



A new chapter

New leadership to drive the Forest forward

Hidden wonders

Breathtaking photos of miniature subjects

Expert views

The future of UK forests

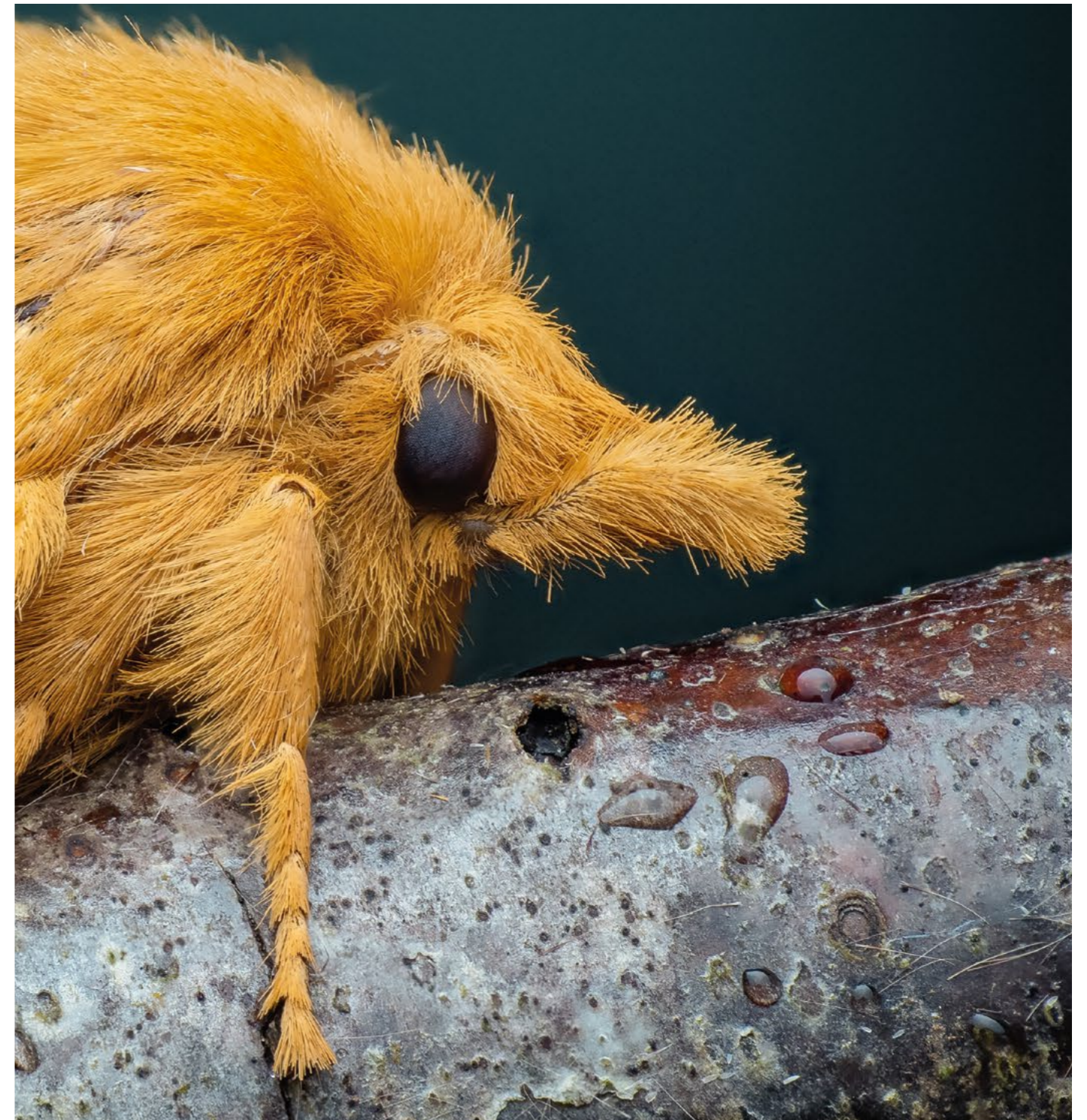
Your Forest

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WINTER SEASON IN THE FOREST

Throughout the winter, the key task for the forestry team is tree planting. This season we're aiming to plant **91,000 trees**, creating **50 hectares** (120 acres) of new woodland.

In addition, we are also revisiting sites planted in previous years to replace any dead trees so that we have right numbers of species on these sites.

Over 40% of the trees planted this winter are from the Forest's tree nursery, a great achievement thanks to the hard work of staff and volunteers. The hours of work seed gathering, sowing, weeding, and lifting the trees ready for planting has been worth it when we see locally sourced and grown trees in our new woodlands.

*Tom Davies,
Director of Land Management*



Welcome

Each season in the Forest has its own story to tell, and January feels like the perfect time to start fresh. The woods are quieter now, with bare branches revealing views you don't usually see, and the crisp air carries that feeling of something new just around the corner.

Since joining the Forest last year, I've been working closely with Heather Acton, our Chair of the Board of Trustees, and the entire Forest Team to set clear priorities to ensure the Forest thrives in the months and years ahead. You can read about our plans on pages 4 - 8.

