tree creeper and long-tailed tit.

In the pasture there are patches of wild daffodils plus dwarf thistle, adder's tongue fern, greater butterfly orchid and autumn ladies' tresses.

Ail Meadow

Acquired in 2022, Ail Meadow is an exciting addition to the reserves on the Woolhope Dome. Managed sympathetically, the many important species of plant and wildflower already on the reserve will flourish. Some areas of the meadow are damp fen grassland, home to different grasses and flowers than on the other reserves. Bog pimpernel is one; you can also find sneezewort and flaxweed.

Lea & Pagets Wood

Considered one of the finest, ancient, semi-natural broad-leaved woodlands left in the Wye Valley National landscape, Lea & Pagets Wood is a delight. There are a variety of magnificent trees dominated by sessile oak and ash and an understorey composed of hazel and field maple, together with some hawthorn, holly, crab-apple and spindle.

Large and spectacular drifts of bluebells make a fine show in springtime, mixed in with wood anemone, ramsons and early purple orchids. You can also spot herb paris, wild daffodil, sanicle, wild liquorice and greater butterfly orchid.

Lea & Pagets Wood is home to a small population of pied flycatchers, all three woodpecker species and many warblers. Alongside the more common woodland butterflies, there are white admirals and wood whites, and the spectacular silver-washed fritillary. There is a thriving population of dormice, while groups of fallow deer are often glimpsed.

Common Hill

Common Hill by contrast boasts a patchwork of wildflower rich meadows, alive with butterflies and bees during summer. There are also traditional orchards in two of the fields bearing pink blossom in April. Look out for the tiny adder's tongue fern, common spotted orchid, yellow rattle, masses of cowslips in spring, quaking grass, common rock-rose, wild thyme and milkwort.



Wood white butterflies © HWT

Nupend Wood

Gnarled yew trees grow along the ridge through which the footpath winds while typical ancient woodland indicator species such as bluebell and yellow archangel are found on the lower slopes in spring. The large grassy area on the edge of the woodland has an abundance of calcium loving plants such as stinking iris, greater butterfly orchid and marjoram. In July, pyramidal orchid spikes appear above the grasses.

Summer butterflies flourish on these warm sheltered slopes: grizzled skippers appear in May/June while marbled whites and silver-washed fritillaries may be seen in July. Scarce species like small pearl-bordered and pearl-bordered fritillaries, together with wood white make an appearance.

Bird life in the wood is rich and varied with breeding marsh tit, chiffchaff, nuthatch as well as woodpeckers – green and great spotted. The crop of yew berries attracts flocks of wintering fieldfares and redwings. Dormice are permanent residents of the woodland.

Rudge End Quarry

The quarry workings at this reserve are believed to date from the second half of the 19th Century but have long been disused. Woodland surrounds this quarry and has doubtless helped in the regeneration of the beech, ash and oak with a holly understorey. The botanical interest of the site lies in the calcicole flora, stinking hellebore, yellow wort and carline thistle, which grow in the old spoil heaps, while lime-loving mosses and liverworts have colonised the steep rock faces.

In addition, we are pledged bequest of a 48ha farm here which we anticipate coming into our ownership within a decade.

Landholdings in the wider landscape

Other key landholdings include Plantlife's Joan's Hill Farm Nature Reserve, Forestry England's Haugh Wood SSSI, Siege Wood, Broadmoor Common Local Nature Reserve and many Local Wildlife Sites. There is a mix of private landholdings from smallholders to large estates and farms.

Other conservation organisations have been, and continue to be, active here including Butterfly Conservation, Plantlife, Woolhope Dome Environmental Trust and the Woolhope Club. The Woolhope Dome also sits within the Wye Valley National Landscape.

Many local residents are also keen conservationists and manage their own landholdings for wildlife, support the management of the Commons and roadside verges and contribute to the management of the Trust's nature reserves. Our Nature Reserves Manager and Nature Reserves Officer oversee our reserves work, supported by long-standing Voluntary Wardens and long-established volunteer groups.



