



A LITTLE BIT OF HEAVEN IN DEVON

In 2018 **STEVE AND TAMARA DAVEY** took possession of Arrishes Wood, five acres of mixed woodland atop a valley on the edge of Dartmoor. This is what they did next.

My wife Tamara and I have always had a keen interest in woodlands, and I have had a passion for the natural environment since my childhood. I used to rush home from school just like the lad in the film *Kes* to tend to a female kestrel that convalesced from a wing injury in our shed. These days, I rush home from work and can be in our wood in 20 minutes. I run a small taxi company and am lucky to be able to visit three to four times a week on average. Even after 18 months of ownership, I still feel a wave of euphoria when I go through the gate.

We purchased Arrishes Wood partly to safeguard our finances, but also to preserve the woodland itself. We regard it as an opportunity to get stuck into our own environmental projects and to carry out meaningful conservation work.

Each and every woodland is unique and precious in its own right and new owners are often advised to observe the woodland for a year before undertaking major operations. This is good advice, although

we have not exactly followed it to the letter. In our first winter we made a clearing for our base and opened up two rides. We planted some new hedging and installed three small ponds. Whatever changes we make within our wood must enhance its biodiversity. However, we are aware that in creating new habitat, one can run the risk of diminishing the existing environment. It is also worth bearing in mind that management can include doing nothing. I am no expert, but this should take up a significant percentage of your woodland.

Throughout the year new revelations have appeared before our eyes, whether it be fungi, bird species, invertebrates, wildflowers, trees or mammals, and this is what we find so special. It's a continual learning curve of enlightenment and knowledge. Our wood is no exception: we have foxes, badgers and roe deer and I have recorded over 30 bird species, including nightjar. For me this is priceless, and I have been down many times this summer in the



evenings just to see and hear this fabulous bird. In May I hired a bat detector from Devon Wildlife Trust for three nights and recorded seven species, including the Greater Horseshoe Bat.

We have stayed overnight a few times, which is a great experience, although you do hear some very strange noises. On one occasion I heard something that sounded like a seal pup outside – needless to say whatever it was had vanished before I could see it.

Trees and habitat

Arrishes Wood faces east and slopes away quite steeply (after all, it is Devon). A young Sitka plantation, probably seven to ten years of age, covers most of the site and in amongst this is a large amount of birch regeneration alongside sweet chestnut. On the western bank is a large beech border with a small amount of oak. There are a few ash trees, which are all in good health at the moment. Copious amounts of bramble and bracken fill out the understorey, both of which have an important role to play in the site's biodiversity. Bramble provides a food source for over 50 species of moth, and bracken cover can host over 40 species of invertebrates. On the northern side are older trees: 100- to 130-year-old sweet chestnut, birch, and large beech.

There is plenty of lying and standing deadwood which is so important for woodland ecosystems, as well as piles of brash and logs, which all play a part in habitat provision. Part of the site still remains unexplored because of the density of the planting. Three or four longitudinal brash piles traverse the contours of the site and remain from when the site was clear-felled some years ago.

Managing for the future

Our plans for the future management of Arrishes Wood will be dictated by the resident and visiting species. We want to aid the foraging and feeding habits of the bats, and to create and maintain habitat for the migratory



nightjar and woodcock, which have very specific habitat requirements. If the woodland remains unmanaged and becomes in effect a closed canopy, they will generally seek alternative habitat. Ground-nesting nightjars prefer young plantations, so we intend to provide two or three 20-30-metre clearings. Most of the gorse will be left in place, although some will be cut back to ground level to provide varying degrees of ground cover and structure. A small amount of coppicing in these clearings will also enhance the woodland structure.



Top: Arrishes Wood contains a young Sitka spruce plantation, which Steve and Tamara have begun to thin.

Right: One of the perks of woodland ownership is the plentiful supply of logs.

The Sitka we remove will be used as dead hedging around our borders, thus creating further habitat. All dead wood, lying and standing (as long as it's safe) will remain in situ; the standing dead wood is especially good for woodpeckers. We will also reinstate the rotational coppice cycle of the sweet chestnut to give varying heights in the scrub areas. We coppiced two this February and their regrowth has been amazing. We have planted a diverse selection of hedging plants – dog rose, dogwood, field maple, hazel, crab apple, hawthorn, blackthorn and oak.

The three ponds will only get better over time, but they are already home to mosquito larvae, diving beetle, pond skaters, dragonflies and broad-bodied chasers. To give an idea of the importance of insect life within a wood, a tiny pipistrelle bat, which can fit inside a matchbox, can consume up to 3,000 insects per night!

The west to east ride will be widened this winter by taking out two to three rows of Sitka (they are all below minimum felling quota size). We will strim back some of the gorse and bramble with a mulching blade and leave most of the birch regeneration. By varying the edging

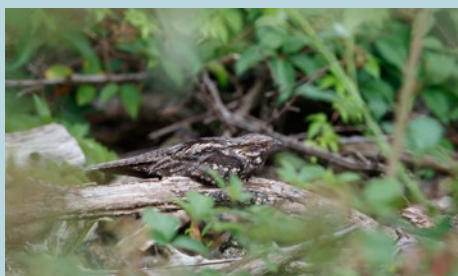
effect, we will achieve a scalloped edging, which is favoured by butterflies.

This summer I have strimmed a narrow pathway through the long grass because of the prevalence of ticks, but in future the grass edging will only be cut back on rotation. Last year we sowed some Yellow Rattle seeds which are great for allowing wildflowers to come through, and perhaps by next July we will be able to collect enough seed from our own wood to place in new areas. Fortunately, the resident roe deer seem to ignore it!

Finally, we have consulted an agroforestry specialist to help us with planting new species in the light of climate change challenges. We wanted to plant some varieties of apple that would be traditionally suitable to south Devon, but now realise we need to consider varieties that currently grow in northern France.

There is a huge task ahead, but we know the rewards will be fantastic. Would we have done anything differently if we were to start off again? We would have purchased more woodland!

Nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus*



Nightjars are extremely hard to spot, and it is often their call that signals their presence. European nightjars prefer nesting in pine forests. Perfectly camouflaged, nightjar can fly up to 6km from their nest site to feed. Habitat loss means that they are a Species of European Conservation Concern, although habitat restoration is going some way to increase numbers in the UK. There is more information here from the **British Ornithologists' Union**.



STEVE DAVEY is charting his family's journey in managing his woodland on a new website, www.woodlandwildlife.co.uk. It includes beautiful photographs of the woods and the wildlife he is working to conserve.