Aylestone Holt habitat survey

Context

Aylestone Holt is a mature woodland, part plantation and part semi-natural, at the southern edge of the Leicester urban area, in Glen Parva, and on the eastern edge of the Soar Valley, which is a regionally important wildlife corridor. It is separated from open grassland and wetlands in the valley by the Great Central Way, a former railway line which is now a cycleway and footpath connecting Glen Parva to Leicester City centre. It is in a steep sided cutting wooded adjacent to Aylestone Holt.

Glenhills, a proposed Local Nature Reserve, is an important site just to the south-west of the woodlands, on the opposite side of the Great Central Way.

The surrounding land use is predominantly suburban, with housing estates to the south, east and north-east and a playing field to the south-east. The Great Central Way runs along the western boundary - a locally important wildlife corridor with a mosaic of tall herbs, scrub, developing woodland and species-rich grasslands. A site to the north and adjacent to the Great Central has been recently planted with a mix of native trees and shrubs, which forms a valuable complementary habitat to the mature woodland.

Usage

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Aylestone Holt is public open space, and is well-used by the public. It has entrances from the Great Central Way, Glen Rise to the east, the playing fields and the new plantation woodland. It has a network of surfaced paths and desire lines. Despite a high level of usage and its edge-of-settlement location there was very little sign of anti-social behaviour.

Woodland habitat

Tree species

The woodland is mature semi-natural/plantation woodland, dominated overall by Ash. At 2.5 hectares (approx) it is a small woodland, but it is estimated that over half is semi-natural - i.e. has regenerated naturally as opposed to being planted up. The semi-natural woodland is towards the Great Central Way to the west, where it is dominated by Ash with Oak, and few non-native tree species. To the east and in the central part of the wood, planted non-native species (Beech, Horse Chestnut, Sycamore and Common Lime) are abundant, and Horse Chestnut is locally dominant. Some of these planted specimens are quite large and may be 80+ years old. A few of the limes have dense low bushy or 'epicormic' growth from the main trunk; this should be retained as it can be good bird-nesting habitat.

Understorey and shrub layer

The Ash is regenerating well, with plenty of seedlings, saplings and young trees forming part of the understorey and lower canopy. Horse Chestnut and Sycamore are also regenerating, but the main understorey species is probably Hawthorn. Blackthorn or Damson is locally abundant. There are occasional young Cherry trees,but mature Cherries were not recorded. Field Rose, Elder and Bramble are occasional, but recorded only rarely were Holly, English Elm, Wych Elm, Cherry Laurel and Field Maple.

Field layer or ground flora

No ancient woodland indicator species were recorded. Cow Parsley, Herb Bennet, Wood False-Brome, Wood Brome, Nettle, Ivy, Hogweed and Bramble were all abundant.

Other species recorded occasionally were Dogs Mercury, Hedge Woundwort, Hedge Garlic, Wild Arum, Herb Robert, False-Oat-grass, Male Fern, Germander Speedwell and Wood Dock.

Woodland structure

The structure of Aylestone Holt is varied, with the western Ash-Oak woodland being the best in terms of a developed shrub and field layer. The central area, where main surfaced paths meet, is quite bare in terms of ground flora and shrub species. Conversely, parts of the woodland, especially near the Glen Rise entrance, have a very dense understorey and poor ground flora dominated by Ivy. (see photographs at end of report).

Other habitats

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Ditches

These are important complementary habitats to woodlands, as they increase the number and variety of habitat niches available for plants and animals to inhabit. Aylestone Holt has a good, deep ditch along the northern edge, which still had running water present in June. This ditch was notable for its community of ferns, including Male Fern, a Shield-Fern and one plant of Hart's Tongue Fern. The two latter species are not common locally, and care should be taken to conserve this fern habitat (see photograph at end of report).

A shallower ditch, dry a time of survey, was along the western edge at the top of the bank down to the Great Central Way, and a dry shallow ditch of little wildlife value was along the southern edge.

