

Our Impact

2023 2024

With your support, we are creating and conserving a Forest that is here for life.
Look at what we achieved together.

A woman and two children are walking along a path in a forest. The path is covered with a dense carpet of bluebells. The trees are tall and have fresh green leaves, suggesting a spring setting. The woman is in the center, holding the hands of two children, one in front and one behind. They are all dressed in outdoor clothing. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and natural.

Who we are

The Heart of England Forest is a charity helping to reverse centuries of woodland decline by creating and conserving a huge broadleaf forest, a place of enduring natural beauty, protected and secured for generations to come.

More than just trees; the Forest is home to an incredible array of habitats, including new tree planting, mature and ancient woodland, grassland, heathland, farmland, and wetland, that enable animals, plants, and people to thrive.

Our work creating and protecting biodiverse habitats that support not just wildlife, but human life, will give us all the best chance of adapting to our changing climate.

The year in review

Our priorities

Establishing strong foundations for growth

Our ultimate goal is to create and conserve a vast 30,000-acre forest that will be protected and nurtured for generations to come. Therefore, we continue to prioritise not only the practical work of creating and nurturing the Forest, but also strengthening the charity's internal processes, governance, and opportunities for awareness and income generation to secure its long-term success. As the Forest grows, so does our team, with key roles being filled to support our ambitious long-term goal and ensure the charity remains one of the most important independent creators of new habitats in England.

Forest management & habitat enhancements

Managing the Forest we have already established is just as important as growing it. This year, our focus returned to the woodland areas created in 2016, as part of our ongoing management cycle. We took a deeper focus on enhancing these and other established woodlands as part of our strategy to optimise biodiversity. The forestry, biodiversity, and volunteering teams worked together throughout the year on habitat enhancements to enable species to thrive. Completing new habitat management plans, as part of the Mercian Woodlands Biodiversity Project, has provided focus for our conservation management work for the next five years.

Expanding diversity and access for underrepresented children

The benefits of connecting with nature are widely documented, but people from disadvantaged backgrounds, urban areas, and people from some ethnic backgrounds are far less likely to visit the natural environment regularly*. This year, 27% of children attending sessions in the Forest were in receipt of free school meals and 9% were from family backgrounds where English

is not the first language. Many of these children were from urban areas including Redditch and South Birmingham.

Our challenges

Climate change

We navigated the wettest period on record since 1890 which impacted all areas of our work from shortening our tree planting season to restricting visitors to the Forest. Our teams spent an estimated 320 hours dealing with the impact of flooding events through the winter and spring - more time than ever before.

Cost of living crisis

The challenges of the economic climate understandably left people less able to support us financially. Our Friends of the Forest, our regular donors, remained steadfast in their support despite this, however, attracting new donors was more challenging.

Our people

We made further ongoing investment in and commitment to expanding our expert team to nurture the growing Forest. The passion and dedication of our staff, volunteers, trustees and other co-opted members, are vital to helping the Forest thrive.

- 75 staff members
- 9 trustees
- 5 apprentices
- 4 interns
- 2 supported interns
- 3,921 volunteer visits

* *The People and Nature Survey for England, led by Natural England, 2020*

For the environment



Aerial view of Roundhill Wood



Weeding a seed bed in the tree nursery

The bigger picture

- The West Midlands recorded 175% of average rainfall, while for England as a whole it was the **wettest 12 months on record** (March to March). Records go back to 1871 – *Environment Agency, March 2024*.
- Not only is the UK one of the **least forested European countries**, with a total coverage of 13%, just 7% of the UK's native woodland is in good condition – *State of the UK's Woods and Trees 2021, Woodland Trust*.

- As part of the Global Biodiversity Framework, the UN has set a **30 x 30 conservation target** – the pledge to conserve 30% of the planet's terrestrial and marine habitat by 2030. The UK Government has formally made a commitment to this target too.

The Heart of England Forest **contributes significantly to woodland creation across the West Midlands.**

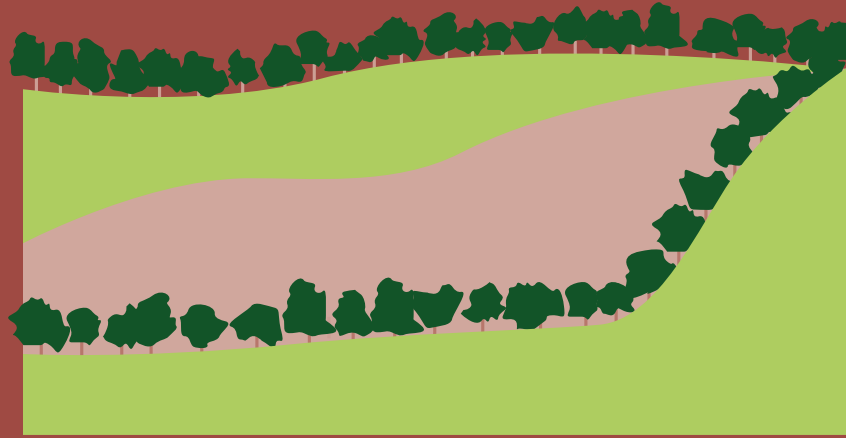
Through developing a programme of woodland management with conservation objectives, we contribute to more woodlands being in favourable ecological condition and help prevent the decline in woodland wildlife.

