

Felling proposals at Blackbushe Airport

The RSPB has recently acquired a lease agreement for the area surrounding the disused runways at Blackbushe airport, which is to the North of the active airport and to the South West of Yateley. The site is designated as part of both the Castle Bottom to Yateley and Hawley Commons Site of Special Scientific Interest, and the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area. These designations are for the open heathland represented at the site, which supports internationally important populations of Dartford Warbler, woodlark and nightjar. The scrub/heathland interface also supports a particularly rich invertebrate fauna including a number of nationally scarce species.

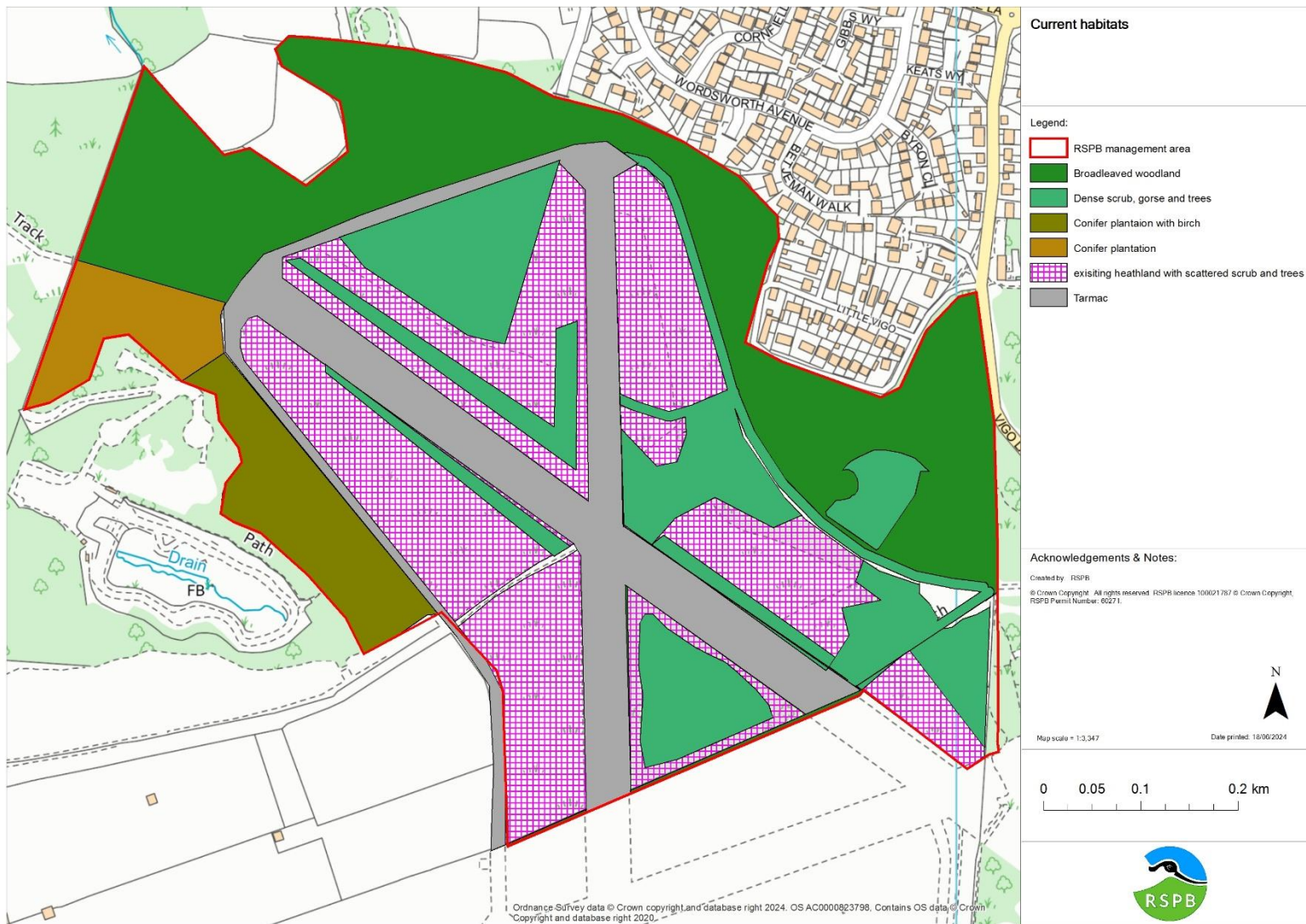
The site was last assessed by Natural England in 2022 wherein it was given unfavourable condition status with the reason given as 'Lack of corrective works – Inappropriate scrub control', as 'Lack of management has allowed gorse and other scrub species to encroach and mature across much of the unit'

