

Your new purchase

I can remember lying awake the night I bought my own wood wondering, and worrying, if it would be OK. It was wholly irrational: after all the wood had survived perfectly well without me. Now I was its owner and carer and, well, it felt a little like when a new born baby has its first night at home and you tiptoe to the cot to see if the mite's still breathing. The excitement of buying a wood, of owning your own patch, is something to savour, and in a sense not worry about at all but enjoy. This short book is to help you do just that.

The early days ...

The early days of ownership are full of surprises. The changing scenes as sunshine turns to rain, your first storm with trees swaying and rocking, or your wood draped white and sparkling in a brilliant mid-winter's morning after a night of snow. The seasons themselves are counted off by flowers and herbs – primroses, bluebells, herb bennet, pimpernel in the rides, mushrooms and toadstools of autumn – by the rise and fall of birdsong and the deep silence of August, by your trees as their buds burst and new leaves build crown and canopy, and then age, turn russet, golden, or brown and finally fall to the forest floor only to begin again in



the Spring. I could go on for the seasons never fail to surprise and delight as on each visit your wood looks different or reveals a new facet – which stocks and shares can ever match that?

But surprises are not only when you get to know your wood. Even after 20 years of changing seasons we find new things. Three or four years ago it was that lovely wayside plant of central southern England, Solomon's seal, last year it was a clump of helleborine under some beech trees right beside our entrance. For several days in late May we had worked hard and raised blisters(!) setting posts, attaching rails, and replacing the main gates. During a coffee break there they were, two patches of this close relative of the orchids – wonderful, and I'd only been going in and out of the entrance for 19 years! A surprise of a different sort is learning that yellow archangel isn't simply a golden version of the similar looking white dead nettle, but an indicator of ancient woodland habitat, and discovering that muntjac deer devour bluebells and target the best patches of cowslips.

You will realise I am a bit of a fan of wildflowers. But we have buzzard nesting though they haven't always, badgers are in the vicinity but not yet active in the wood, a marsh tit was spotted by friends only this year, orange-tip butterflies herald Spring warmth, and deer, both roe as well as the wretched muntjac, are increasing. A wood is never static, it is forever variations on a theme.

Being creative ...

The pleasure of wildlife, of being in the country, need not exclude more down to earth interests of cutting firewood, gathering pea and bean sticks or growing useful timber. Unlike a farmer's field devoted exclusively to wheat or oilseed rape, your wood can meet many needs simultaneously, and we will return to this theme as a helpful way of thinking about woodland management. The pleasure this brings is that while you can enjoy the changing scenes in your wood from the weather, the butterflies, birds and flowers in their season, you can also create change. You can plant, and fell, you can pollard and coppice, you can deliberately leave piles of dead wood for beetles or open up glades for picnics and even dig ponds. The scale of such interventions needn't be timid, indeed they usually shouldn't be. It's a question of confidence. A wood is so permanent, trees are so tall and timeless, dare you



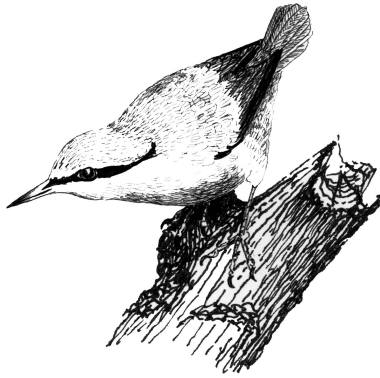
interfere? Yet interference, informed interference if you like, is just what many woodlands cry out for to help regenerate them, to help maintain the very diversity you are afraid of losing, and even to earn some money. Over the years our patch has more than 'washed it face' financially, but for many that is not an important consideration. Walking the dog, camping with the kids, pretending to be Ray Mears, fashioning your own rustic furniture, or having your own resource for woodturning are all reasons enough.

The possibilities of your new purchase are almost endless. There's getting to know your neighbours – always good to be on friendly terms – finding out who locally has special knowledge to help, who in the county can provide advice, is there a farmer who can mow or swipe the rides in summer in exchange for some Christmas trees in winter and so on. And have you a skill to offer or now, with your wood, a place to invite friends and family to?

But how much time does it take?

I often give talks about our wood and the most frequently asked question, by quite a long way, is how much time do you have to spend there or how much time does it take to look after properly? There is no fixed answer. Unlike a dairy farmer's daily necessity of milking cows, a woodland can be left, and left, and left – though presumably you won't be enjoying it as much as you might! Apart from checking the entrance, which someone else can always do for you anyway, or occasionally visits for pest control if you have a particular problem such as grey squirrels, there is nothing in woodland management that requires you to visit this week or this month. You may choose to, but will not have to. You can visit your wood when you want to, not because you must.

In answer to the question for myself, over the years I have probably averaged half a day per fortnight in my 30 acre wood. This is very frequent because, as I suspect you already appreciate, my wood is my hobby and I derive hours of pleasure from caring for this gift God has entrusted to us. I can honestly say that I have never found it a chore to visit my wood: I hope you find the enjoyment of yours as rewarding.



The handsome nuthatch forages in cracks and crevices in the bark mostly working down the trunk, the brown and better camouflaged tree creeper does this only going upwards