

Backwell Environment Trust

Registered Charity No : 1109406

Bulletin 20 - Spring 2011



A very warm welcome to our latest spring bulletin

It's been one of the busiest winter seasons for your Trust in many a year with the various wildflower meadow restoration and coppicing projects in Badgers Wood making spectacular progress. Other highlights have included the completion of our wheelchair-friendly path leading to Backwell's best viewpoint and high numbers of hazel dormice have been confirmed in Jubilee Stone Wood.

To help you find your way around our action packed bulletin the contents are listed below :

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The View From The Chair



Membership Renewal Time

Welcome to our spring 2011 Bulletin, our twentieth. We have moved a long way from Bulletin No 1, a single-sided monochrome sheet of A4. The month of March marks the end of our membership year and renewals are due on the 31st. We hope very much that you will continue to give us the support that has enabled us to transform two neglected woodlands into accessible and, as you will see from our reports below, richly diverse nature reserves.

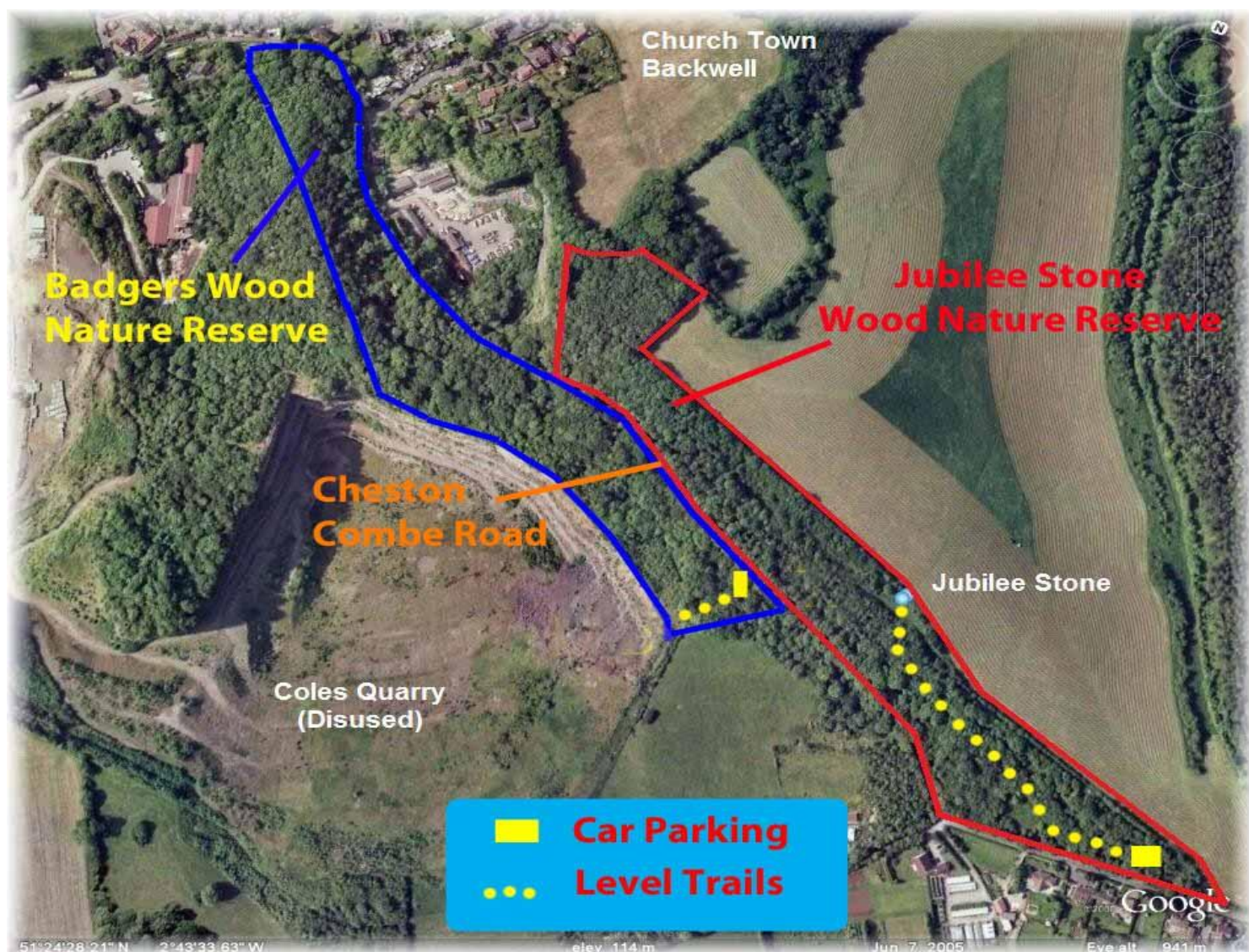
A membership form accompanies this Bulletin. If your details are the same as before there is no need to complete all the boxes; just tell us 'no change'. However, if you can, please tick the Gift Aid box and sign. I know some people have already renewed, so please ignore this message if you are one of them or if you are a new member who has joined recently (in the last three months). In the latter case your membership will last until March 31st 2012.

