

Blessington Wood reserve

Scots Pines and oak trees above the lakeshore at Blessington Wood reserve
Photo: Jeremy Casey

Jeremy Casey continues his series on the Native Woodland Trust's nature reserves. **No 2: Blessington Wood**

Ancient woodlands are all the rage – and they should be. In the last issue, we looked at what it takes to establish a new native woodland at Gracedieu Wood in Waterford. This time, we're looking at woodland rehabilitation. Before enjoying ancient woodland expansion, I thought it so important to highlight these equally important projects we're undertaking.

Past

The story of **Blessington Wood** begins earlier than 2010, the year we purchased the site. The oldest maps we can find tell us of a broadleaf woodland that once stood here. A woodland eventually incorporated into the **Russborough estate**.

Management of the woodland escalated in later years, as it was largely cleared to make way for a crop of non-native conifer and hardwood plantation. Other parts were quarried for sand.

That's where the bad news ends, thankfully. Tales of rewilding and

rehabilitation must often start this way. Under our watchful eye, and with help from our **Wicklow Branch** of volunteers, this 16½ acre Planted Ancient Woodland site begins to heal.

Present

Blessington Wood consists of over a dozen habitats, which means it's home to a diverse range of plants and animals. Humans thrive here, too. Accessible via the **Blessington Greenway**, it's the perfect spot for a picnic at water's edge or under leafy canopies.

The site deserved protection for a multitude of reasons, including that the area is a **Proposed Natural Heritage Area** (pNHA). The lakeshore it buffers is within a **Special Protection Area** (SPA) for birds, and the site houses inhabitants like **Common Snipe**, who are part of the very qualifying interests for these protections in the first place.

The Native Woodland Trust took on this site with a vision to allow natural regeneration to take place, with a touch of management to give nature a helping hand. The branch and I have planted almost 300 trees in the last four years. We've worked hard to eradicate and continue to manage regrowth from non-native **Buddleia**. We've collaborated with various scientific research projects, and we host a raft of volunteer, educational and even speciality events here

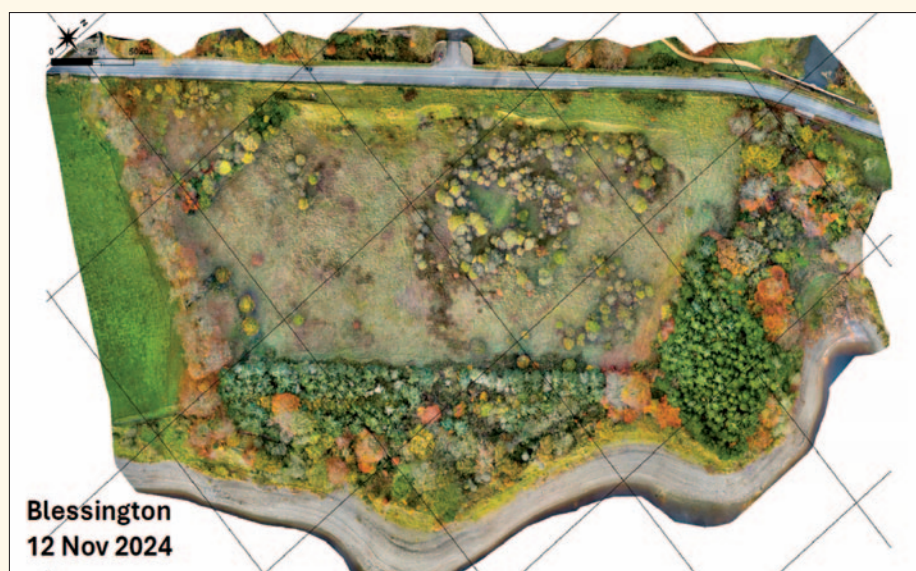


Image by Rick Terres

throughout the year.

And so Blessington Wood is not only a haven for wildlife, but a haven for people, too. People come to relax, to learn, to have fun and to contribute to something important.

Setting forth

On a mid-May morning, a visitor to Blessington Wood might park at **Poulaphouca car park**, enjoying views that stretch from the water's edge to the Wicklow Mountains.

Essential stops along the way include at a pair of old **Sycamore** trees who showcase wonderfully the increasing ability of trees to support other living things as they age. Crowns hanging low, roots exposed and crevices deep. A lone bush **Hawthorn** stands isolated along the way, a magical tree whom we delight in telling stories beneath.

No views quite so special as those to come. To your left, an avenue of veteran **Beech** trees mark the start of our reserve. To the right, the tops of other of the reserve's oldest trees – **oaks**, **Scots Pines** and **Horse Chestnuts** – some of which were presumably planted as part of the Russborough estate in the 18th or 19th century, others wild and of similar age.

With a new lease of life, any giants toppled to ground level at this stage remain *in situ* – to live their second life, providing habitat and food, decaying to feed the next generation.

Natural regeneration

Speaking of which, it is here on the woodland edges, along the path to the lake, where the first signs of natural regeneration are visible. A sight for sore eyes in a county denuded of young trees, owing largely to an overpopulation of deer, mainly Sika Deer.

Thanks to boundaries of water and



Clearing invasive Buddleia from the dry grassy bank. Photo: Jeremy Casey

tarmac (the N81), deer density remains low enough here for wild **oak**, **Hawthorn**, **Elder**, **Hazel** and **Wych Elm** to sprout. In the dappled sunlight they've created over the last decade, two **Speckled Wood** butterflies dance. Stopping for a moment, birdsong fills the air – from resident **Chaffinch**, **Goldcrest**, **Song Thrush** and more of the nearly 30 species we've encountered here.