Lowland heathland is an incredibly rare habitat, which if left unmanaged will naturally succeed to secondary woodland, which is what has been happening for several years at Blackbushe. Without intervention the habitat will continue to decline and will become unsuitable for the species that the site has been designated for. The RSPB proposes to undertake habitat management work to restore the open heathland habitat by reducing the tree and scrub cover and then continuing to manage the vegetation on rotation to provide a mosaic of open heath, scrub and trees. Restoring the open habitat on this site will also reconnect the managed open habitat of Castle Bottom to the West and Yateley Common to the East, which have become fragmented due to the degraded habitat between them at Blackbushe.

Our proposals for tree and scrub removal on the site is outlined on the following pages.

Current Habitat

The below image shows the broad habitats currently represented at the site. Some open habitat still remains but trees and scrub are heavily encroaching across the site.



The image below to the left shows an area where the habitat is still fairly open but with gorse and scrub encroaching on all sides. The habitat is currently suitable for nightjar and Dartford warbler, but the scrub would need to be controlled to prevent further encroachment. Some mowing of the heather and grasses would also provide additional vegetation structure and improve the habitat for woodlark.

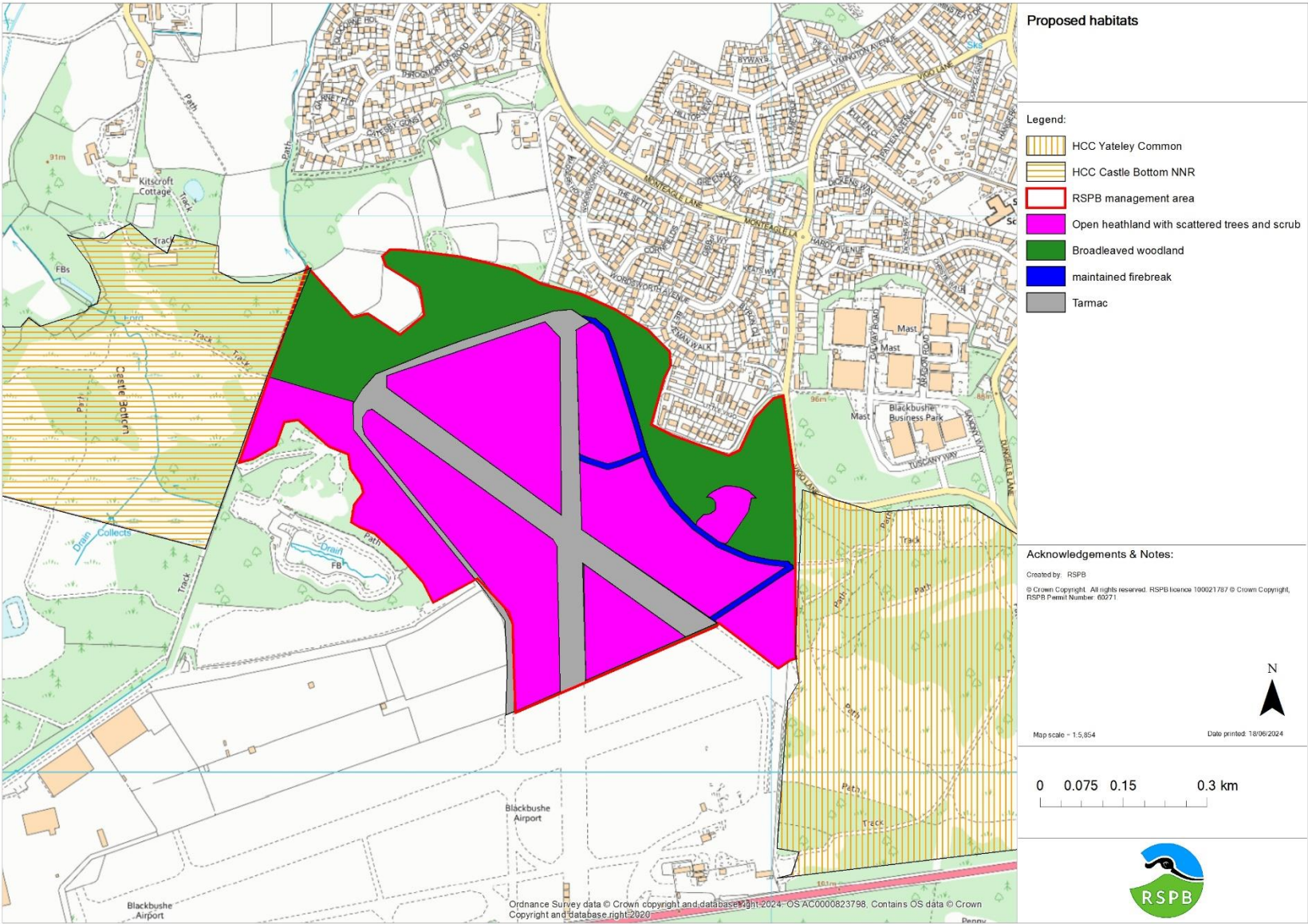
The photo to the right shows an area where the habitat has succeeded further, and is an example where tree cover would need to be reduced to provide suitable habitat for the designated species.