In this issue, we also explore the hidden lives of woodland creatures in winter, you'll see some of our tiniest inhabitants as you've never seen them before, learn about our strategic vision for our valued volunteering programme, and hear from experts in the conservation sector about the future of UK forests.

Whether you're someone who knows every plant and bird by name or just loves a good walk in nature, there's so much waiting to be discovered this year. Let's take it one step at a time and see what the Forest has in store for us.

*Andy Parsons
Chief Executive, The Heart of England Forest*

Winter 2025 Edition. Many thanks to all the contributors who made this issue possible.

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We love our warm-hearted supporters!

Whether you dedicated a tree, ran a bake sale, or simply gave a donation – thank you to each and every one of you who supported our Winter Appeal. Together you gave a **fantastic £11,140** to help fund our winter forest work and vital tree planting season.

Now that's teamwork.



The future of the Forest: looking ahead with new leadership

In 2024, our charity made two new appointments to lead the Heart of England Forest into an exciting new chapter. Heather Acton joined as Chair of the Board of Trustees in May, and Andy Parsons started as our Chief Executive in November. Since then, they have been busy, meeting the team, our partners and diving deep into the Forest.

Heather and Andy are working with the team and trustees to ensure there are clear priorities to shape the future of the charity and make sure it can thrive in the months and years ahead.

A nationally significant charity

We are an important regional charity with national significance, for a number of reasons. Andy says: “The long-term nature of the work that we are involved in, through growing a huge forest with

an array of habitats to enable animals, plants, and people to thrive, makes our charity and our work vital.”

There will now be a greater emphasis on why rather than what we do. “We are facing the defining challenges of our generation – a climate emergency, the loss of biodiversity, and connecting everyone, from all walks of life, with nature and its benefits.” explains Andy, “this is why we are here – to be part of the solution.”

The whys

- Combatting climate change - as one of the largest woodland creators in the country, we have a massive role to play, from flood management to soil health and providing shade for wildlife, the Forest supports climate resilience for the entire region.
- Helping nature recover - with species decline affecting ecosystems nationwide, the Heart of England Forest is committed to nature recovery. Working with partners, the charity promotes biodiversity across its diverse landscape.
- Improving community access and wellbeing - surrounded by towns and cities, the Forest offers accessible green spaces that benefit mental and physical health.



Chief Executive Andy Parsons

Under Andy and Heather's leadership, the entire Forest Team, including our valued volunteers, will be working on approaches to help the charity fulfil its potential and maximise its benefits, with the impact not just regional, but national and international too.

A responsible neighbour that is part of the community

Being a regional charity with national significance starts with being a great neighbour, so strengthening links with communities and organisations local to the Forest is a top priority.

“We're a significant and responsible landowner, and it's important to us to be a good neighbour,” says Andy. *“I'm looking forward to meeting local parish councils and community groups who live and work within the Forest's boundaries to understand their needs, share our vision, and explore how we can work better together. Every local authority within the Forest's reach has*

declared a climate emergency, and we're here to support their climate action plans.”

Andy will be holding drop-in sessions throughout 2025 to strengthen the Heart of England Forest's relationships and raise awareness of our work within the Forest's closest communities.

Heather is also keen to highlight the importance of our neighbours contributing to our national goal; *“We can only achieve full impact through collaborative partnership working. We will continue to work with neighbours, especially our volunteers, relevant organisations and get other experts' thoughts and input to improve what we do.”*

In Andy's past role as Chief Executive of Cotswolds National Landscape, a publicly funded organisation focusing on countryside accessibility, land use and environmental education, working in partnership was vital to achieve anything as they do not own land. The Heart of England Forest is a significant landowner, but Andy's experience of

working with farmers and land managers to support environmental land management schemes will be of huge benefit in enhancing our partnership working.

It is already happening. As well as collaborating with the Forestry Commission, the Environment Agency, and Vale Landscape Heritage Trust, we are part of the Severn and Wye Nature Alliance and active in both Warwickshire's and Worcestershire's Local Nature Recovery Strategies. The Trees Call to Action Project (TCAP) is another example of the crucial role we play in working with partners in the region. The four-way partnership between the Heart of England Forest, Stratford-on-Avon, Warwick, and Wychavon District Councils is increasing tree cover, engaging communities and landowners, and promoting climate change mitigation and biodiversity through tree planting.

More extensive networking is also key. Since becoming Chair, Heather has met with three MPs with constituencies on our land, with local council leaders and with other partner organisations to amplify the charity's important messages.

A Forest for people and nature

Native, broadleaf trees will always be central to our mission, but the Forest is more than trees. It is a wide array of habitats including wetland, grassland, heathland, and farmland, and it is this mix that will help nature recover and adapt to climate change. Being custodians of these landscapes is of utmost importance.

Whilst clear that the Forest is not looking to become a major visitor destination, enabling local communities to access and appreciate nature is also at the heart of what we do. This is achieved not only by having accessible permissive routes in the Forest, but also through our extensive volunteering programme and year-round events, giving people the opportunity to deepen their connection with nature throughout the seasons.

