

Gorse *Ulex europaeus* coppicing at Blackhill, Dorset, England

Liley D.

Footprint Ecology, Court House, Binnegar Lane, East Stoke, Wareham, Dorset BH20 6AJ, UK

SUMMARY

On a heathland in southern England, mature gorse *Ulex europaeus* was coppiced and the area fenced to prevent rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus* browsing in an attempt to create a varied gorse age structure. Twelve years later little gorse had regrown from the cut stumps and the cleared area had been invaded by bracken *Pteridium aquilinum*.

BACKGROUND

European gorse *Ulex europaeus* is a common woody shrub on lowland heath land in the UK, especially on disturbed ground such as the edge of tracks. Old gorse becomes tall and leggy and is a very different structure to younger gorse which has a dense, low growth form.

The effects of coppicing gorse in an attempt to create a varied age structure alongside a track at Blackhill Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), in southern England are examined here. The work was conducted by the RSPB Heathland Project as part of on-going management at this site.

ACTION

Locality: The gorse coppicing was undertaken at Blackhill SSSI (National Grid ref: SY 835945) Bere Regis, Dorset, southern England.

Gorse coppicing: The work took place in March 1993. The gorse was cut at ground level using chainsaws and in total 0.2 ha of mature gorse was coppiced. The cut material was carefully burnt on site, the litter being raked up and burnt at the same time. The clearance and burning took a total of 3.5 person days.

Rabbit fencing: In July 1994, the plot was fenced using wooden posts and chicken wire, to prevent rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus* browsing and so allow the gorse to regrow. The fence was partly buried (in an effort to prevent rabbits burrowing underneath) and was left in place for at least one year (exact length of time not known).



Photo 1. View of coppiced area in August 2005, showing bracken *Pteridium aquilinum* dominated foreground with several gorse *Ulex europaeus* bushes in the background. Blackhil SSSI, Bere Regis, Dorset.

CONSEQUENCES

Gorse regrowth: In July 2005, the coppiced area could still be seen as a clear break in an otherwise continuous line of tall gorse alongside the track. Cut stumps were visible and closer inspection indicated that many stumps had not regrown. The percentage cover of gorse in the cleared area was estimated at 15%. The area was largely dominated by bracken *Pteridium aquilinum* with some bramble *Rubus fruticosus*. No before or after percentage cover estimates are available for these two species.

Photo 1, taken in August 2005, shows the extent of the bracken dominated area with a few uncoppiced old gorse bushes in the background.

Conclusions: This attempt at gorse coppicing was deemed unsuccessful. Little gorse re-grew from the cut stumps and the cleared area was rapidly colonised by a dense stand of bracken.