

Proposals for Copt Hill

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Copt Hill is an open grassland site with scrub and regenerating woodland bounded by mature hedge and adjacent to Rough Dene. The site has commanding views across the surrounding landscape, looking west across to the Durham Dales and north towards Peshaw Monument. The circle of six beech trees, known as The Seven Sisters, is a local landmark. It identifies the location of an ancient burial mound which is designated as a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM).

1.2 There are a number of benches across Copt Hill with an information board about the Burial Mound at the entrance. The Stephenson Trail (an 11-mile promoted route which follows the route taken by coal wagons on their way from the Elemore and Hetton Collieries to the River Wear), runs alongside the edge of Copt Hill. There are a few well-used routes around Copt Hill with a central path, which rises steeply from the adjacent cycleway network.



2.0 Location and Accessibility

2.1 Copt Hill lies between Hetton-le-Hole and Houghton-le-Spring (see also Appendix 1). The site is bounded by a golf course to the east, farmland, woodland and public house to the north and housing to the west. To the south lies Rough Dene Burn Local Wildlife Site (LWS), which flows along the southern edge of the site, just outside the site boundary, providing a steep sided wooded valley.

3.0 Site Context

3.1 There are four statutory designated sites within 2Km of Copt Hill with a further 9 non-statutory sites:

- Hetton Bogs LNR
- Hetton Park LWS
- Hetton Bogs West LWS
- Hetton Bogs SSSI
- Rough Dene LWS
- Hetton Lyons LWS
- Eppleton Quarry LWS
- Eppleton Grassland and Railway SSSI
- Copt Hill LWS
- High Haining Hill SSSI.

4.0 Strategic Significance

4.1 The site is not designated as a protected wildlife site, though it lies between two LWS at its northern and southern boundaries. It also lies within a wildlife corridor and is protected from development as greenspace and as a Settlement Break in the city's Local plan- the Sunderland Core Strategy. Overall, the site has strong strategic significance and so all habitats recorded have been included within the Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) Metrics Calculator as "formally identified within local strategy." The area of calcareous grassland (Magnesian Limestone grassland) is of very high significance.

5.0 Methodology

5.1 Durham Wildlife Services (DWS) were commissioned to carry out an ecological appraisal of Copt Hill in May 2022. The methodology was carried out as three main steps as set out below:

- An Ecological Assessment;
- Protected Species and Other Species of Nature Conservation Importance;
- Controlled Invasive Species.

