

# Woodland Condition Self-assessment Guidance



This assessment guidance is a tool intended for community and volunteer groups, and specifically designed for woodland in Greater London. It consists of a thorough walk through your woodland. The aim is filling out a form for every bit of the woodland that looks like it has its own marked identity (i.e. different species of trees, or of different age, management, etc) and comprises more than 10% of the woodland (see next page for more information about “compartments”).

**Pre-survey set up:** if you are not familiar with the woodland, it is better walking around first and getting to know which areas are distinctively different, so you get an idea of how many forms you may need to fill. Having a look on Google or Bing Maps (or similar) can help.

**Timing:** depending on the identification skills of the surveyor, the survey can be undertaken at different moments of the year, to collect different data.

## Optimal time for identification

Ground flora	mid-March to mid-May*
Trees by their leaves	April-October

\* Ancient woodlands should be surveyed during that, to maximize ground flora identification.

**Time required:** variable according to site, but ideally proportionate to its size. It is recommended that woodland should not take more than 1 hour.

**Equipment required:** woodland condition assessment form, woodland condition assessment guidance, and clipboard/folder/weather writer, pencil, pencil eraser, plant identification guides or apps (desirable); measuring tape.

**Skills required:** plant identification skills would be helpful.

**Survey methodology:** the recorder should fill one form for every ‘compartment’ – parts of the woodland that clearly have similar characteristics. Areas which differ from one another suggest different compartments.

## About the form

### Compartment ID:

If there are distinctive areas within the woodland making up 10% of the area, you could consider filling a separate form for those compartments (i.e. different species of trees, or of different age, planted area, different ground conditions, etc). Give to each compartment a number to identify it, and take notes about what makes a compartment different from another (e.g. different tree species, different management, etc).

We recommend drawing the woodland with the approximate compartments (use the form called “Optional, map”), or even better, printing a screenshot from Google Maps or similar to draw on top.



Example of a nature reserve divided into compartments. There will be woodlands with only one compartment. It is not necessary to have more than one.

## 1. Canopy

### Most common dominant trees in London woodlands

ash	hornbeam	sycamore	yew
beech	horse-chestnut	whitebeams	ornamental trees
lime	oak (native)	willow	(hawthorn)
hawthorn	sweet chestnut	wild cherry	

#### The woodland is considered young when it fulfils the following criteria:

approx. 90% trees less than 8cm diameter at chest level, and less than 5 metres high. Plantations included.

#### What is the difference between a shrub and a tree?

In general, mature trees are taller (above 2m), part of the canopy, and have only one trunk (except hazel; or unless the tree has been coppiced), whereas shrubs can have several trunks. Hawthorn is a species which can be a tree (if it is part of the canopy) or a shrub (lower than the canopy).



↑ Canopy layer

Shrub layer  
Approx 0.5-2m

Ground layer  
Approx < 0.5



## 2. Native shrub

### Most common shrubs in London woodlands

blackthorn	crab apple	guelder-rose	wayfaring-tree
broom	dogwood	hawthorn	wild privet
buckthorn	field maple	rose	
butcher's broom	gorse	spindle	

For the definition of shrub, see above.

Tree saplings are not included in the shrub layer.

Check the guidance for a list of native and non-native species.

## 3. Ground layer

Tree saplings are not considered in the shrub layer.

**Sections 3.3 and 3.4** should only be filled between mid-March and end of May.



Sydenham Hill Wood © Sam Taylor/London Wildlife Trust

*Example of an area heavily eroded and compacted. Originally a path, walkers and their dogs have eroded it beyond the path limits. This is considered eroded and compacted bare ground.*

To find out if a woodland is Ancient, check the inventory in this [link](#).

