

## United Utilities West Pennine Moors Bio Diversity Actions Financial Year 2011/12

One of the major issues that raised its head again on the West Pennine was one of uncontrolled moorland fires. The fire that started near to the A675 north of Belmont Reservoir proved to be one of the largest and probably one of the costliest in terms of manpower and resources for the Fire & Rescue Service in England. Staff from United Utilities and Lancashire Fire & Rescue Service met to look at a way forward to reduce impacts and costs. UU has provided areas for Fire service personnel to train in the use of off road wheeled and track vehicles and has provided staff input and equipment to the renewed Lancashire Fire Operations Group. Fire plans have been overhauled and updated and the requirement for targeted fire watch areas at peak alert periods has been recognised.

In parallel with these activities actions have taken place on the ground. At Slater Lane, Belmont two ditches running parallel with the track on the north side have been grip blocked and are holding a considerable volume of water to rewet the edge of the moor. Slater Lane has been scraped off to create a narrow fire break and it is proposed to refurbish the track surface in 2012/13.

Having reviewed the fire break that was cut in 2009 when the fence was renewed and its failure to suppress the fire a parallel fire break has been cut approximately 30m wide from just outside Belmont to Watsons Farm and upslope towards Great Hill. The cutting has been carried out using a flail mower on a low ground pressure track vehicle and the process has not been without its critics who have expressed concerns with regard to ground compaction and potential to damage areas of sphagnum on blanket bog.

As part of the Scamp2 process similar actions have been carried out on other moorland areas which have been susceptible to uncontrolled fires in the past.



*Photos | M Harper*

Almost as topical as uncontrolled fire is the issue of invasive species control. Despite efforts to maintain control and reduce the areas infested with Himalayan Balsam and Japanese Knotweed both species appear to be increasing. UU has targeted a number of sites to control knotweed through the application of pesticide but staff are finding new areas, many on roadsides that appear to have been infected through the dumping of garden waste. New areas of balsam are appearing some over a mile from the nearest known source creating the assumption that seed is being transported by mammal or bird movement. Currently UU are continuing to target catchment head waters first and working downstream but this policy may have to be reviewed to put a brake on its spread to new areas. UU are also working with the Conservation Volunteers on the project to remove balsam from the River Yarrow Catchment. Roadsides are becoming a particular problem. In 2011 seed set early and before roadside verges were mown which increase the potential for mowing machinery to spread seed not only along the roadside but also over fences and hedges onto neighbouring land and also from one site to another.

Following a productive summer of dry stone wall restoration around the Roddlesworth Woodlands and Anglezarke areas where over 550m was rebuilt, the winter saw a large number of holes appear in roadside walls notably on the A675 and Haslingden Grane Road. At the Calf Hay bird hide part of the wall overlooking the feeding sight was lowered to improve visual access.

Efforts to maintain optimum habitat conditions on the island at Belmont proved popular with the black headed gull colony where UU undertook an aerial census for the first time. Figures obtained indicated that the island hosts approx 5% of the UK breeding population. Many thanks to the small team who have assisted with this project for the last ten years.

In the late spring and early summer Wildlife Warden Ian Harper undertook the usual round of kilometre square surveys for the Brown hare project. Despite poor results from the surveys the ad hoc reporting is painting a much healthier picture for the West Pennine Moors despite the ongoing problem with illegal hare coursing in some areas.

At the end of the financial year UU entered into agreement with Lancashire Wildlife Trust to undertake positive management of the Tennis Court Field, Rivington through the Forever Meadows Project. Some tree works and rubbish removal have taken place in readiness for mowing and baling in late summer 2012.

I M Harper  
17<sup>th</sup> July 2012