

## Why enclosures?

Text and photos by Piers Eley

You may have noticed the "new" thorn and gorse enclosures around Conduit Wood. The first of these patches of seedling hawthorn and low gorse scrub were enclosed in 1999, in the hope that the self-sown plants they contained would survive climatic changes better than imported trees, and would, over time, create natural areas of scrub. Because of the deer, who love to browse on tender young tree shoots, this type of cover, so important for small birds, is in very short supply in the Park.

The result was startling. Within the first 12 months, some of the hawthorn seedlings had grown from a few inches to more than seven feet in height! Far from being young seedlings, the small shrublets we had enclosed turned out to have been trees of 20 or more years old that had repeatedly been eaten to the ground by the deer. Released from this pressure, the formidable root systems they had developed resulted in dramatic growth. The similar growth of the gorse was less surprising, but equally spectacular.

Almost immediately, these groups of small shrubs began to develop into thickets and

birds started to use them as nesting sites. Below are a couple of the annual visitors that have regularly bred in these enclosures since they came into being.



Above: Male Stonechat in gorse enclosure



Below: Male Whitethroat in thorn enclosure

This great success story has nevertheless brought with it its own problems. We had never intended the enclosures to be permanent, we just wanted to give the scrub a sufficient period of protection from the deer to enable thickets to be established. However, these new thickets have become such important breeding grounds for some of our smaller and less common birds that we would not now want to risk their destruction, by leaving them entirely unprotected.

Not only has the fencing kept the deer at "neck's length", it has also kept out both people and dogs. In effect, these small enclosures have become nature reserves.

Some of the hawthorn enclosures, however, have now become so overgrown with bramble as to appear impenetrable, even without their fencing. Meanwhile, the gorse, in the first enclosures, has grown so tall that it is beginning to show signs of

thinning out and, it is suggested, might now benefit from some browsing.

We have therefore decided to remove the fencing from one of the original gorse enclosures and from three of the most overgrown of the thorn enclosures, to see what effect this will have.



Above is the smallest of these, beside the bench on the north edge of Conduit Wood, with its fence still in place. Below is the same enclosure, with fence removed and brambles trimmed back.

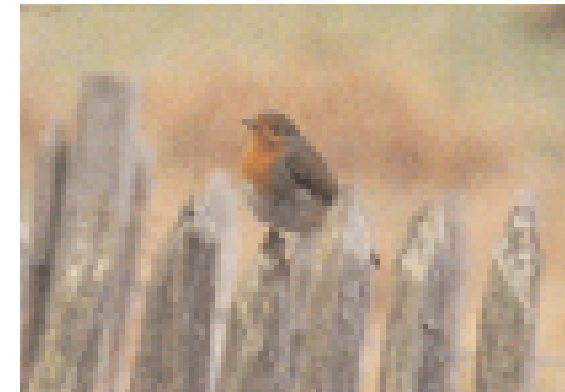


Shorn of its bramble overcoat and fencing, it looks rather small and vulnerable, but we hope that the bramble will be re-established around the edges within the next 12 months. If this is the case, we would hope

that breeding by small birds, particularly the Whitethroats, may at least take place in some of the larger thickets, if not this coming Spring, 2008, in the one thereafter.



The gorse enclosure above looks less bare, stripped of its fencing, but is probably more vulnerable to the attention of the deer. Time alone will tell.



Other birds that regularly breed in these enclosures include: Garden Warblers, Wrens, Robins, Blackbirds, Song Thrushes, Chaffinches and Greenfinches.

All I can really say at this stage is "watch this space"!

*Piers Eley is Chairman of both the Richmond Park Wildlife Group, and the Butterfly Recording Group*