Volunteers

As many members will know we received our Queen's Award for the work of our volunteers. I am pleased to report that numbers are still growing and our hours donated could be even greater this year than last. This is because we now have a flourishing Monday morning group with half a dozen or so regular attendees. It's the usual BET format; two hours work, usually 9.30 to 11.30am, with a break for tea, biscuits and a chat. If you would like to join us just turn up or contact me (462083) or Ian (463315) or check our website : www.backwellenvironmenttrust.org.

Spectacular Views and Access to Them

Both Jubilee Stone Wood and Badgers Wood have spectacular viewpoints with some parking and level access for those who are less than able-bodied. The location of the car parks is shown on the map. The Jubilee Stone Wood car park has a farm gate which is now kept unlocked. Make sure you park in the bay off the farmer's access track. The route from here to the Jubilee Stone is 300 yards but there are conveniently spaced benches at delightful spots along the way. We are a bit disappointed that these facilities are not used more often but perhaps this brief plug will stir up interest.



Backwell Cave

A formal letter expressing once again our interest in acquiring the cave elicited a telephone call from one of the directors of Griffiths and Hosier Estates Limited who own both the cave area and quarry. I was told that they are in discussion with North Somerset Planning about completing the reinstatement of the

quarry after which they would be able to discuss with us the fate of the cave. It was stressed that they were interested only in the commercial buildings in the quarry. We continue to await developments.

Sustainable Backwell Community Orchard

BET has been approached by Sustainable Backwell about the possibility of jointly managing an old orchard on the common. Sustainable Backwell is a lively local group interested in exploring ways of reducing energy use and living more sustainably. As well as replanting and restoring the orchard there is considerable scope for developing parts of it as a nature reserve or even incorporating a few allotments. It's early days yet but this could be a (literally) fruitful development for BET.

Playrangers

The playrangers have been using our woods regularly on Tuesday mornings with visits from amongst others West Leigh and St Andrews Junior. By the end of March there will have been seven sessions in all but unfortunately funding then ceases. It seems a great pity that this introduction of children to the outdoors, to nature and to the environment is given such a low priority.

Backwell Lake Access Path

After many false starts it now seems that real progress is being made on this project. Wessex Water who own the lake area have confirmed in writing to the Backwell Access Group (of wheelchair users, aka BAG) that they are now fully committed. They have appointed landscape architects and undertaken extra surveying work to complement that already commissioned by BAG. Watch this space...

Parish Council Grant

Once again the Parish Council has made a generous grant to BET. They have supported us right from the very start and I would like to take this opportunity to thank chairman Colin Pope and his fellow councillors for their constant encouragement and help.

With best wishes for a happy Easter

Bill Charnock



Membership Renewal



The membership year runs from April 1st to March 31st and renewals for 2011/12 are now due. We really hope you will complete and return the enclosed form. The size of the membership is an important factor when applying for grants so although we seem to be very well established, we do need to be able to demonstrate a wide base of support.