Standing dead wood

This is an important habitat in a woodland ecosystem, as many species of fungi and invertebrates are dependant on rotting wood for survival. In turn, these invertebrates feed birds, bats and other animals. Standing dead wood provides feeding and nesting sites for many birds, such as tits, nuthatch, and woodpecker. Whenever possible, standing dead wood should be conserved. Although this can be difficult in an area of public use, it is often possible to retain dead trees away from paths, and crown-reduce dead trees to standing stumps if there are safety fears. Even low stumps less that 2m tall are of value. (see photograph at end of report).

There is very little of this habitat in Aylestone Holt.

Fallen dead wood.

This is a different but also valuable habitat to standing dead wood. It is usually wetter and shaded, and prone to rapid rotting. It supports different species or fungi and invertebrates, and also plants such as mosses and ferns.

There is some fallen dead wood in Aylestone Holt, but it is not a common habitat. (see photograph at end of report).

Evaluation and management recommendations

It is usually considered that woodlands with an open canopy and understorey that allows dappled light down to the woodland floor are likely to be the best for many species of woodland plants and animals. Many birds prefer nesting in dense thickets close to the ground, so clumps of bramble, rose and dense low Hawthorn are ideal bird-nesting habitats, whereas tall canopy trees and understorey shrubs, with little cover at ground level, are not as good.

In general terms, native species are preferable to non-native species, as they often support more species of invertebrates. However, this does not mean that non-native trees such as Sycamore are 'bad'; they can often support huge numbers of invertebrates such as aphids at a time when birds

need this kind of food for their chicks. In the case of a woodland like Aylestone Holt, where there is a high proportion of non-native species, it is probably better to concentrate of getting the woodland structure right, regardless of tree species.

The best part of Aylestone Holt is the area closest to the Great Central Way, as this has the best structure and highest proportion of native species.

In places where a dense high understorey is creating a very dark and shaded woodland floor dominated by Ivy, the habitat could be improved by thinning out and coppicing of areas of understorey, to allow a low dense thicket to develop and allow more dappled light to the ground flora.

If possible, it would be good to plant understorey shrubs in the areas with bare ground under canopy trees. Hazel, Holly and Hawthorn are recommended.

Good wildlife woodlands also have plenty of additional habitats such as ditches, banks, standing and fallen dead wood . .These habitats should be prized when they appear, and opportunities taken to create and conserve them. The ditch along the northern edge of the Holt is particularly important.

Aylestone Holt is poor in terms of dead wood habitats. It may be possible to create new standing dead wood by ring-barking selected specimens away from paths. In additional, a" standing dead wood should be conserved - sometimes it is feasible to slightly re-route a path away from a 'drop-zone' of a dead or dying tree.

Creation of wood piles of long lengths of large timber is recommended. These should be sited in various locations of differing levels of shade and exposure for maximum benefit to wildlife.

Glades and rides are often cited as valuable habitats in woodlands, but Aylestone Holt is too small to accommodate these, and it is not recommended that they are created.

Additional habitats to conserve are Ivy growth up trees - valuable nesting sites and important sources of early nectar for many invertebrates. Ivy dose not harm trees, but often exploits a dying tree. It should not be cut off trees. Honeysuckle is a good nectar provider and could be planted. Dense low prickly bushes are valuable nesting sites, especially if evergreen. It is recommended that Holly and Dog Rose or Field Rose are planted, and Bramble thickets should be conserved.

