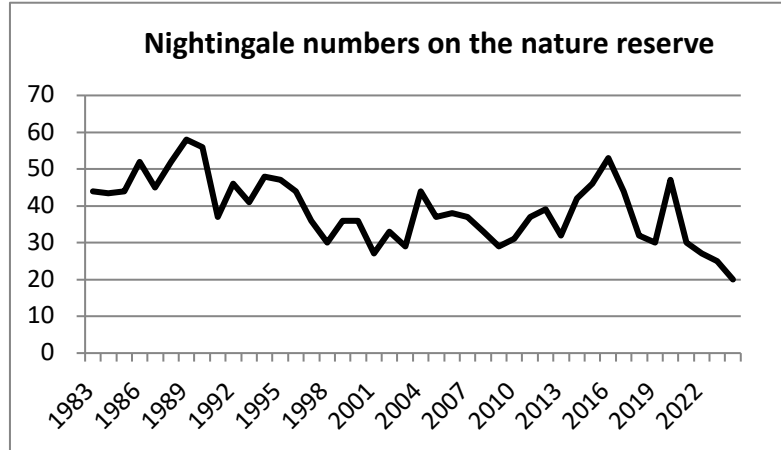


Blean Woods National Nature Reserve

Mid-November to mid-December 2024

Nowadays, most nature reserves aren't managed for a single species, but for all the wildlife of the habitat in question, be it marshland, heath or chalk downland. But many sites do have iconic species that the reserve manager feels under a particular obligation to nurture. At Blean Woods, two of those species are heath fritillary and the beloved nightingale, a bird that can aptly be described as being part of our literary heritage, appearing in so many poems, Shakespeare plays,

books and films. But, as the graph above shows, the nightingale has been declining erratically almost since the RSPB began acquiring land at Blean Woods in 1982. Then the population was consistently in the 40s or 50s, but since 1997 the norm has been somewhere in the 30s, falling to an all-time low of 20 in 2024. Numbers will only rise if a larger area of young coppice can be created, and I can't do better than quote from the warden, Sam Richardson, on how he and his staff and volunteers have risen to the challenge.



“One of the biggest challenges when managing a conservation woodland is finding someone to actually fell trees. The forestry sector is increasingly becoming a niche career choice and people entering into it to work in a woodland as a chainsaw operator are few and far between. It tends to be something you do for the love of it, not for financial gain. However, the RSPB staff and volunteers still do diligently head into the woods several times every week throughout the winter to coppice trees using chainsaws, then stack the firewood and pile up all the branches and off-cuts by hand. It is slow and labour-intensive, but ultimately very rewarding. The positive effect this coppice management has on wildlife reminds us every spring why we keep doing it. Despite our best efforts we are not able to cut all the areas we want to each year, so we hire contractors to undertake coppicing too.

“This winter we have employed a firm who are coppicing two large areas for us – two hectares adjacent to the small heath, and one hectare in the north of the woods, using a tree shear to fell the trees. A tree shear is an excavator-style machine with an extendable arm that has a grapple on the end that holds the tree in place. Hydraulic cylinders then close two blades in a scissor-like motion through the tree and it is laid on the ground, ready to be collected. It is quick and efficient and a hectare of trees can be cleared in a week. The trees are then collected and removed to the trackside where they will be chipped and taken to Sandwich to be used as biomass. Once felling is complete, a chainsaw operator will walk through the site and trim off any ragged stumps before the coppiced area is left to regenerate for at least 20 years.”

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