Gift Aid is also a very important source of income for us so, if possible, please tick the relevant box and don't forget to sign the form.

If you have joined or rejoined since December 2010, please ignore this notice as your membership will go to March 31st 2012. Thank you for your continued support



Did you know that you can now show your support for BET by wearing clothing embroidered with the BET name and logo? T-shirts, sweatshirts, fleeces, etc can all be ordered from Peaks of Backwell (22 West Town Road). You can choose any colour or style of clothing and select an embroidery colour of your choice. Prices start from as little as £7 so why not pop in or look online at www.propeaks.co.uk.



BET Trustees 2011



Following the AGM in November 2010, the trustees are now as follows:

Bill Charnock, chairman and membership secretary, 462083, 17 Church Town,
bill.chnock@btinternet.com

John Tarkanyi, treasurer, john.tarkanyi@jci.com activity morning volunteer

Ann Chambers, publicity officer, 463315, 24 Backwell Hill Rd., chimpychambs@yahoo.co.uk,

Ian Chambers, bulletin editor and woodland management team leader, 463315,
24 Backwell Hill Road, chimpychambs@yahoo.co.uk, Avon Wildlife Trust volunteer leader.

Jenny Greenslade, indianajen@tiscali.co.uk local archaeologist.

Caroline Hout, houtfamily@btinternet.com.
Activity morning volunteer & children's activity co-ordinator.

Avril Marks, paintermike@btinternet.com, Avon Bat Group

Michael Marks, paintermike@btinternet.com, Avon Bat Group

Carrie Riches, carriches@btopenworld.com, Hawk and Owl Trust Member

Amanda Swannell, doug.minter@blueyonder.co.uk,
Activity morning volunteer & children's activity co-ordinator.

Andrew Town, Avon Wildlife Trust, local naturalist

Diane Zimmer, diane.zimmer@uwe.ac.uk, Activity morning volunteer.

Also, the Trustees couldn't get by without the tremendous help of:

Barbara Charnock, acting secretary and events co-ordinator.



Jubilee Stone Wood Dormouse Survey 2010



Dormouse Summer Nest

In mid-November 2010, Gill Brown (who is licensed by English Nature to handle dormice) and myself, went into Jubilee Stone Wood to carry out a survey of the dormice population on the nature reserve. We knew we had dormice on the reserve after the chance discovery of three summer nests and a live hibernating dormouse in 2007 - all quite rare finds. Since then, we have put up 28 summer nesting boxes throughout the best dormouse habitat on the reserve and so it was these boxes that we surveyed. In most years, dormice have usually started their extremely long hibernation period by mid-November so we were quite surprised to find two juveniles still very

much awake in two of the boxes. Out of the 27 viable boxes we inspected, **ten** had dormouse nests in, **eight** had a small mammal nest (eg wood mouse, shrew), **five** contained bird nests & **five** were empty. For such a relatively small woodland such as Jubilee Stone Wood, the number of nests found this year is really quite remarkable and it may well turn out in future years to be amongst the highest densities of dormice in the UK. Interestingly in 2010, the highest density of dormice found in summer nesting boxes in the UK was recorded very locally on the Avon Wildlife Trust's reserve at Goblin Combe, where 33 dormice were recorded in 50 nest boxes. This coming year, our nest boxes will be surveyed during the summer months so we can more accurately assess the numbers of dormice present on this remarkable nature reserve.



Juvenile Dormouse in JSW

Whilst the upper sections of Jubilee Stone Wood are pretty well the perfect habitat for dormice, the denser woodland of Badgers Wood *should* be quite poor for them. However in October 2010 we discovered (thanks to 'piper' the dog!) a live hibernating dormouse on the edge of Badgers Wood. This chance discovery was quite a surprise and has spurred us on to re-double our efforts over the winter of 2010/11 to make Badgers Wood more dormouse friendly as soon as possible.