Emerging at the lakeshore, I was greeted by 'snow' (willow catkins) falling. Woodland gives way to exposed sandy banks lined with willows and thorns. During my visit, **Common Blues** fluttered among abundant **Bird's-foot Trefoil**. Above them, **Badger** earthworks are found, and similarly a colony of **Sand Martins** at cliffs to the south. A prominent sandy cliff marks the reserve's highest point.

Standing guard on top are massive **Scots Pine** and **Pedunculate Oak** trees, protecting what can only be described as an **oak sapling nursery** at their feet.

The lakeshore path leads past a **Monkey Puzzle** tree, and travellers follow

Water Mint and **Silverweed** to the marshy outflow, one of the wettest parts of the reserve, where **Alder** trees have emerged on their own, underscored by **willows**, **Cattails** and **Yellow Iris**.

I decide to divert upstream to peek at what volunteers have called "the bat cave." An old bridge under which **Daubenton's Bats** roost in crevices, hopefully finding the wetter parts of our reserve useful for hunting – skimming across the water surface using big feet to scoop up prey.

Back to the path, we're led through a block of mixed conifer and hardwood trees containing **Sitka Spruce** and some hardwoods, including **Beech**. With plans underway to start replacing these conifers with native species, it's great to see wild **Elder** and **Holly** trees reclaiming lost ground already.

Central marsh

Emerging into the open, we meet the central marsh. The old quarry gradually deepens on one side, it's extractive past now adding to the site's ecological value in new ways. Where it's deepest, **wet willow woodland** has developed with sedgy-swampy bits perfect for **frogs** and **newts**. Dry grassy banks surround it on all sides and, as the depression shallows, wet grassland emerges and eventually gives way to drier meadows and woodland scrub.

Visitors are met with a fence we've erected that offers scenic views stretching back to the Beech avenue and a raised route back home. With welly boots on, I decide to follow the marshier route to visit some friends. With a bit of luck, and good timing, I was pleased to see **Dingy Skipper** butterflies along the way, a near-threatened species in Ireland ➤



Wicklow Branch members removing litter from the reserve. Photo: Jeremy Casey



Jeremy and Wicklow members on Biodiversity Week walk. *Photo: Arthur Stainmesse*

with small isolated populations. There's a healthy population of **Cryptic Wood White** on the grassy banks here too, and even **Wall Brown** – an endangered butterfly species in Ireland.

Future

Myself and our **Wicklow Branch** of volunteers have worked hard over the last four years at Blessington Wood. We've eradicated and continue to manage regrowth of non-native butterfly bush (*Buddleia*), which would encroach on important native butterfly habitat if left unchecked.

We have started a yearly **spring clean** of litter on site and along the greenway,

and we've planted almost 300 trees in considered spots – some of these saplings the progeny of healthy elm grown from our **Wych Hunt** project.

With numbers rising locally, our attention has also been on **deer management**. We've partnered with **UCD** and **ReWild Wicklow** in separate projects this year to study and invest in infrastructure on site.

More recently, our focus has shifted to the remnant plantation conifers. Over the next few years, I hope to bring you along with us as we begin to replace them with trees we have lovingly grown at our nursery in east Wicklow, collected as seed from ancient woodlands across

the county – from **Knocksink** in Enniskerry to **Glen of the Downs** and the **Vale of Clara** further south. Trees destined for our woodland rehabilitation project at Blessington Wood. ■

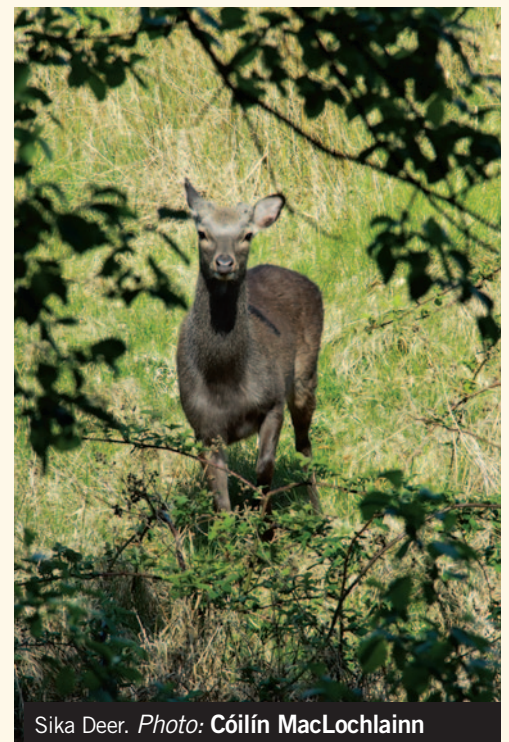


Dingy Skipper. *Photo: Jeremy Casey*

➤ If you live in one of counties Carlow, Donegal, Wicklow, Meath, Offaly, Roscommon, Waterford or Westmeath, do consider joining a local branch and lending your hand to our important mission. to find out more, feel free to contact me, Jeremy Casey, at Jeremy.casey@nativewoodlandtrust.ie.



Willow carr in Blessington Wood reserve. *Photo: Jeremy Casey*



Sika Deer. *Photo: Cólín MacLochlainn*