6.0 Habitat Assessment

6.1 The habitat types found in Copt Hill are set out below.

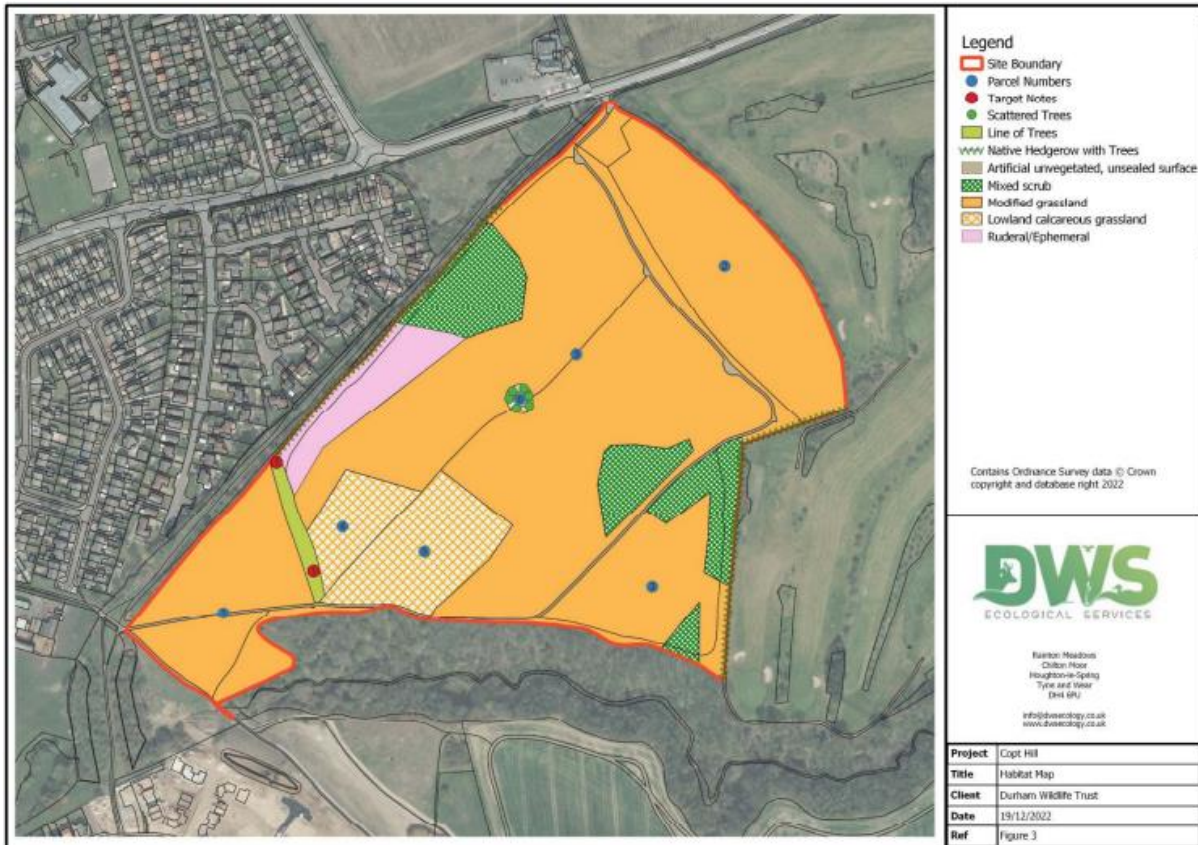
Habitats	Conditions
Urban – urban tree The Seven Sisters, a circle of beech trees, are situated at the top of a mound in the centre of the site. Vegetation beneath is calcareous grassland. The trees are all beech, <i>Fagus sylvatica</i> . However, only 6 of the 7 sisters remain.	Good
Sparsely vegetated - Ruderal/Ephemeral Several dense stands of tall ruderal vegetation are present towards the western edge of the site. Rosebay willow herb is dominant. Additional pockets of tall ruderal are present elsewhere but are recorded as negative indicator species within the metrics.	Poor
Grasslands Modified The vast majority of the site is comprised of rank species poor grassland. To the far west the grassland was being grazed by tethered horses, with a resulting mixed sward height. Scrub is a large problem throughout the site, with large amounts of self-seeded ash, hawthorn, and willow <i>Salix</i> spp. Bracken is present to the southeast, and large amounts of rosebay willowherb throughout. The main central section of the site is more diverse with some indicator species present, but these are very rare in the sward and this large area of grassland comprises almost exclusively of rank grasses and undesirable herbs.	Poor/Moderate

<p>Modified grassland uses the low distinctiveness grassland condition assessment. This habitat has been assessed as being in poor condition for the areas of horse grazed grassland, and moderate condition for other areas.</p>	
<p>Grassland Lowland calcareous A large pocket of grassland in the centre of the site, on the southwest slope, is species rich calcareous grassland (Magnesian Limestone grassland).</p> <p>A large number of neutral indicators are still present, with common knapweed, oxeye daisy, and yellow rattle. However, the frequency of calcareous indicators has increased, particularly lady's bedstraw, kidney vetch, fairy flax and small scabious. Management has taken place across this area including spreading of green hay and it is evident that this has been successful.</p> <p>Area 1: East of the path is of high quality, being the area more established.</p> <p>Area 2: West of the path is the area newly diversified and is still doing well.</p> <p>Area 3: Small area of calcareous grassland exists on the small mound on which the Seven Sisters stand. This is the only area where greater knapweed was found. A large amount of bare ground from footfall limits the number of species present.</p>	<p>Good except around 7 sisters due to footfall</p>
<p>Heathland and shrub – mixed shrub Scrub is scattered across the site, with majority hawthorn, self-seeded ash and willow. These scattered trees have been recorded as negative indicators within the grassland condition assessments. Denser areas have developed to the northwest and southeast. These areas are also willow, hawthorn and ash dominated, as well as Swedish whitebeam and silver birch. These areas are self-seeded over the grassland and are immature.</p>	<p>Moderate</p>
<p>Species Poor Hedgerow with trees Overgrown hawthorn hedgerows with trees border the site to the east and northwest. The northwest is more diverse with osier willow, dogrose, blackthorn, hazel, ash, cherry and sycamore all recorded. Ground flora is poor, with mugwort, rosebay willowherb, cleavers and nettle. Bracken is present along the eastern hedgerow.</p>	<p>Moderate</p>

Line of Trees

A line of mature/ veteran trees are present to the west of the site. These are likely to be a former hedgerow with trees, with some hawthorn understorey still present. However, ash, oak and sycamore trees dominate with a small number having decay and/or rot holes providing bat/bird potential.