Dormouse Factfile

Secretive, nocturnal and rarely seen, dormice are the only mouse-sized rodents with a furry tail. They are often quite chubby in appearance, about 75mm long, with a 55mm tail and orange-yellow fur which is creamy white on their undersides. They usually hibernate between October and April. In summer they make their nest in an oval ball of shredded honeysuckle bark in which they raise their young. At dusk they emerge to forage, ideally in thick undergrowth, for berries, nuts and insects.



ROMAN GARDENS



The subject of Roman gardens is a relatively new field of archaeology, as earlier antiquarians only studied buildings and ignored their surroundings which contained all sorts of evidence about people's daily lives. Now all that has changed and we know that almost everyone had gardens - town houses, shops, inns, around tombs, and even small apartment blocks had plant pots on their windowsills and balconies (sometimes falling onto passers-by below!).

Gardens are mentioned in many literary sources, but some of the best evidence comes from preserved frescoes and wall-paintings in houses at Pompeii and Herculaneum, Italy, which were covered by volcanic ash after the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79. Pompeii was buried up to 6 metres and Herculaneum over 20 metres deep. It was not until 1860 that Pompeii was rediscovered and scientific techniques in the 1970s found traces of animals, birds, carbonised insects, bacteria, fungi - and plants, which, as they died, rotted away and ash filled the cavities, allowing most of them to be identified. This has enabled some gardens to be recreated and one of the best to see in England is at Fishbourne Roman Palace, West Sussex.



Gardens were places for fresh air, exercise, outdoor dining, socialising, the worship of gods and deities and, more importantly, displays of good taste and wealth! Formal gardens were laid out with rows of well-manicured box hedges, scented roses, lilies and green and yellow ivy. Dark green myrtle bushes covered in starry white blossoms in summer, were cut and used as decorations for celebrations, feasts and woven into bridal wreaths, whilst sprigs of box were ritually placed in coffins. There were fountains, with statues of gods and goddesses, man-made grottoes and caves. Sometimes there was a specimen sacred tree like walnut (food of the Gods), the nuts used to not only dye wool and hair, but were thrown at weddings, because of the satisfying clatter they made! A fig tree in Pompeii was sacred because buried beneath it were 'things which were struck by lightning'!

Elaborate dinner parties and sumptuous banquets were held in these gardens, usually beneath shady, vine-covered arbours. Main meals were eaten at 3pm, with Romans reclining on their couches, relaxed and comfortable, but children, travellers and slaves had to sit upright. They listened to various readings and recitations during the meal, and afterwards watched acrobats, jugglers and dancers. It is recorded that in AD 27, a dinner party in a cave on the Isle of Capri ended in disaster when part of the roof collapsed and fell on the diners below. Emperor Tiberius was one of the guests, but luckily escaped harm!

The informal gardens were a complete contrast, places for relaxing in, where children played games and pet dogs ran freely among trees carefully-planted for that 'random' look, with scatters of flowers and a temple or sculpture aesthetically-placed for visual impact. We know that birds were encouraged to the gardens as they are shown flying, perching and feeding in the wall-paintings, all very lifelike as they were done by specialist painters. There are references to pet birds such as starlings, magpies and parrots who did tricks, and were taught to speak, whilst blackbirds were special as they could not only speak but sing such beautiful songs.



Flowers were important, used for decorative garlands and wreaths and for making perfume. Columella, a horticulturalist told farmers to fill their baskets with roses to sell and they would return from market "soaked with wine, of staggering gait, and pockets full of cash!" Kitchen gardens were usually next to the house, so women could work there between chores in the house. They were responsible for providing produce for eating and for medicinal purposes. Cabbage was a most popular vegetable, which not only prevented nightmares and insomnia, but cured hangovers after too much alcohol! It was so popular that apparently Emperor Diocletian's dream was to retire to his palace in Split and be able to grow cabbages! Asparagus and onions were good for digestion and cleansing and Emperor Nero was known to eat chives in olive oil to improve his voice.