For the environment - in numbers



170 acres
of land acquired

Welford-on-Avon and Naunton Beauchamp.



84 person days of
volunteer contribution

Our dedicated volunteering, biodiversity and forestry teams collaborated on habitat enhancements, with volunteers contributing 84 person days, equating to 214 hours of work. Activities included creating ride-side scallops for woodland butterflies, installing leaky dams to slow water flow, removing scrub around ponds, restocking hedgerows, and hazel coppicing.



500,000
seeds sown in
our tree nursery

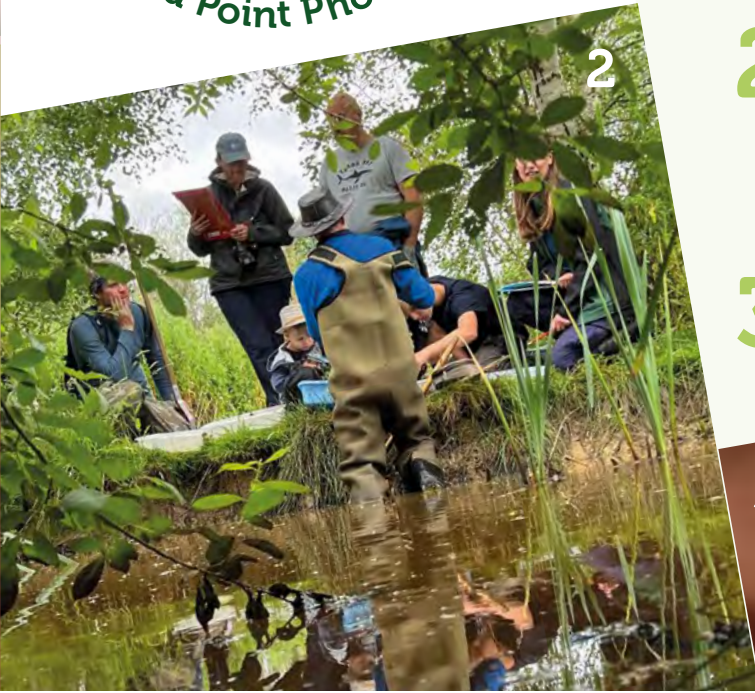
With 200,000 samplings being cultivated ready for the upcoming 2024/25 winter season.





Forest Firsts

- 1** Fixed-point photography was launched, with volunteers taking photos at set points each month to show how the Forest evolves over the months and years to come.
- 2** Due to having a floating vegetation mat and a moss layer, **two ponds in the Forest were recognised as irreplaceable habitats** (habitats which cannot be replicated within 100 years), protected under the Environment Act 2021.
- 3** Ladybird and woodlouse surveys began in the Forest.



3



A robo mower cleared bramble and thick thatch, promoting native plant growth

Highlights

The biodiversity and forestry teams collaborated to manage grasslands at Sheriffs Lench using a combination of robots and cattle. A robo mower cleared bramble and thick thatch, promoting native plant growth and encouraging favourable conditions for returning species like the grizzled skipper butterfly. Moving forward, the focus will shift to **long-term conservation grazing management**.

A two-year partnership with the Small Woods Association partially funded the Biodiversity Officer (Woodlands) and provided technical support for digital mapping. Woodland assessments and management plans were completed for 220 acres of ancient semi-natural woodland.

Left: Aerial view of the robo mower at work

For the environment - in numbers



51,000 trees
were planted

31% of which were grown in our tree nursery.

3 forestry
team members
gained a place
on the Level 6
Forestry Manager
Apprenticeship



Delivered by the University of Cumbria in partnership with the Forestry Commission, supported by the charity.



950kg of
seeds were
collected

From 20 species of
trees in the Forest.

Wilf – from Apprentice to Assistant Forest Ranger

Investing in the foresters of tomorrow is vital to ensure the Forest's future. The decline in people pursuing forestry careers risks immediate skills shortages, threatening the future of our woodlands if new entrants do not increase. We are proud to have been running our apprenticeship programme for over five years, providing a wide range of theoretical training and hands on experience in all aspects of social forestry and pathways into employment.

