

A Decade of Denge Dukes

Back in 2007, the Duke of Burgundy was on the brink of extinction in Kent, with just a single known colony remaining in Denge Woods. Following a successful bid, Butterfly Conservation received Heritage Lottery Funding to begin a three-year rescue project. Fran Holmes ran the project from 2008-2011 and, looking back, recalls the excitement of realising the full scope of this landscape-scale scheme, working with the three main landowners involved; the Forestry Commission, the Woodland Trust and a private individual.

The funding provided the focus to improve knowledge of the Duke's distribution in the wider countryside and of historic colony sites. All known sites were brought under careful management programmes, with woodland managers and owners engaged and encouraged to get involved with appropriate management. A network of volunteers was built to survey the sites and undertake winter work parties improving the habitat. Through a program of events, public and local communities were engaged to raise awareness of the Duke and lepidoptera generally.

The three-year project resulted in the discovery of 4 new, previously unknown colonies, and the re-colonisation of 2 previously 'lost' sites. It also greatly expanded the amount of suitable habitat in Denge Woods. Since 2011 work has continued in the form of detailed annual monitoring of all sites by the 'Duke Guardians' volunteer network. Dan Tuson of Natural England collates this information in an annual report.

Dan also coordinates conservation efforts in the surrounding countryside, continuing and building Natural England's stewardship scheme work with farms and estates around the wider grassland colony sites in the area. This focuses on new grassland creation work, enhancing wildflower meadows and maintaining sensitive management on the existing colony sites. Since 2011 continued one-to-one habitat management advice has ensured that all the grassland breeding colonies have been sustained. A network of new grassland habitats is developing which is much more favourable to the Duke, as well as the Black-veined Moth. This has resulted in the establishment of 4 new breeding colonies and increased Duke sightings in the wider countryside around Crundale and Wye.

After the funded project ended, Claire Ward took on voluntary management of the Denge Woods work parties, coordinating volunteers and liaising with land owners. A dedicated band of volunteers spend several days each winter at work parties with a focus on clearing scrub to ensure the sites continue to be suitable for the Duke and providing new sites for colonisation, as well as ensuring connectivity between areas allowing the Dukes to travel along rides. In 2015, Joan and Kelvin Martin transplanted 200 plugs of Cowslip from their private nature reserve near Braebourne to Bonsai Bank, improving foodplant distribution in the area.

Denge Woods is part of an ancient semi-natural woodland complex and the presence of Turtle Doves, Nightingales, White-spotted Sable moth and various orchid species including one of the largest colonies of Lady Orchids in the country make this a precious and important site. A huge thank you to everyone whose tenacity and dedication has ensured the legacy of the original HLF woodland management work in the Denge continues to this day. The Duke's progress is evident from the chart below. The figures speak for themselves.

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Breeding colony sites	4	9	9	10	12	10	11	12	12	11	13
Sites where Duke sightings recorded			13	10	16	13	13	13	12	14	14
Total max counts across all sites	32	60	172	115	90	59	78	81	58	81	140

There will be a field trip in May, check the program of events for details.