Proposed Habitats

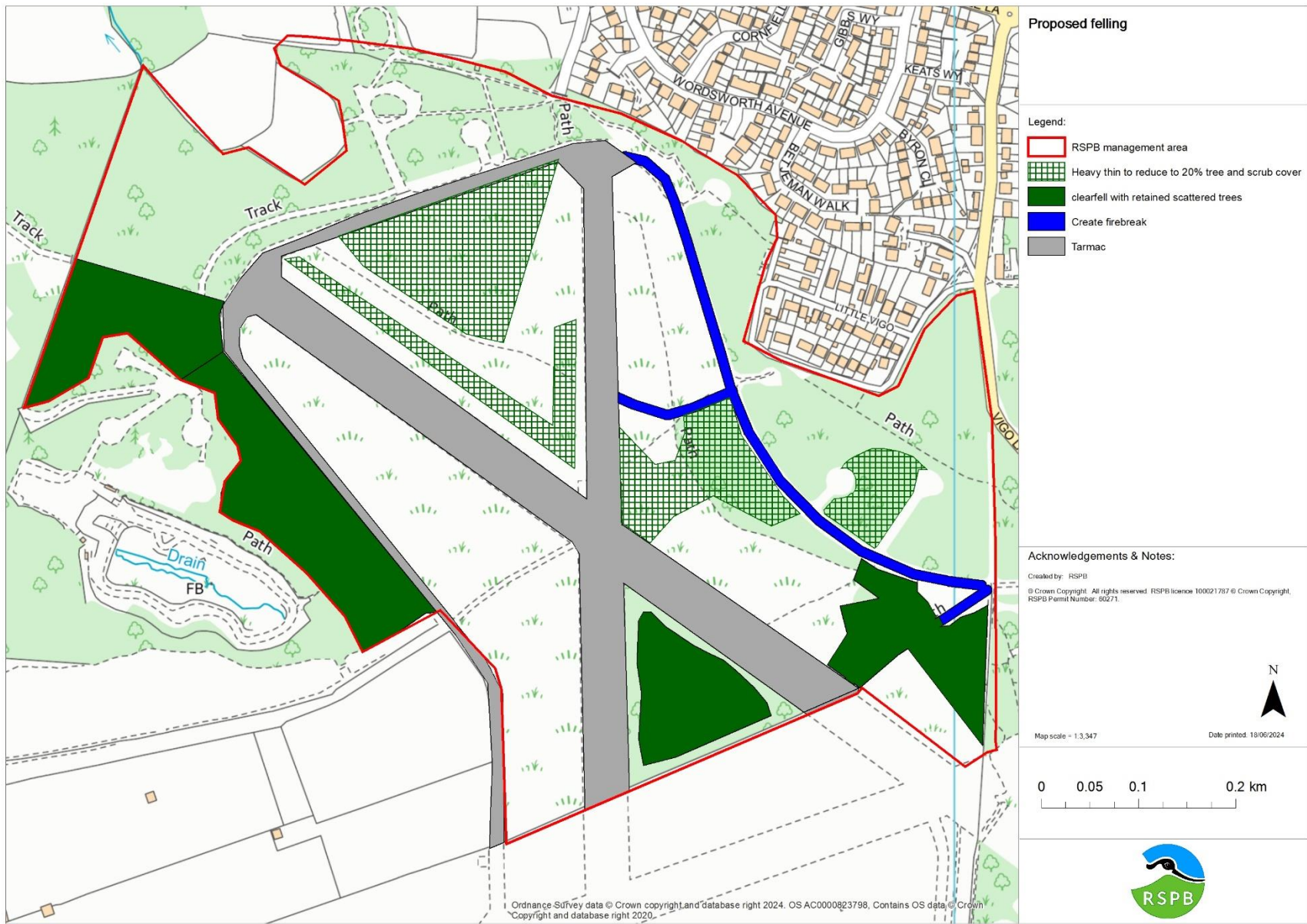
The below image shows the proposal for a much more open habitat of a heathland mosaic with scattered trees and scrub. This would reconnect the open habitats of Castle Bottom and Yateley Common as shown. We also propose to create a new firebreak on the Eastern side of the