Yew trees, Nupend Wood Nature Reserve © Paul Lloyd

Declines and disconnections

Herefordshire's Local Nature Recovery Strategy opportunity mapping, to date, identifies significant areas within the Woolhope Dome as being suitable for creation or restoration of wetland, traditional orchards, woodland and open (grassland) habitats.

While there are many treasures within this landscape, these are often isolated and, when we zoom out, the picture is of a fragmented landscape with large areas of low biodiversity value.

In particular, the relatively small areas of species-rich grassland are patchily distributed with no connecting corridors.

While some woodlands are well-managed, this could be increased. A large amount of the woodland here remains conifer plantation with little to offer wildlife. The woodlands are often disconnected from one another and this connectivity could be improved by riparian tree corridors and more and well-managed hedgerows.

Hedgerows play a key role in connectivity for wildlife, including for butterflies, bats, dormice and birds, and need better, more consistent management for wildlife with, for example, longer cutting rotations, leaving one side uncut, increased hedge laying and expanding some strategic hedgerow connections into 'linear woods.'

The area of traditional orchards remaining could be increased and management improved.

Streams such as the Pentoloe Brook could have wide buffer strips to protect each bank and they could be more effective in holding water in the landscape (combatting both flooding and drought) with the introduction of woody debris or leaky dams and streamside ponds.

The large deer population has been a major problem for conservation in the Woolhope Dome historically and this remains an issue for the management of coppiced woodlands in particular.

We continue to see poor, unsustainable practices on some farmed land holdings and opportunities for carbon sequestration and improved nutrient management. For example,

reducing the practice of putting fields under fodder such as turnips to be grazed by sheep over winter resulting in bare soils (contributing to carbon loss), compaction of soils and nutrient run-off into streams.

Building on successes

As well as the management of our own nature reserves, the Trust has led and contributed to a number of projects here in recent decades.

The Woolhope Dome's biodiversity significance and overlapping organisational interests gave rise to a government-funded, multiple partnership project – led by the Trust – to further selected Natural Area objectives, especially for ancient woodlands and semi-natural grasslands. The project ran in two phases between 1998 and 2004.

In 2015 we carried out a Phase 1 Habitat Survey² across much of the landscape which gives us some good baseline data and observations.

We have collaborated with Butterfly Conservation on improving habitats for the wood white.



Dormouse monitoring, Woolhope Dome © HWT

² [wdet-habitat-survey-herefordshire-wildlife-trust.pdf](#)

Our Vision for a Wilder Woolhope

Our vision is to achieve the following outcomes:

- improved management of individual habitats, increasing the area of species-rich grassland by 20%, broadleaf woodland by 10% and orchards by 10%;
- improved connectivity and permeability of the landscape including restoration, or new planting, of at least 5 km of hedgerow;
- population declines halted for key species: wood white, pearl-bordered fritillary, dormouse, lesser spotted woodpecker, noble chafer beetle and bat species;
- broad, long-term engagement and collaboration between residents, landowners and stakeholders;
- a range of sustainable ongoing management schemes implemented e.g. Environmental Land Management Schemes, sustainable commercial enterprise, eco-tourism, community action, rewilding, a 'flying flock' of livestock for conservation grazing
- improved interpretation and visitor facilities at our nature reserves and throughout the landscape

This is a long-term vision for the landscape which, following a period of research and relationship-building, would begin with a major landscape-scale recovery project which delivers practical actions to achieve the vision detailed above.

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| ❖ Phase 1 2025-6 | Research and development |
| ❖ Phase 2 2026-7 | Project development, partnership building |
| ❖ Phase 3 2027-2032 | Project delivery |
| ❖ Phase 4 | Impact assessment |

A Wilder Woolhope Dome

To complete our first two phases of project development, we are seeking contributions to raise £100,000 through our Nature Recovery Fund.

This will allow us resources to begin collaborative discussion and planning with partners, landowners and communities, scrutinise existing data and opportunity maps and prioritise the habitats and species to focus our initial efforts.

We hope to secure commitments of annual donations of upwards of £5,000 from donors through the project period 2025 to 2032 to give us a stable footing on which to progress with our plans.



Wessington Pasture Nature Reserve © Paul Lloyd