“Creating and conserving a huge broadleaf forest is not only helping to mitigate against the effects of climate change and boost biodiversity,



Chair of the Board of Trustees Heather Acton

but it provides a haven for wildlife and accessible green spaces for people to enjoy and learn about the natural world and the necessity to protect it” says Heather.

The Forest should be seen as a community asset but balancing appropriate public access whilst protecting biodiversity is an important part of the charity's mission. For example, Roundhill Wood is an important location in the Forest for protecting certain threatened species so does not have public access, but in areas such as Morgrove Coppice we can offer extended access to people along waymarked trails designed to have less of a negative impact on biodiversity, while still enabling people to enjoy a variety of wildlife habitats.

Meet the Chief Executive Drop-in Sessions – coming spring 2025

Meet the Chief Executive and other key members of the Forest Team at drop-in sessions in communities local to the Forest from the spring. Look out for more information on our website: heartofenglandforest.org and on our social channels.





A great crested newt in the hands of a licensed surveyor at BioBlitz 2024

From water drops to data: How eDNA is assisting our habitat management

eDNA is revolutionising the way we survey great crested newts, an ecologically important species, in the Forest. But what is eDNA and how is it aiding conservation efforts in the Forest? Find out from Avery Hill, Assistant Biodiversity Officer, and Lauren French, Communications Assistant.



What is eDNA?

Environmental DNA (eDNA) refers to genetic material that organisms leave behind in their surroundings, such as water, soil, or air. Scientists collect and analyse this DNA to identify which species are present in each area. DNA is shed into the environment through skin cells, hair, faeces, mucus, and other biological materials.

By collecting samples, you can identify which species are present without needing to see the wildlife or use live traps.

The importance of great crested newts

The great crested newt (*Triturus cristatus*) is an ecologically important species, protected under numerous laws within the UK. It is protected in the UK under the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981, a Priority Species under the UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework and listed as a European Protected Species under Annex IV of the European Habitats Directive.

Presence of these species can impact habitat management, needing a conservation licence to continue work carefully. Ponds can also be enhanced to protect these species, such as by planting emergent vegetation or removing fish.

We are delighted that great crested newts have been recorded in 15 ponds in the Forest so far.

Using eDNA to survey newts in the Forest

eDNA-based surveys of great crested newts are nationally recognised as an approved methodology for ecological impact assessments for the planning and development sector.

Newts are amphibians, breeding in ponds during the spring and spending most of the rest of the year feeding on invertebrates in woodland, hedgerows, marshes, and tussocky grassland, before going into hibernation for the winter. As newts reside in water during the breeding period (April to May), their DNA is left behind. These samples can then be collected from the water during the optimum period, between mid April and the end of June.



Above: Avery pipetting the water samples into tubes

Great crested newts prefer to lay their eggs in broad-leaved vegetation in still water for protection and preservation, and are therefore most likely to use ponds, canals, or pockets at the sides of slow-flowing streams. At the Heart of England Forest, we only survey for eDNA in our ponds.

Traditionally, great crested newt surveying was carried out by licenced individuals going to a pond twice between March and June. At the pond, surveyors would do torching or bottle trapping:

- Torching is a simple method, waiting for dusk with a bright, high-power torch and searching for newts within the light beam. This method is not always rewarding however, as newts are small so can be easily missed.
- The other traditional method is bottle trapping, where bottles are placed in pond vegetation and left overnight. The newts will swim into the traps, unable to get out. In the morning, the traps can be checked for newt presence. If there are newts present, they are recorded and then safely released back into the pond.

As these traditional methods require a licence to conduct, they are quite restrictive. Obtaining a license involves extensive training, experience, and evidence gathering which can take years to complete before applying for and going through the assessment stage. Due to this, a new method was produced - eDNA surveying.

www.arc-trust.org/great-crested-newt-advice

The science behind eDNA testing

The content of an eDNA sample is typically analysed by amplification using real-time polymerase chain reaction (PCR).

DNA is made up of numerous proteins, including adenine, thymine, guanine, and cytosine (nitrogenous bases). The sequence of these bases with a couple of other proteins makes up a nucleic acid, and the sequence of these make up the DNA of an individual. Each base has a match, thymine with adenine and cytosine with guanine, together making the iconic double-stranded DNA structure.

DNA in the body is constantly being replicated naturally for protein formation and biological reactions. This is done via the help of an enzyme (biological catalyst) - polymerase. This enzyme is used artificially in eDNA testing. The amplification is done by a single-species approach using specific primers for the great crested newt DNA in the sample, only amplifying the DNA of the target species.

In this case, a specific primer (a short, single-stranded nucleic acid) is used, which will only bind to the great crested newt eDNA and will initiate the DNA synthesis/replication.

How eDNA surveying is informing our habitat management

By using this data, we have adapted how we manage ponds in the Forest to help our great crested newts thrive.

A prime example is our Gorcott Hill site, where three ponds were found to have great crested newts. Consequently, when we reprofiled and de-silted a previously negative pond, we planted species preferred by the newts, such as bog beam. This approach aims to encourage the newts to spread from the positive ponds to the newly reprofiled one. ●

Surveying is crucial for monitoring the health and biodiversity of our Forest. It provides us with important data that enables us to identify trends, habitat use, and any potential threats. Surveying helps us to inform our work, so we can successfully improve and conserve our wildlife and our habitats.