heathland, which would provide access for a fire tender as there have been historic events of fires on the site, which would protect both the nearby houses of Yateley, and the wider habitat.

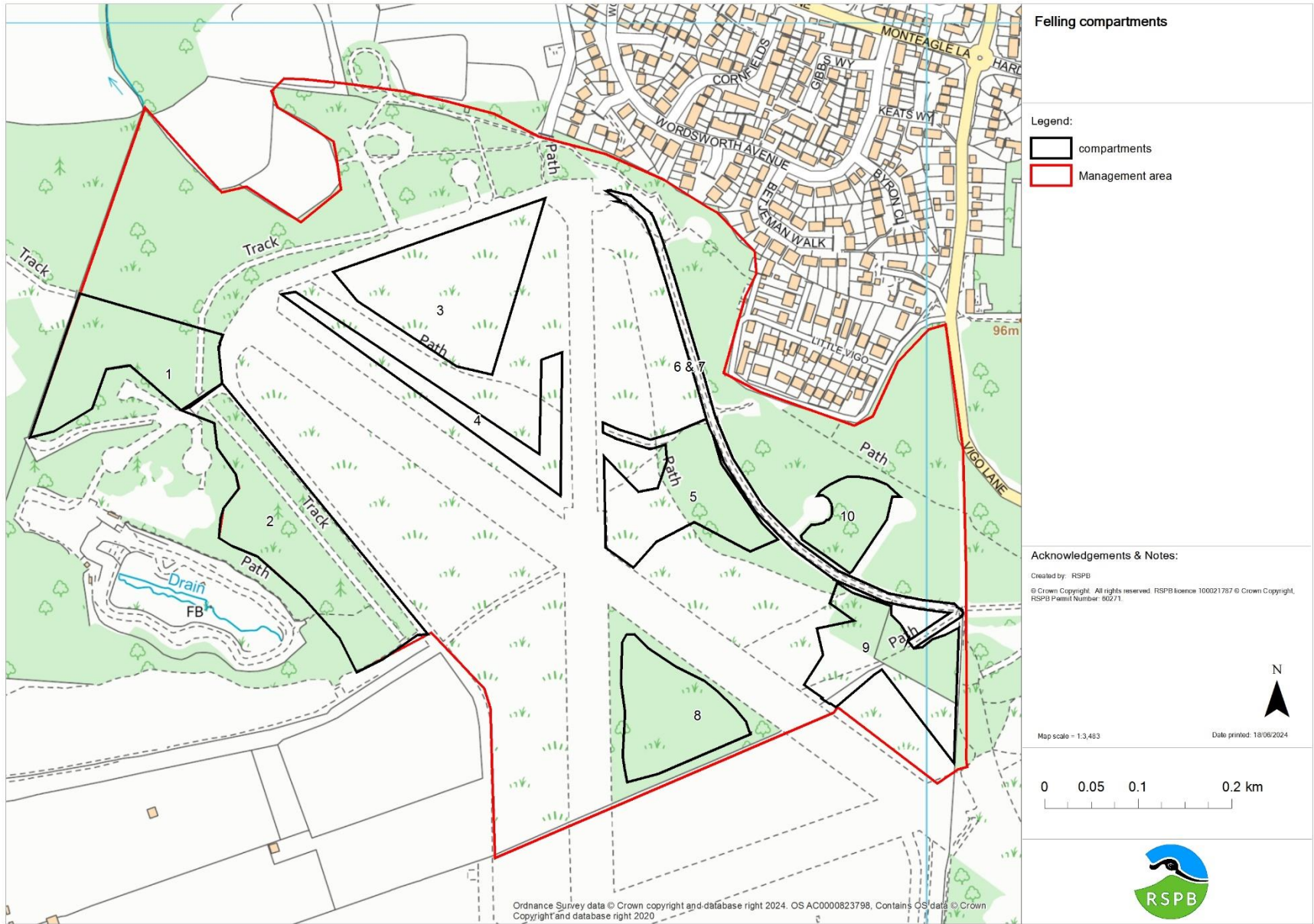


Proposed felling

The image below highlights the areas where tree felling will take place. Further information is provided in the compartment map and text on the following pages.



The map below highlights the compartments where felling will take place. The following page provides details of the felling that will take place in each compartment.



Proposed felling by compartment

Compartment 1

This compartment is a Scot's pine plantation of approximately 40 years old. It is almost entirely a closed canopy monoculture, but ling heather is present in the few areas that light reaches the woodland floor, showing the potential for heathland restoration. The majority (c.95%) of the Scot's pine would be removed, with the occasional tree retained as song perches. Removing the trees and opening the canopy will encourage dormant heather seed present in the soil to germinate and begin the process of restoring the heath.

Compartment 2

This compartment is a remnant of a slightly older Scot's pine plantation approximately 60 years old. Unlike compartment 1 it appears to have been previously thinned, which has allowed silver birch to also have become established. As with compartment 1 the majority of the trees would be removed to open the habitat for heathland restoration, with the ecologically more interesting birch and pine being retained as scattered trees.

Compartment 3