Moderate



7.0 Protected Species and Species of Nature Conservation Importance

Breeding and wintering birds

7.1 The Environment Records Information Centre (ERIC) found 41 records are for the site itself. These records include red list cuckoo, yellowhammer, grasshopper warbler, tree sparrow, grey partridge and willow tit and Schedule 1 peregrine falcon, crossbill, osprey, fieldfare and barn owl. During the survey in summer 2022, woodpigeon, swifts, collared doves, magpie, yellowhammer, bullfinch, blue tit and common whitethroat were all recorded. Since visiting the site various woodland birds have been noted including blue tit, coal tit, robin, blackbird and sparrow using the areas of scrub and boundary hedges.

Bats

7.2 Bat records were noted from within 2Km. None of these records are from within the site itself, with the nearest record approximately 500 metres away.

Badger

7.3 No evidence of badger.

Western European Hedgehog

7.4 No records found for the site itself, however site provides good habitat for this species, and they are highly likely to be present.

Invertebrates

7.5 Two records lie within the site itself, with both red list and Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act species wall and small heath butterflies. The site has potential for rare and threatened invertebrates because of the species rich grassland and mature/veteran trees on site.

8.0 Existing Management and Maintenance

8.1 Copt Hill is managed by SCC with low intensity grazing by cattle. There is no regular maintenance of the site as a whole from Environmental Services. The adjacent footpath is a right of way and managed by the Highways Team.

9.0 General description and observations

9.1 Copt Hill is an open grassland site, which rises steeply up from the Rough Dene. The grassland varies in quality due to encroachment from scrub and woodland regrowth, ruderal species and rank grasses. The southern area of grassland is Magnesian Limestone grassland and is good quality. It is important to maintain that quality and prevent deteriorations due to encroachment from scrub. However, the combination of scrub, overgrown hedges and regenerating woodland does provide good habitat for birds. Therefore, it is important to maintain a good balance between controlling the scrub and keeping areas of open grassland.

Access and Interpretation

9.2 There are a number of informal routes around Copt Hill and the Stephenson's Trail runs alongside the site. The open nature and location of various benches could encourage long distance walkers to stop off and enjoy the views as well as local walkers. There is one major north south route, which rises steeply. There is a more informal circular route around the edge of Copt Hill. The path is narrow in places and should be widened with scrub cut-back to help create a circular walk.

10.0 Summary of Constraints and Key Issues

Issue	Comment
Planning Policy	Proposals support local policy, enhancing the existing greenspace, Settlement Break and wildlife corridor and respecting the historic setting of the SAM.
Climate Change and Health	Proposals will support further opportunities for carbon sequestration. Area of deprivation nearby- site enhancement will support area in general.
Greenspace	Area is low in greenspace quantity and quality and has lower woodland cover. Proposals will reduce deficiencies.

Biodiversity	Proposals will further support stepping stone connectivity within wildlife corridor and improve overall biodiversity.
Invasive Species	None on site.
Landscape Character	Area of higher landscape value. Longer distance views from Magnesian Limestone Escarpment will be protected and local landscape will be improved.
Historic Environment	The Scheduled Ancient Monument (and its setting) will be protected and enhanced by proposals and where possible, improvements to the adjacent alignment of Hetton Colliery Railway will be enhanced. Site interpretation to be enhanced.
Water Environment	Lies within a Source Protection Zone – proposals will not negatively impact on this.
Rights of Way / Access	Informal footpaths exist on site. These routes (and access points) will be improved. Signing and seating also to be improved.
Soil and Nitrates	No negative impact on soils. No nitrate fertilisers will be used as site lies within Nitrate Vulnerable Zone.
Utilities	Regional Transmission High Pressure Gas Pipe runs diagonally through the site. Any planting will avoid easements relating to this pipeline.

11.0 Proposed Works

The locations of the proposed works are shown in the map below.

11.1 Habitat management aims at Copt Hill:

- Maintain and enhance Magnesian Limestone grassland by ensuring appropriate management continues and encroaching scrub is managed.
- Improve quality of other areas of grassland by planning a programme of scrub management to maintain open areas, putting in place suitable grazing or mowing regime
- To increase continuity of hedgerows through new planting.

11.2 Access and Interpretation

To improve informal routes by removing encroaching scrub

- To repair sections of footpath which have been washed away and improve cross drains
- Erect site signage and waymarks to show circular walk and to depict historic setting, local landscape and biodiversity.