We have much to thank the Romans for, because when they arrived in Britain in AD 43, they slowly cultivated many of our wild food plants, improving both size and flavour, plus introducing many fruit and vegetables that today we take for granted. These include apricots, figs, grapes, strawberries, plums, pears, and onions, broad beans, peas and cucumbers, with herbs like parsley and fennel for flavour.

I wonder if it was the Romans who passed down to us our traditional love of gardens which provide us with such an endless source of pleasure. We have our formal front gardens for passers-by to see, but spend our time in the more informal back gardens with patios or smart green lawns (which unlike Roman grass, has to be cut!), patches of fruit and vegetables and supermarkets will sell us potted herbs for our kitchen windowsills.

Our gardens are as important to us as they were to the Romans, and today, more than ever, we need to have a quiet place to escape to, a 'patch of green' we can call our own in which we can relax and unwind, after the ever-increasing hustle and bustle of our busy, daily lives.

Jenny Greenslade



Hobbies Over Backwell

The Hobby (*Falco Subbuteo*) is a small falcon which breeds in the UK but winters in Africa. Whilst most of our trans-Saharan migrants are declining in numbers, the Hobby has bucked this trend and has increased dramatically in recent years. The provision of large water bodies such as reservoirs, gravel pits, fishing lakes and reed beds has played a part in the population expansion, but the species is extending its range northwards, perhaps due to climate change. Forty years ago the UK population was considered to be a hundred pairs, now the estimate is closer to 2,700!

Hobbies are like small, slim peregrines, about the size of a kestrel and what they lack in power compared to the peregrine, they make up with astonishing agility - I have seen their flight described as 'mercurial' and that just about sums it up. Some years ago Hobbies began to nest in the general area of Chelvey/Nailsea Court (the exact site is not known) and from there I have seen them circle up high and then head purposely towards Backwell, no doubt to plunder the House Martin colonies there. So in the summer (and principally July, August and the first half of September) do look out for these wonderful acrobats. Hobbies are late nesters (they use an



old crow's nest or similar) and their young - usually two - don't fledge until mid-august. This allows the adults to prey on easily caught juvenile birds, mainly Swallows and House Martins, but basically any bird that they can catch. I have seen one take a Swift! They also feed on dragonflies and other largish insects and the young practice their hunting skills on the early autumn dragonfly feast. Then they head south to Africa with the Swallows and Martins, so there is food en-route.

I am always interested to hear of local Hobby sightings, so if you do see one please let me know and, if there are a few reports, I will write a follow up note.

Trevor Riddle, 01934 835208



Woodland Report

As BET's many woodland tasks draw to a close for another year, I always feel a keen sense of anticipation of what surprises the coming spring will bring. However, in the days before spring officially *springs*, it has to be said that some sections of woodland we have been working on over the winter are looking pretty battered & bruised - so just what have we been up to? Well, large areas of our nature reserves are often covered with dense woodland which is not always the best habitat for wildlife. In dense woods, the main wildlife activity has to happen way up in the tree canopy which is fine if you can fly or climb, but not much good for all the other animals trying to live in the dense shade below. So most of BET's work over the past winter season has been to thin out sections of dense woodland (by coppicing & pollarding) to let more light reach the woodland floor, as well as restoring the old wildflower meadows. What we want to achieve is a diverse woodland profile with a rich ground flora below a scrub layer of bramble and regenerating trees, with the tree canopy soaring high above.

