Richmond Park: top site for beetles that like decaying wood

by Marilyn Mason

You may have noticed those strange perspex traps in the trees when out in the Park last summer and wondered what they would catch. Now the results of this research project are out, and they confirm the Park's international importance as a top site for "saproxylic beetles" – beetles that depend on dead or decaying wood for at least part of their life cycle.

"Rusty click beetle" (Elater ferrugineus)

The survey found 347 species of saproxylic beetle in the Park; 46 of these (for example, a silken fungus beetle, Cryptophagus falcozi; a false blister beetle, Ischnomera caerulea; and the "Windsor" Weevil, Dryophthorus corticalis) were previously unrecorded in the Park. 138 have conservation status. Among these are 34 so-called Red Data Book species, nine of which are among the most endangered species in the UK – including the "rusty click beetle" pictured. This would be extraordinary for any site, but is particularly so for an urban site like the Park.

The study was partly funded by the Friends of Richmond Park and carried out by Royal Parks staff and volunteers, including Royal Parks Community Ecologist Dr Nigel Reeve and national beetle expert Dr Peter Hammond. It began in 2005 with a review of beetle records for the site, field visits and hand searches, followed by placing perspex vane traps in 30 veteran English oaks and five individual trees in five areas of the Park. Between May and November 2006, 365 trap samples were collected. Some very rare species, such as the Trinodes hirtus (a carpet beetle), Ampedus cardinalis (the Cardinal Click Beetle) and Procraerus tibialis (a click beetle) were found remaining well-established in the Park, but, intriguingly, some other species that inhabit similar sites were not found. The researchers hope to learn more about the reasons for these inter-site differences, and to undertake further work on the non-beetle species found in their traps.

A longhorn beetle (Leptura quadrifasciata)

The Park's status as London's largest Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), a National Nature Reserve (NNR) and a European Special Area for Conservation (SAC), is partly thanks to its 1350+ species of beetle (a third of the British list). The Park's saproxylic beetles, which include the Stag Beetle (Lucanus cervus, familiar to most of us and of national and European conservation importance), rely on its famous veteran trees and associated decaying wood or fungi, and their presence underlines the vital importance of this valuable resource. (See the free leaflet Decaying Wood, Managing a Valuable Wildlife Habitat, available at the Pembroke Lodge Information Centre, for more on this.)

With thanks to Dr Nigel Reeve