You can support this work by becoming a Friend of the Forest –
www.heartofenglandforest.org/friend



Lace up your running shoes, pump up your bicycle tyres, or dig out your trekking poles and challenge yourself to **run, cycle, or climb** to fundraise for the trees, wetlands and wildlife of the Heart of England Forest this year.

As the New Year dawns, it brings with it the perfect opportunity for fresh beginnings and new goals. What better way to kickstart the new year than by signing up for a physical challenge to raise money for a charity close to your heart?

The Shakespeare Marathon

Set against the picturesque backdrop of Stratford-upon-Avon, this is not just an opportunity to embrace the spirit of the Bard – it's also your chance to make a lasting impact on the natural world. With its beautiful, historic route through scenic countryside, river paths and woodland glades, running in support of the Heart of England Forest is more than just personal endurance; it becomes a journey to sustain and nurture nature.

Whether you are a seasoned marathoner or a first-time runner, let your steps be the seeds of a greener, healthier future.

We have tickets for both the full marathon and half marathon on **Sunday 27th April 2025** for those fundraising for the Heart of England Forest.

Please contact our friendly fundraising officer **Ros Anscombe** on **07754 800258** or email fundraising@heartofenglandforest.org

If you'd like to take on the Great Birmingham run, the virtual London Marathon, the scaling of the Three Peaks or the Cotswolds Classic cycling challenge, let us know and we'll get you a place in the race!

To sleep, perchance to dream



Who has not wanted to curl up and sleep through the darkest, dampest months of the year. As the days shorten, the air chills, and we hunker down, where do the animals of the Forest go in winter? Edward Leszczynski, Forest Projects Manager explains more.



What is hibernation

Hibernation is a mechanism used by many animals to escape cold weather and food shortage over the winter and is triggered by hormonal changes and reduction in daylight hours. An animal prepares for hibernation by building up a thick layer of body fat during late summer and autumn that will provide it with energy during the dormant period. During hibernation, the animal undergoes many physiological changes, including decreased heart rate (by as much as 95%) and decreased body temperature.

In the UK we only have three mammals that truly hibernate; bats and hedgehogs, which are resident in the Forest, and the hazel dormouse, which hopefully in the not-too-distant future may make an appearance.

There are other types of inactivity which explains why a number of other animals and insects you would expect to see in the Forest, appear to disappear in winter. Amphibians, reptiles (herpetofauna) and insects do not truly hibernate, but do employ different energy saving strategies.

Torpor

This survival strategy is a form of suspended animation or dormancy which is similar to but is not quite full hibernation. Torpor is generally where an animal is less active and has a reduced metabolic rate and body temperature for a short period of time. For example, certain species can enter daily torpor for a few hours, whilst animals exhibiting true hibernation are torpid for days or weeks. Badgers and red squirrels do not hibernate, but they do enter a state of torpor.

Diapause

Diapause is common in insects, allowing them to suspend development between autumn and spring. It refers to the interruption of an insect's development as a response to environmental pressures. It also occurs in mammals such as the roe deer (the only ungulate with embryonal diapause), where a delay in attachment of the embryo to the uterine lining ensures that offspring are born in spring when conditions are most favourable.

Brumation

Brumation is an example of dormancy in reptiles that is similar to hibernation. Reptiles generally begin brumation in late autumn generally after the first frost (more specific times depend on the species). They will often wake up to drink water and return to "sleep". They can go months without food. Reptiles may want to eat more than usual before the brumation time but will eat less or refuse food as the temperature drops. However, they do need to drink water.

The brumation period is anywhere from one to eight months depending on the air temperature and the size, age, and health of the reptile. Brumation should not be confused with hibernation. When mammals hibernate, they are asleep. When reptiles brumate, they are less active, and their metabolism slows down, so they just do not need to eat as often.

Finally, some food for thought...there is some possible evidence that our early hominid ancestors may have hibernated or entered a form of torpor according to some fossil experts. ●



Discover the Heart of England Forest: Year-round events to connect with nature

Whether you're following a Forest trail, taking part in a seasonal workshop, or exploring hidden areas of the Forest with the team, our events are designed to inspire, inform, and deepen your connection with nature. Our 2025 Forest events programme will immerse you in the beauty and diversity of the Forest, no matter the season.

Bluebells in the spring

Spring is a time of renewal, and there's no better way to celebrate than with our Bluebell Fundraising Open Days. Enjoy a rare chance to wander through carpets of bluebells in the Heart of England Forest's ancient Alne Wood, whilst supporting efforts to protect these vital and

irreplaceable ancient woodland habitats. This day is perfect for families, nature lovers, and keen photographers. Explore the trail, enjoy a hot drink and cake, and help ensure the Forest continues to thrive for generations to come. **Thursday 24th – Saturday 26th April 2025**

Summertime sculptures

The Garden of Heroes and Villains is a stunning sculpture garden, created by our founder, that showcases over 50 life-sized statues of some of the world's most iconic historical and literary figures. This summer, we're opening the gates once again and hosting a series of open events where you can explore this unique place, enjoy informative walks and talks from members of the Forest Team, and take in the rich history behind each statue.