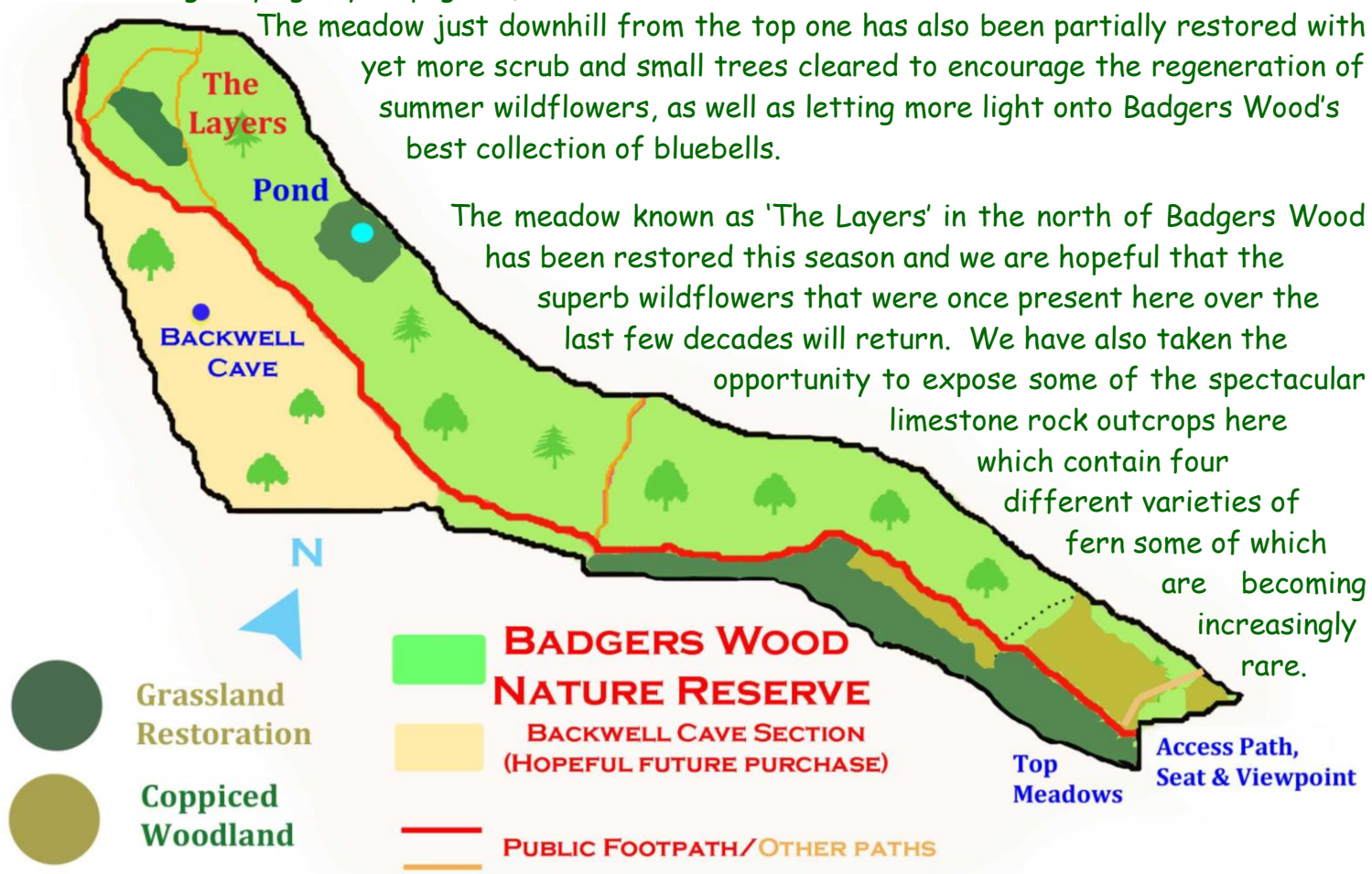


Winter Work 2010/11

Since the chance discovery of a live, hibernating dormouse in Badgers Wood in October 2010, we have been very keen to improve the range of food supplies for this increasingly rare nocturnal mammal in the woodland. So we have been busy coppicing some of the more common trees, (cutting the trees at ground level and letting them re-grow), to let more light reach the woodland floor. This will encourage a much more varied habitat full of wildflowers at ground level, bramble scrub just above, and a wide range of trees all at different stages of their development. The cut material has also been left just where it fell, which will exclude any browsing roe deer who would like nothing better than to eat the fresh tree re-growth - given half a chance.