The compartment comprises a mix of successional oak, willow and birch scrub of varying ages up to approximately 40 years old. We propose to reduce the scrub and tree cover to 20% and maintain this level of cover by future rotational cutting.

Compartment 4

This is a fairly linear compartment of mature Scot's pine and successional oak, birch and willow. The proposals would be the same as compartment 3, to reduce the tree and scrub cover to 20% and to maintain a mosaic of open heath, scrub and trees.

Compartment 5

Similar in composition to compartment 4 with Pine, oak, birch and willow and the management proposal would be the same. Reducing the scrub and tree cover to 20%.

Compartments 6 & 7

These compartments sit either side of an existing surfaced track. The trees and scrub will be removed either side of the track to a total width of 15m to provide both a fire break and for access for a fire tender. This will provide protection for both the houses of Yateley and for the wider habitat should a wildfire ever occur. The management proposed in this document will also reduce the total fuel load of the site, which will further reduce the risk of a wildfire on the site.

Compartment 8

Predominately young birch and the occasional oak of approximately 20 years old. The tree cover would be reduced to 20% with scattered trees retained in clumps.

Compartment 9

Predominately birch and willow of approximately 20 years old. As with compartment 8, cover would be reduced to 20% with scattered trees retained in clumps.

Compartment 10

Similar composition to compartment 4 with mature Scot's pine and successional oak, birch and willow. Again, the proposals would be to reduce the tree and scrub cover to 20% and to maintain a mosaic of open heath, scrub and trees.