“When I was an apprentice, the knowledge passed to me by the Assistant Forest Rangers was invaluable – I am now in the lovely position of being able to pass knowledge down to other apprentices and interns. Having spent a bit more time with the charity, I feel a real connection to the woodlands I work in, and trying to visualise how what we do now will affect the Forest many years down the line is one of my favourite things to do.”



For wildlife



A macro photo of a hazel leaf-roller beetle in the Forest. © Lee Frost



Wild chicory amongst grass

The **bigger** picture

- Almost **1,500** (1 in 6) UK native species of plants and animals are **threatened with extinction**.
– *State of Nature 2023*.
- In the UK, wetlands make-up **3% of land** but support **10% of our biodiversity**, so they are hugely important for our wildlife. Sadly, the UK has **lost over 90% of wetlands** in the last 100 years, making the **150 ponds** in the Forest a valuable habitat.
- The UK Red List for birds now stands at **70 species** and accounts for **more than one-quarter (29%)** of the UK species, more than ever before.
– *Birds of Conservation Concern 2021*, British Trust for Ornithology.

We manage our grasslands with a greater focus on biodiversity to conserve and increase the floral diversity - this benefits many other species in the Forest, particularly pollinating insects whose distribution has **declined by 22% in England since 1970**.

For wildlife - in numbers



100 wildlife surveys completed annually

These surveys contribute to our knowledge of the Forest as well as the health of wildlife within the region and nationally.



32 butterfly transects completed across the Forest

% contribution

Of these, 26 were in Warwickshire and contributed to 25% of all butterfly transects in the county.



6 volunteers were trained and supported to be livestock checkers

Our team of 6 volunteer livestock checkers help monitor our livestock daily to ensure high standards of animal welfare.



Forest Firsts

- 1 White-letter hairstreak butterfly** recorded for the first time at Bearley.
- 2 Lesser horseshoe bat** roost discovered in the Forest.
- 3** More than **seven short-eared owls** recorded around Dorsington in the winter – the greatest number we have ever had recorded in this area.

1



© Rosie Stone

2



3



Highlights

The Redditch Ringing Group completed its fifth year of bird ringing in the Forest, as part of our strategy to provide long-term monitoring, recording the presence of birds in the Forest. During the last five years, over 10,000 birds, from 52 species, have been ringed in the Sernal area of the Forest.

The Heart of England Forest was mentioned in the annual Butterfly Conservation UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme Annual Report, released in 2023, which analyses results from all butterfly transects: *“the most productive area was in Warwickshire where Keith Warmington’s growing collaboration with the Heart of England Forest has led to the establishment of several new transects”*.



During the last five years, over 10,000 birds, from 52 species, have been ringed in the Forest.

Right: A ringed blue tit at Gorcott Hill

For wildlife - in numbers



2,282 birds from 40 species were ringed in 2023

These included 9 Red List and 12 Amber List. 1,856 birds were new and 425 were re-traps.



We worked with 11 local graziers to meet conservation grazing objectives

In addition to using our own sheep and cattle to manage our grassland fields and woodland rides.



30 metre wide pollinator pathways enhanced with a wildflower mix

More vigorous grass species were cut and removed to give opportunities for wildflowers to grow with less competition.



Rosie – a valued volunteer

Rosie has been a passionate volunteer with the charity since 2019, focusing on wildlife surveying and expanding her knowledge of biodiversity. She began with butterfly and bumblebee surveys in Bearley and now also records plants and birds. Thanks to her efforts, rare butterflies like the silver-washed fritillary and white-letter hairstreak were documented in the Forest. In 2023/24, Rosie also participated in 24 conservation sessions, including green hay strewing, rhododendron removal, glade cutting, coppicing, and tree planting across various locations.

“I find spending time in the Forest is always uplifting and I get the added bonus of knowing my efforts play some part in helping restore biodiversity to the heart of England. I’ve learnt some interesting facts about woodland and habitat management on every single volunteer session I’ve attended since I started, which really enhances the whole volunteer experience!”



For people



A Young Forester in the woodlands



Attendees at our monthly volunteering and adventure club

The **bigger** picture

- In Warwickshire there are a **higher proportion of SEN pupils** with a moderate learning disability in mainstream primary schools than in all English local authorities (24.8% vs 17.1%) and a higher proportion of SEN pupils with a severe learning disability in mainstream secondary schools (27.3% vs 19.3%). *Appendix 2 – State of Warwickshire 2022.*
- The UK has been ranked the **lowest of 14 European countries** for 'nature connectedness' and wellbeing. - *Country-level factors in a failing relationship with nature, Miles Richardson, Iain Hamlin, Lewis R Elliott & Mathew P White, Ambio (2022).*
- **Only 5.6%** of people nationally with a learning disability are in work. The West Midlands has an even lower rate of 4.2%.
- Over three-quarters of volunteers (77%) reported that **volunteering improved their mental health and wellbeing** – *Time Well Spent: A national survey on the volunteer experience 2019, NCVO.*

31% of children who visited the Forest were known to have a special educational need or disability (SEND), 2 adults with SEND accessed our supported internship program, and 3 neurodivergent young women accessed supported volunteering to develop their self-confidence and social skills.

