

Black Down & Hindhead Supporters of the National Trust

Wilder Valewood

Project Notes

Valewood – where is it and what is it?

Valewood on the north-west side of Black Down is an area of land running roughly between Chase Lane and Fernden Lane. It consists of two small valleys surrounded by woods and fields used for grazing cattle. Through these valleys run two small streams which flow off Black Down and are in fact the first tributaries of the River Wey. A small lake provides a focal point for local birds and other wildlife. A number of other lakes have silted up although in the past these were dredged manually at considerable cost and effort.

The Re-wilding Experience

Experience elsewhere, notably at Knepp Castle in West Sussex, has shown that a more traditional and less intensive form of land management rapidly allows soils to regenerate, insect species to flourish and the whole food chain to be kick-started. Already at Swan Barn Farm, where Lead Ranger Dave Elliott and his team have started to introduce similar methods of management, they are proud to announce that, for the second year running, the song of nightingales has been heard. At Knepp for the first time in decades there are turtle doves, nightingales and Purple Emperor butterflies, together with clouds and clouds of flying insects, and this after only a few years of totally changing the way the land is managed.

The National Trust's Plan

The National Trust's plan for Valewood will involve 'extensive' grazing by native long-horn cattle (which have been purchased with funds from the BD & HH Supporters) on larger grazing compartments, creation of wider hedges with scrub being allowed to invade at field margins and the replacement of non-native softwood plantations by native broadleaved woodland and wood pasture. The plan will involve the removal of a considerable amount of old fencing while at the same time putting in new fencing where needed.

Perhaps the most eye-catching part of the project is the introduction of European Beavers into one of the valleys to create a water-rich habitat.

The plan is to create a specially fenced enclosure and allow the beavers to "naturally" manage the stream and create new lakes. In the process the beavers will cut down and coppice existing trees. This in turn will allow light to penetrate and encourage lower growing plants and shrubs to thrive, creating new habitats and niches for an increased range of flowers, birds, insects, small mammals and amphibians to develop over a relatively short period of time. We expect a dramatic transformation with minimal human intervention. The action of the beavers is expected to both retain water and purify it before it flows downstream. It should be noted that beavers were once common in the British Isles until they were finally exterminated in the sixteenth century.

This beaver introduction will be a first for the National Trust in England and Wales and we expect it will attract national attention. To fully capitalise and understand the transformative nature of the re-wilding and the beaver introduction, it will be essential to properly measure the improvements in biodiversity as well as water retention and quality. To that end, with our encouragement and some financial support, Imperial College London and Exeter University are actively considering sponsoring two Ph.Ds. and an M.Sc. to carry out a rigorous scientific study of the changes the re-wilding and beaver introduction will bring. Valewood is a particularly good location for this study because with two valleys it will be possible to use one for the beaver introduction and the other as a control for measurement of change.

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