### Most common ancient woodland indicator species in London woodlands

barren strawberry (Mar-Apr)	three-nerved sandwort (May-Jun)	hard-fern (Apr-Aug)
betony (Jun-Jul)	toothwort (Apr-May)	hard shield-fern (May-Jun)
English bluebell (Apr-May)	tutsan (Jun-Jul)	soft shield-fern (May-Jun)
common cow-wheat (May-Jun)	wood anemone (Mar-Apr)	pale sedge (May-Jun)
early dog-violet (Mar-Apr)	woodruff (May-Jun)	remote sedge (Jun)
goldilocks buttercup (Apr-May)	wood-sorrel (Apr-May)	intermediate polypody (Apr-May)
moschatel (Apr-May)	wood speedwell (Apr-May)	wood sedge (May-Jun)
pignut (May-Jun)	wood spurge (Mar-Apr)	great wood-rush (May-Jun)
ramsons (Apr-May)	yellow archangel (May-Jun)	hairy wood-rush (Apr-May)
sanicle (May-Jun)	yellow pimpernel (May-Jun)	southern wood-rush (Apr-May)
spurge-laurel (Mar)	wood millet (May-Jun)	wood melick (May-Jun)
dog's mercury (Feb-May)	greater stitchwort (Apr-Jun)	early purple orchid (Apr-Jun)



### 4. Problem species

#### Most common invasive plant species in London woodlands

buddleia*	Himalayan balsam	lilac*
cotoneaster	Japanese knotweed	rhododendron
giant hogweed	laurel (cherry and other ornamental types)*	variegated yellow archangel

'Under control' means the area (once) covered by that species remains constant or is reducing year after year through specific management interventions.

**Section 4.2:** A competitive plant species is the one that tends to dominate and exclude other species. For example, understorey dominated ONLY by holly or bramble. These competitive plant species can become dominant, out-competing more sensitive woodland flora. This can be very site-specific and include trees (e.g. yew on non-chalk soils), shrubs (such as holly), or ground layer plants (e.g. bramble, ivy).

Invasive species are officially listed on [Schedule 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981](#).

This lists non-native species that are already established in the wild, which continue to pose a conservation threat to native biodiversity. Schedule 9 also includes some native species to provide a level of control. \*Species not listed but considered invasive.

### 5. Wildlife features

Ivy on trees: some woodlands will naturally have more ivy than others (especially young woodlands).

Ivy on the tree trunk is not a problem (and should not be removed) unless the trees are close to public right of way or properties, as the tree may end up dying and falling.

## Ponds



Example of a pond that seems to be in good condition. Even if it is surrounded by trees, at least 30% of the surface receives sun. Water is clear; several species of aquatic plants are present. It holds water during most of the year (but may drop during dry spells). No invasive plants (e.g. Himalayan balsam or floating pennywort) are present.



Example of a pond that may not be in good condition. Surrounded by tall trees, 80% of the water surface is shaded. A layer of algae/duckweed covers the water surface, in extreme conditions the pond maybe deprived of oxygen, making it difficult for aquatic animals to thrive. Filamentous algae covers the bottom. A low diversity of aquatic and marginal plants (reeds, iris, sedges) is present.

NB this may also be caused by other factors such as high nutrient inputs.

## Veteran trees

Exceptionally valuable. May not be very old (as age is dependent on the species), but they have significant decay features, such as big dead branches (>10 cm) and hollows (in the trunk, in or between the branches, etc). They can be individual trees or groups.



Example of a tree that may not yet be considered a veteran tree, but has some features - hollows, cracks, and dead branches - all important niches for other biodiversity.



## Badger setts



Entrances to part of the same badger sett in a bank. Only entrance 3 seems active: clear of vegetation and the ground has been recently dug out.

## 6. Access and Interpretation

Designated paths: normally the key paths through a site, maybe a legal right of way, a bridlepath, and are usually marked by the wood's owners and/or managers. These should usually be mapped on signage.

Undesignated paths: stray paths, 'desire-lines' potentially crossing sensitive areas; usually not mapped.

Fieldfare Trust: <https://www.fieldfare.org.uk/>

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