Saturday 24th May; Saturday 28th June; Saturday 19th July; Saturday 16th August 2025

Autumn in the Arboretum

As the leaves turn golden and the air turns crisp, come and explore the Heart of England Forest Arboretum. Unlike the broadleaf species we plant in the rest of the Forest, the Arboretum hosts a fascinating collection of over 600 species from around the world that have all been specifically chosen because they are of special interest. This autumnal event offers you the chance to take a stroll through the stunning display of seasonal colours offering an educational and serene experience as our guides teach you about the history of the Arboretum's creation and the trees that you can find here.

TBC November 2025

Winter bird ringing

Help us to record the wide variety of bird species that we have in the Heart of England Forest and understand key information about these birds by joining the Redditch Ringing Group for a ringing demonstration. Carried out by trained ringers only, you will get to see up close the process involved in catching, inspecting, weighing and ringing birds in the Forest, and have the chance to ask questions and find out more about the species seen at the ringing and the Forest bird population. Whether you are an avid birdwatcher, or you can't tell your woodcock from your skylark, these sessions are suitable for both enthusiasts and novices alike.

Saturday 6th December 2025

From guided walks to seasonal workshops, family-friendly activities, and children's clubs, there's something for everyone to enjoy. Each event you attend supports our vital conservation work and helps us create a woodland legacy for future generations. Explore our full range of events here: heartofenglandforest.org/events



Growing together: a strategic vision for volunteering in 2025

The work we do is about more than planting trees and creating habitats, it is about people. Our volunteering programme is central to this mission, providing a vital connection between individuals, communities, and the natural world. Ben Toney, Head of Volunteering, shares how we are taking a fresh, strategic look at volunteering to ensure it remains at the heart of our efforts to grow and nurture the Forest.



How volunteering powers our mission

Volunteers are an integral part of the Forest Team. Over the years, their contributions have been remarkable; from planting trees to speaking at events, every hour given by a volunteer translates into meaningful progress toward our vision.

Volunteers do not just help us meet targets, they bring energy, enthusiasm, and a sense of shared purpose. Their involvement strengthens community bonds and inspires action for a greener future. Whether it is a seasoned conservationist or someone completely new to outdoor volunteering, every individual helps us achieve our long-term goals for reforestation and biodiversity.

Listening to volunteers: what we have learnt

In 2024, we hosted two volunteer forums as well as conducting several surveys to hear directly from the people who make our work possible. These forums highlighted the dedication of our volunteer network and gave us invaluable insights into how we could improve the volunteering experience.

Key themes from the feedback included:

- A desire for clearer communication about upcoming opportunities and the impact of completed projects
- Requests for more diverse and flexible roles to suit varying schedules and skill sets
- Suggestions for enhanced training to help volunteers feel confident and capable in their roles.

We have already started implementing changes based on this feedback. For example, we have updated our communication channels to provide more frequent and transparent updates, and enhanced the volunteer-focused section of the website to include important information and the latest goings on in the Forest.

In July and August, to make volunteering more inclusive and reflective of our wider community, we trialled weekday evening volunteering opportunities, designed to fit around work and other commitments. We welcomed 41 unique volunteers who together contributed an incredible 172 volunteer hours over nine sessions. Each



Volunteers with Assistant Biodiversity Officer Avery carrying out a shieldbug survey

session visited a different site in the Sernal area of the Forest, supporting activities ranging from tree guard removal to boardwalk maintenance. We hope to build on these in 2025.

Looking ahead: the future of volunteering

As we step into 2025, we are excited to roll out more improvements and expand our volunteering programme further.

Our vision for the future includes:

- Skills development: offering workshops and training for volunteers to gain new skills while contributing to our work
- Reward and recognition: different ways to recognise the contribution of our volunteers
- Regular coffee mornings: to help welcome new volunteers, where people can come for an informal chat and meet experienced volunteers
- Improved activity descriptions: every one of our volunteer activities will have a page on the website with a video, a 'physicality rating', and an in-depth description of what is involved, to enable people to see if it is right for them
- Easier volunteer registration: establishing a new application and sign-up area on the website to make the process easier for people to register and see activities.

Right: A volunteer removing tree guards

Through these initiatives, we aim to make volunteering with the Heart of England Forest even more rewarding while ensuring we have the capacity to achieve our ambitious conservation goals. ●



Join us in growing the Forest

As we grow the Forest, we are also growing a movement – a network of passionate individuals united by a love of nature and a commitment to its preservation. Whether you are a seasoned volunteer or someone curious to get involved, visit heartofenglandforest.org/volunteer to explore the opportunities available in 2025. Together we can make a lasting impact for wildlife, people, and the planet.

Aspen leaf-rolling weevil



Hidden wonders

Capturing the Forest's overlooked miniatures through macro photography

Award-winning macro photographer Lee Frost has taken a keen interest in visiting the Forest to capture some of our tiny wildlife that is often unseen. Julie Walton-Evans, Marketing and Communications Officer, explores this fascinating medium which is exposing the hidden signs of life in the Forest.



What is macro photography?