For people - in numbers



27% of children visiting the Forest were in receipt of free school meals

Additionally, 9% were from family backgrounds where English is not the first language. Many were from urban areas including Redditch and South Birmingham. Bringing the magic of the Forest to young people who would not otherwise step into a forest.



Over 3,000 attendees

Enjoyed our programme
of walks, talks and
fundraising events.



94 children attended Holiday Activity and Food (HAF) sessions

The sessions were for disadvantaged pupils from Redditch thanks to our partnership with Redditch Borough and Bromsgrove District Councils.



Forest Firsts

1 Our **first purpose-built Outdoor Education Centre** opened in January 2024 at Gorcott Hill. It will significantly increase our capacity to work with more schools, young people, and families, specifically targeting new audiences in Redditch and South Birmingham.

2 A **new weekly after-school club** for pupils from Ark Kings Academy in Birmingham, funded by our corporate partner Gateley PLC, was launched.

3 We held our **first volunteer forums** to gain feedback from our volunteers, giving us valuable data and information to drive improvements to the programme.



Access on three Forest trails was improved with boardwalks

Highlights

As part of our work supporting neurodiverse audiences access learning and skills, **376 children with SEND visited the Forest regularly and 2 adults with SEND accessed our supported internship program.** Three neurodivergent young women accessed supported volunteering to develop their self-confidence and social skill, thanks to funding from the Baily Thomas Charitable Fund and the D'Oyly Carte Charitable Trust.

Access on three Forest trails was improved with boardwalks across sections prone to becoming waterlogged, thanks to funding from our corporate partner National Grid Electricity Distribution (NGED), and constructed by their hard working apprentices and Heart of England Forest volunteers.

Left: NGED apprentices on the partially constructed boardwalk in Dorothy's Wood

For people - in numbers



17,500
visits to the Forest

During an average summer month this year.



13,151
volunteer
hours given

The equivalent working hours delivered by 7.8 full time members of staff.



5,182 learning
days for children
and adults
delivered

Most visited the Forest at least three times, learning new skills whilst developing a deeper connection to nature.



Harrison – Supported Intern

Supported internships at the Heart of England Forest are work-based study programmes aimed specifically for young people with an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan to help them overcome any barriers to employment they might otherwise face.

Harrison joined our Supported Intern programme in September 2023. "I would sit at home a lot, didn't know what I should be doing, and now I've found my niche here. I know the path that I want to go down and that's half the battle."

“The supported internship at Heart of England Forest is the best thing to happen to Harrison. He absolutely loves it and comes home so happy, telling me all about his day. He has learnt a lot and wants to learn even more; he has really grown in confidence. He said it's his dream job!” ”

Jodie, Harrison's Mum





The Forest so far...

Based in the heart of the Midlands, near Stratford-upon-Avon, the Forest stretches across the Warwickshire and Worcestershire borders.

Our mission is to create and conserve a thriving broadleaf Forest of 30,000 acres (half the size of Birmingham).

The Forest currently covers over 7,000 acres, and more than 2 million trees have been planted across 4,685 acres since the charity began.

Establishing and growing the Forest on land that we have purchased will ensure it is safe and protected for generations to come.

The significance and scale of our work cannot be underestimated: the Heart of England Forest will be one of the largest native forests in the country.

As the Forest grows, so too will the benefits to both our health and that of the natural world.

What will your impact be?

To discover how you can be part of an incredible journey supporting people and planet, both now and for hundreds of years to come, visit

heartofenglandforest.org

Our supporters

Our achievements this year would not have been possible without the continued support and generosity of our donors.

Thank you to our Friends of the Forest, every person who donates in our car parks and at our events or workshops, those who collect money for us in the community, for every gift made online, legacies pledged, and the support of our corporate partners, trusts, foundations and other grant-giving organisations. You have ensured that we can protect and nurture the Forest for future generations.

- 1165 Friends of the Forest making regular donations
- 8 new corporate partners joined us
- 15 existing corporate partners renewed their support
- 36 corporate volunteering days delivered
- 9 generous grants received from trusts and grant-giving organisations
- 1 significant legacy from a long-term friend of the Forest which will enable us to expand our conservation efforts and educational programmes



“I support the Heart of England Forest because it plays a crucial role in preserving natural habitats and promoting biodiversity. Additionally, it provides a beautiful space for the community to enjoy nature and engage in outdoor activities.”

Oliver, Friend of the Forest



The Heart of England Forest is more than just trees

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