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 to fill 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 time, 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.

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 in compartments. There will be woodlands with only one compartments, it is not necessary to have more than one.

1. Canopy

Most common dominant trees in London woodlands		
ash	horse-chestnut	willow
beech	oak (English and sessile)	wild cherry
lime	sweet chestnut	yew
hawthorn	sycamore	ornamental trees
hornbeam	whitebeams	(hawthorn)

A 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).

Bluebells in wood © English Nature

Canopy layer

Shrub layer
Approx 0.5-2m

Ground layer
Approx < 0.5

2. Native shrub

Most common shrubs in London woodlands		
blackthorn	dogwood	rose
broom	field maple	European spindle
buckthorn	gorse	wayfaring-tree
butcher's broom	guelder-rose	wild privet
crab apple	hawthorn	

For the definition of shrub, see above.

Tree saplings are not considered in the shrub layer.

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

3. Ground layer

Tree saplings are **not** included in the ground layer.

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

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 (May-Jun)
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)

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.

4. Problem species

Most common invasive plant species in London woodlands	
buddleia*	laurel (cherry and other ornamental types
cotoneaster	lilac*
giant hogweed	rhododendron
Himalayan balsam	variegated yellow archangel
Japanese knotweed	

'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.

Deer presence

Confirmed sightings; droppings; footprints

Droppings

Fallow droppings

Footprints

Fallow footprint © David Stimpson

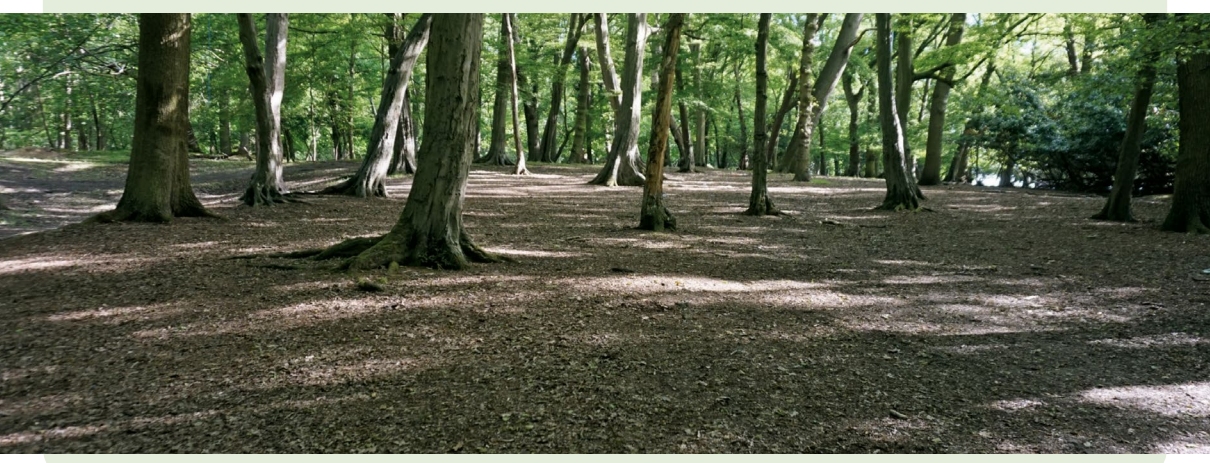
Browsing damage to ground and shrub layer

Ground layer – grazed leaves, no flowers

Ground layer – grazed

Shrub layer – grazed coppice

Severe browsing damage – no ground or shrub layer



Browse line

A distinct line of branches grazed from a tree or hedgerow

Rubbed bark

Rubbed bark – mild

Rubbed bark – severe

5. Wildlife features

Ivy on trees

Some woodlands will naturally have more ivy than others (especially young woodlands).

Ivy isn't parasitic and growing on tree trunks and into the canopy is rarely a problem (and ordinarily should not be removed). However, if the amount of ivy in the canopy is such that it could lead to a tree falling in high winds, then assessing that risk should determine what actions might need to be taken.

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.

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.

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: www.fieldfare.org.uk/

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