Macro photography simply put is extreme close-up photography of small subjects, including things like insects, fungi, and flowers. Magnifying details to greater than life-size results in breathtaking photographs of miniature subjects that go unnoticed in our daily lives – and on our woodland walks.

“When looking through a macro lens, you are instantly teleported into another world, it’s almost like you’re looking at another planet – the crazy thing is it is just beneath our feet.” says Lee. *“Seeing how beautiful these creatures are up close had me interested straight away, I just love the challenge of finding and photographing them.”*

Much like our biodiversity team, Lee's interest lies in the subject he photographs not just the outcome: *“What fascinates me the most about invertebrates and mini creatures is how they just know what their purpose is! It is also incredible how some insects mimic others or plants for their survival, it blows my mind.”*

Forest firsts

Visiting in the spring and again in the summer Lee found some firsts for his portfolio in the Forest. The main invertebrate that attracted Lee to visit the Forest were the records of the Aspen leaf-rolling weevil (*Byctiscus populi*).

This species had been on Lee's bug bucket list for some time, and he was thrilled to have captured them in the Forest. (see image left)

The **horned treehopper** (*Centrotus cornutus*) was also described as “a cool find” as this was an unexpected discovery of the visit. There are only two species of treehopper in the UK. Having this species in an area of the Forest not open to the public, where huge conservation efforts have been implemented, especially for our rarer butterfly species such as the brown hairstreak and wood white, shows our work is also having a great impact on other invertebrate populations. Lee was delighted to have ticked this one off his list! ●

The horned treehopper



Lee's top macro photography tips



If you can, get out early morning. Before sunrise is the best time for insect macro photography as they are still cold and unable to move as much. This makes it far easier to get closer than it would be in the daytime when they are active.



Take it slow, bugs can be found all around us. I find most insects sitting in one position than I do walking around.



Know your subjects, learn where you find them, become interested in their behaviour.



Consider lighting options, using a flash freezes the action, as you know insects very rarely stop moving. If using a flash for your macro lens you will need a good 'flash diffuser' to soften the light, as most insects are very reflective. This will not only freeze the subject but will bring out those details too.



Hazel leaf-roller weevil



Macro photography workshop with Lee

Sunday 4th May 2025

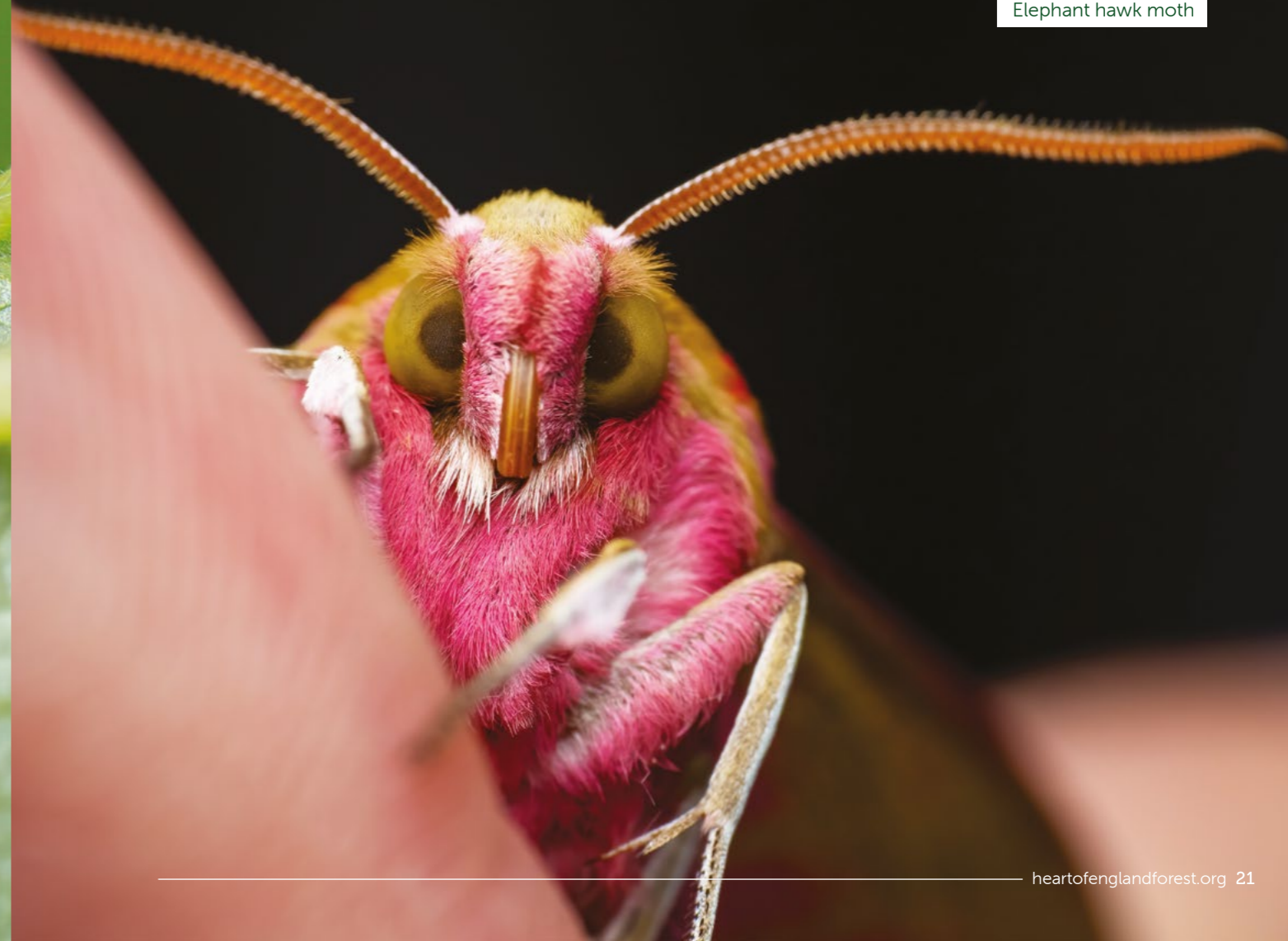
Join Lee and a member of our biodiversity team for a morning of exploration and skill gaining. Get to know more about the hidden signs of life in the Forest, as well as picking up new skills and techniques to start you on your macro photography journey.

