

## **2016 Rangers Report**

It has been another busy year on the common with good amounts of scrub clearance, thinning, scrape creation, bracken control and management of the grazing animals taking place in rotation on all five commons. We are now half way through the 10 year HLS agreement and I hope you agree that much has been achieved to restore this important heathland habitat in the past 5 years.

To date, the numbers of animals grazing has been fairly constant which has helped to ensure that the vegetation regrowth is kept under control. The ponies and sheep in particular have been a little too keen on munching and some of the turf has been overgrazed. We removed the sheep from the combined commons last summer to allow the *Molinia* tussocks to recover and will probably be avoiding sheep altogether in 2017. Ponies also tend to nibble very close to the ground so we will be reducing the number of ponies too to allow the flowers and soft vegetation to benefit. The lovely Longhorn cattle will definitely be grazing again. The final grazing arrangements for this year are still ongoing with the graziers but on-site signage will be put up to notify visitors of where the stock is grazing and you will be able to look at the grazing plan on the CCS and ESCC website.

As well as the standard winter works, which started in the Autumn, we managed to secure extra funding from Natural England for 3 new scrapes. One on Pound Common has already been completed-top soil and bracken litter has been removed and the area has been sown with heather seed collected locally from Ashdown Forest. This new scrape has linked two existing scrape sites together, so, in time, this will help to create a very large area of prime heath-provided we can stop the inevitable spread of the birch! There is also a 1 hectare scrape planned for Red House Common and another smaller one on Romany Ridge, both of which will both link existing scrape sites together. The County Archaeologist is working with us to protect the archaeological trenches and other features found on the commons.

Last summer saw the usual unwelcome return of the bracken. As well as the bi-annual return of the heavy horses and the dedicated team from the Working Horse Trust to roll and bruise the bracken on the combined commons, much of

the bracken was mown too. Natural England are now insisting that, where possible, the bracken is cut and collected rather than left on site to rot down and contribute to nutrient build up. This is a good approach, but unfortunately increases the cost of the works quite considerably.

Talking of pesky plants, the ragwort also seemed to be particularly abundant in 2016 so the rangers set to with bulging biceps to pull as much as possible, concentrating on the commons with stock on.

Over the last year, there has been a lot of focus on re-wetting some of the commons, in particular, Romany Ridge which is where many of the rarer heathland plants such as sundew and bog asphodel are found. Volunteers have helped to dig out Molinia tussocks to create more pools and edge habitat for species to colonise and we have been working with the Freshwater Habitats Trust and Sussex Wildlife Trust to plan works which will benefit the common. These include opening up some of the ponds by coppicing a proportion of the willow, creating a new pond and creating a series of temporary pools for wildlife. This will be part-funded by the FHT. Volunteers are needed for more pool creation over the coming months. It is hard work but very rewarding! If you can help, please get in touch.

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