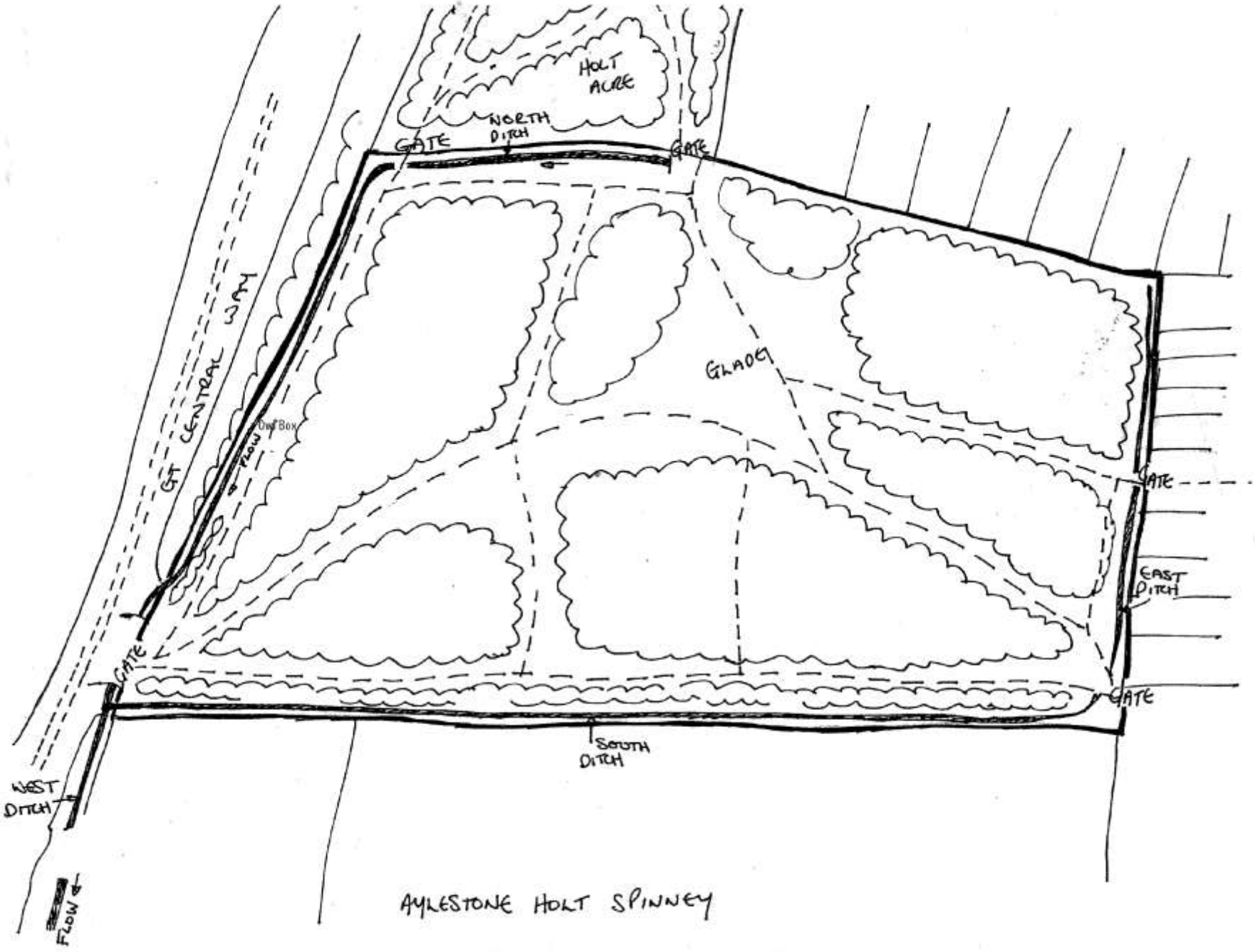
Local Wildlife Site

Aylestone Holt would meet the criteria for designation as a Local Wildlife Site in Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland (formerly known as Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation). This is mainly on the basis of its value as a community resource as a place to enjoy and experience wildlife and a natural environment. It also has more than the minimum size requirement of 1 hectare of semi-natural woodland for a woodland of secondary habitat value.

Summary

Overall, Aylestone is a good small plantation/semi-natural woodland, with a good structure in part, and with scope for enhancement by fairly minor habitat creation and management. It is well-used but there is little evidence of anti-social behaviour. lt : is an important element in the landscape of the local and regional wildlife corridors of the River Soar and Great Central Way. As mature woodlands are scarce within the Soar Valley in this part of Leicestershire, Aylestone Holt is a locally important habitat in the context of the regional wildlife corridor. It meets the criteria for designation as a Local Wildlife Site.

Sue Timms Senior Ecologist Leicestershire County Council June 24th 2009



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