Lee is donating profit proceeds from the workshop to the Forest, to help ensure these hidden signs of life stay thriving for years to come.



SCAN ME

Elephant hawk moth





Bridging the nature gap: championing equal access to outdoor learning for all students

With a recent WWF report warning of school children in poorer areas facing a 'nature gap', our Director of Learning and Skills, Elaine Skates, highlights the work the Heart of England Forest are doing to help address this issue.

Barriers to benefitting from time in nature

Spending time in nature makes learners happier, healthier, and more successful members of society. Yet pupils in less affluent areas are less likely to experience the benefits of spending time in nature. WWF's Schools for Nature Report* has found that whilst 52% of pupils from schools with a low percentage of free school meals are given daily opportunities to experience nature, only 18% attending schools with a high percentage of free school meals do so.

Sadly, none of this is news to us at the Heart of England Forest. Forestry Apprentice Leon Midgley has conducted his own research about the barriers black and minority ethnic communities experience when it comes to spending time in nature. 98% of black households in the UK reside in urban areas which have poor access to green

spaces and unaffordable transport links. But, as Leon found, the barriers are much more complex and include language, awareness, safety, culture, confidence, and the perception of middle-class stigma – with many ethnic communities expecting to feel excluded and conspicuous in what they perceived to be an exclusively English place.

These disparities of access are both a problem for society and for nature because we need the next generation to feel connected to nature to take action to help to protect it in later life.

Working with schools to help redress the balance

The Heart of England Forest's Learning and Skills programme is by far the most significant way the charity works with disadvantaged and under-represented communities. Of all the children

who visited the Forest in 2023/24, 27% were from disadvantaged backgrounds (in receipt of free school meals). In terms of ethnicity, 9% of all children visiting the Forest 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 work with schools is of particular importance, so that the children from communities in the West Midlands develop a lasting connection to nature and a lasting connection to the Heart of England Forest. Through working with schools, we can engage with children from all backgrounds, not just those whose families already spend time enjoying nature or those from more affluent backgrounds.

Our work with schools also enables us to provide children with regular contact with nature as part of a repeating cycle of visits, with children visiting the Forest on a termly or even a weekly basis to maximise the benefits to their wellbeing and learning, whilst sustaining and deepening their connection to nature. This way of working with schools is different from most other outdoor learning organisations who deliver one off visits, and means our work is of particular interest and significance to funders and research partners interested in long term impacts.

“A young person gaining a strong, lasting, and beneficial connection with nature is not a result of them having a one off experience in nature, nor is it the result of learning about nature within their school curriculum. Having regular contact with nature, engaging with nature emotionally and consciously reflecting on the personal value of that engagement are all linked to increases in nature connection.”

Schools for Nature Report, WWF



Children with a member of the learning & skills team

Case study: Ark Kings Academy

Our long-term partnership with Ark Kings Academy is an exemplar of good practice. Since 2019 we have been successful in working with funders to ensure pupils from this inner-city school in Birmingham visit the Forest frequently, through weekly visits to the Forest both as part of the school day and via an after school programme. We also work closely with the school's Forest School lead to ensure that children experience nature back at school.

“Mental health is a big focus in our school, pupils need time to be ‘themselves’ and develop those friendship groups further. In the Forest, pupils often choose activities they want to do and are therefore more engaged in those activities. Pupils have benefits from the freedom of play and choice and this has led to pupils who find school more difficult wanting and asking to go to the forest more and more.”

- Karen Simmonds, Teacher



Playing in the woodland

Empowering children to connect with the outdoors

We are very proud of the work we do closing the nature gap and ensuring children from under represented communities or disadvantaged backgrounds become confident being outdoors so that they grow up caring about wildlife and feeling connected to nature.

We hope that by sharing our approach with other organisations regionally and nationally, we can have a positive influence in ensuring thousands more children from poorer or minority ethnic backgrounds have frequent interactions with nature as an essential part of growing up. ●



Making forest bird feeders

Case study: Arrow Valley First

At Arrow Valley, an urban school from Redditch, every child from nursery up to year 4 visit the Forest every term for learning. Last year the programme was enhanced by an overnight camping in the Forest experience for their year 4 pupils.