12.0 Budget for Copt Hill

Source of Funding	Amount (£)
S106	27,387
Area Committee	5,000
NECF	5,172
NLHF	12,000
Total	49,559

These costs have yet to be allocated – this is subject to further analysis of costs (ongoing)

Habitat	Project	Delivery	Indicative Budget £	Month Completed
Grassland Calcareous	Cutting or scything the grassland to remove arising.	Contractors/V/S/T	2,500	August/September
	Spreading of green hay across the site to spread seed more widely	Contractors	5,000	August/September
Scrub Management	Define programme of scrub management across the site to control scrub encroaching grassland	Contractors/V/S/T	10,000	October/February
	Remove scrub	Volunteers/staff/trainees	1,887	October/February
Modified Grassland	Cut grassland	Contractors	5,000	August/September
New hedgerows	Plant new 270m hedge along existing fence line	Contractors	5,172	November/March
Total			29,559	

Access and Interpretation

Project	Delivery	Indicative Budget £	Month Completed
Cutting scrub alongside paths	Contractors/Volunteers	5,000	October/February
Footpath repairs	Contractors	15,000	March – July
Total		20,000	

Further information

If you would like to discuss the proposals/detail further, please contact:

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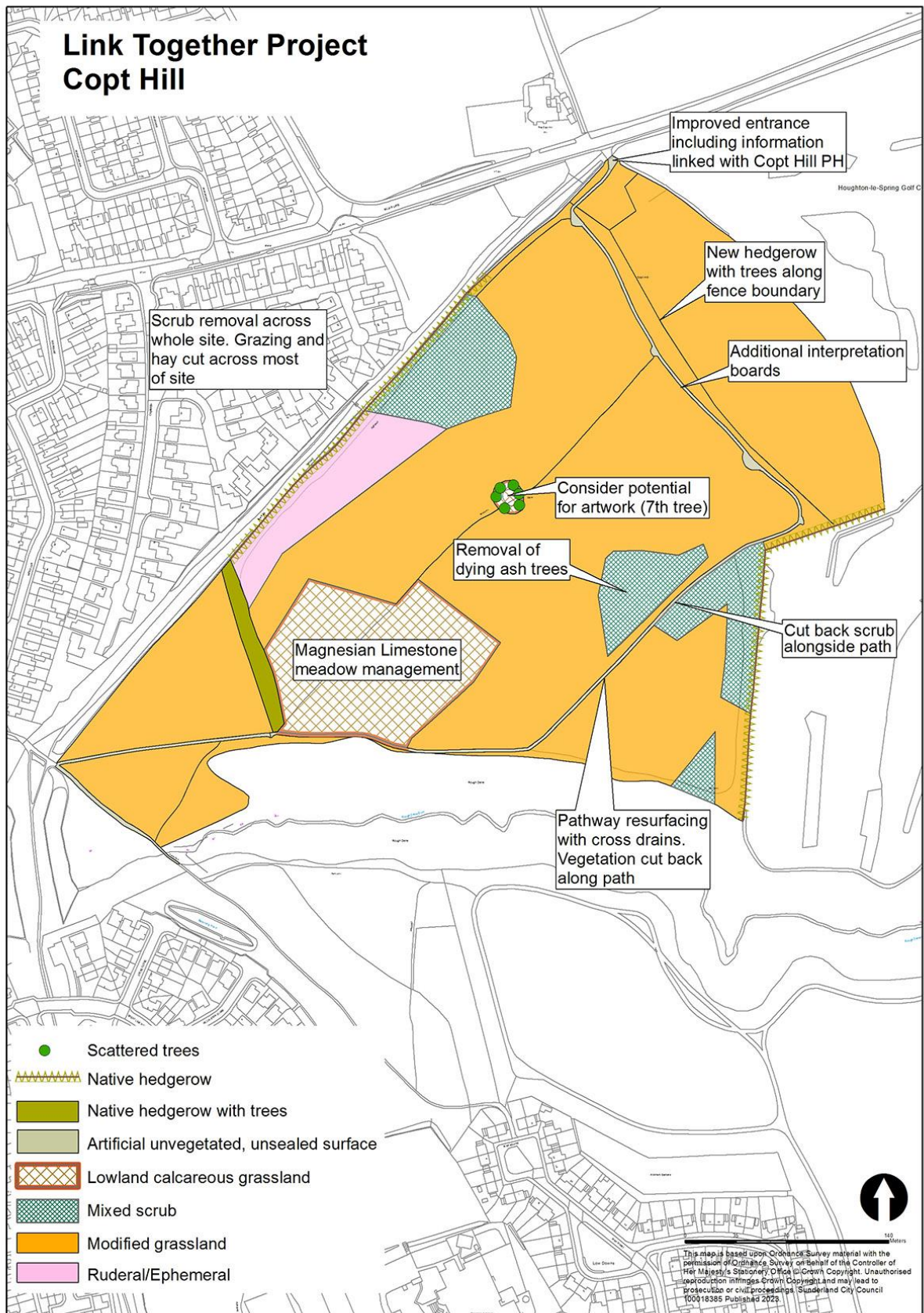
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Link Together Project Copt Hill



Appendix 1