“For many it would be their first time away from home and it was in a place that they loved. This had a big impact on their independence, resilience in ‘not school learning’ and their smiles. Within the first hour when a child put their tent up, he said ‘this was the best day of his life.’”

- Sarah Allen, Lead Teacher



THE FUTURE OF UK FORESTS

Perspectives from conservation leaders and experts

As we look ahead to a new year of exciting opportunities, our sights are firmly set on the future. Not just our future goals and ambitions as a charity, but the future of UK forests and all the varied forms of life that depend on them.

There's no denying there continues to be many challenges facing biodiversity and nature at both a global and local level. The Government's State of Natural Capital Report for England, published last October, outlines some of the severe ongoing risks to England's natural capital based on past and ongoing impacts on ecosystems, as well as highlighting the need for collaborative action across all sectors to reduce these risks.

Only by drawing on the knowledge and expertise of people from different fields and backgrounds, with a shared dedication to protecting our natural world, can we identify and implement solutions on the scale needed to ensure a brighter future for our Forests. With this in mind, we asked some of the leading conservation and forestry experts in the UK to share their thoughts on how we can best adapt to the challenges ahead and some of the emerging trends in forestry management.

Our expert panel:

John Everitt,
Chief Executive,
The National
Forest Company



Tom Davies,
Director of Land
Management,
The Heart of
England Forest



Callum Nixon,
Richard Hartley,
Alastair Boston,
and Alan Reid,
Forestry Commission
NW & WM Forest
Services team



Q How can we support our forests to adapt to changing climate and environmental conditions?



A If we are going to adapt our forests to a changing climate then we must make them more resilient to the changes coming our way. For existing forests that means getting more of them into active management. For new forests we should be planting mixed species and increasing diversity, whatever your position is on conifer and broadleaf or native and non-native. And for the country as a whole, we must expand and connect our forests to provide greater protection and buffering from threats, as greater fragmentation will increase risk.



A Forestry practice in the UK was developed in the second half of 20th century, however, as the climate has changed, we need to change practice. This means diversifying species and ages of trees in our forests along with the management of them. This must be suited to the local conditions, but we must also design and manage our forests now in a way which gives the managers of the future options to adapt to suit the changing climate in the late 21st century.



A Often from an ecological perspective the worst thing we can do is nothing, this allows canopies to become denser shading out ground flora species which often provide the basis of woodland food chains. We need to make woodlands bigger, better managed and more joined up.

The key questions forest owners should ask themselves are *What can my site support now and in the future? What are the specific threats to my woodlands? What makes my site special?*

Q What do you think is the single biggest factor that will impact the health of UK forests over the next decade?



A Climate change is undoubtedly the number one factor that will impact the health of our forests. We can see this in the changing conditions that enable increases in disease transmission or extreme weather events causing windblow, fire or flood damage. Climate change is also responsible for positive impacts with increased planting driven by the need to reach net zero carbon targets or improved woodland management taking place to adapt to change.



A In the shorter term over the next decade, the overall health of our forest will likely be determined by how as a nation we value our forests and woodland. To improve forest health, we need to manage our forests – we need to intervene whether it's to increase species diversity, decrease herbivore impacts (such as deer), or restructure our timber producing plantations. We need to step in so that our forests become diverse, rich environments. And this will only happen when we value the array of benefits our forests provide.

Q continued... What do you think is the single biggest factor that will impact the health of UK forests over the next decade?



A In our opinion lack of management is the greatest factor. Whilst climate change, invasive species, introduced diseases and extremely high populations of deer and grey squirrels may have a catastrophic effect on woodlands and their biodiversity, good management can mitigate and prepare for these challenges. Having a clear vision for your woodland which can be modified in the face of changing threats creates a resilient woodland for the long term. Many more woodlands must be brought into management for us to turn the tide of species loss and increase carbon uptake.

Q What innovations or developments in forest management have you seen recently that you think will change the way forests are managed in the future?



A It is encouraging to see a more naturalised ecology returning to some of our forests where extensive blocks of woodland can be managed by large grazing animals and native species reintroductions can help maintain healthy woodlands. The use of bison in Blean Woods in Kent or the return of the pine marten to the Forest of Dean show how we can improve woodland management and reduce impacts of non-native species by working with nature.



A The development of green finance and the natural capital market is transforming opportunities for landowners across the UK. Many new native woodlands are being created which would not have been planted without investment from organisations seeking to mitigate their climate impact. As this market continues to grow and mature, with options to value the benefits of existing native woodlands being developed, opportunities to work with partners committed to genuine change enable more of the fantastic benefits forests provide to be multiplied across our landscape.



A There is now a huge pressure on woodlands to not only be economically beneficial but to benefit biodiversity, local communities and provide other ecosystem services such as reducing flooding and carbon. All woodlands can and should provide economic returns, and grants and payments which support forestry that provides far greater holistic value should vastly improve forests value to society whilst simultaneously benefiting owners.

Equally technology such as LiDAR and drones have the potential to revolutionise forestry through improved harvesting efficiency to understanding and managing deer populations in far greater detail than has ever been possible when surveying manually. ●