The very top meadow in the woodland (adjacent to the new viewpoint & seat) has now been restored to how it looked some twenty years ago with most of the invading scrub and small trees removed. This old meadow once had some of the finest wildflowers in the area including many

orchids, so we are all very much looking forward to seeing what will develop there over the next few years. To finish off the meadow and to restore the impressive views over the Bristol Channel and beyond, a living hedge has also been laid the full length of the field (see Chris & Henry's report on BET's hedge-laying day on page 10).



Badgers Wood's only area of open water is to be found in an old livestock drinking 'pond' that is still in remarkable condition despite its age. Some trees in this area have now been coppiced to allow more sunlight to reach the water which should encourage aquatic plants and animals to take up residence.

Jan Chambers

PS : As Bill mentioned in 'The View from the Chair', our wheelchair-friendly path is now **fully** completed in Badgers Wood together with a convenient car pull-in space off Cheston Combe Road. Whilst the path starts in dense yew woodland, it soon emerges into bright sunlight at a viewpoint that is second to none in the whole of Backwell. There is also a comfy wooden seat at the end to soak up those gorgeous vistas. And don't forget that a similar style path exists in Jubilee Stone Wood starting at a small car park and ending at the stunning location of the historic Jubilee Stone. **So there is now no excuse for not visiting BET's Nature Reserves!**



The Oxford University Press has just made a conservation biology textbook freely available on the internet which may be of interest to BET members. It covers its history, ongoing research and future direction etc. It can be found at:

<http://s3.amazonaws.com/mongabay/conservation-biology-for-all/Conservation-Biology-for-All.pdf>

Hedge-laying with BET



The Sunday hedge-laying event on 6th February 2011 was a fun event, supported by 47 people who each took something away from the day.

My son & I were both complete novices and our ambition was to learn sufficient skills to lay a few metres of our own hedge at home.

Malcolm Dowling, the instructor, explained the purpose was to cut through about two thirds of the trunk and then to fold the 'pleacher' over to form the hedge. The pleacher was then trimmed at an angle to stop the cut stools from rotting. This introduction was followed with some practice work on stakes using a hand axe, billhook and saw.



'Using the tools was amazing, especially the Billhook and Axe'

The group then divided into smaller working parties and were assigned different sections of the fence line to work on. With so many people working at the task, it was amazing how quickly the hedge was laid.

'I feel a sense of pride having been part of it, each time we walk that route'



As the day drew to a close, my son expressed what many of us were privately thinking, 'I thought it was really fun and didn't want to go home'. *Thank you BET for a great day!*

Post Script

Two weeks after the course, having sharpened our axe, my son & I did lay our own hedge and are now looking forward to seeing the result of our work as spring emerges and the sap begins to rise.

Chris & Henry Hoults



BET Bird Box Survey 2011

Members may know that Jubilee Stone Wood and the lower slopes of Badgers Wood have been equipped with numerous nest boxes. Every year BET member and local RSPB representative Trevor Riddle, inspects, refurbishes and advises on the Jubilee Stone set often assisted by RSPB man Bryan Thompson and me. Trustee Michael Marks and I look after the Badgers Wood set.

This is a report of the results of this February's pre-nesting inspection with some interesting results - and not just about birds.

In Jubilee Stone Wood we have two owl boxes and seventeen small bird boxes, three of which are designed for marsh tits and have the entrance hole on the tree side of the box. (This arrangement doesn't seem to deter other tit species though). Of these seventeen boxes, eleven contained evidence of a successful nesting by tits (quite hard to tell which) while another two had been used for roosting or for shelter by mice. One of the successful boxes had, on top of the empty bird's nest, a coconut-shaped mammal nest. Trevor was quite clear that this was not the type of mouse nest he usually comes across, while Ian Chambers thought it was probably not a dormouse nest. Given the mammals that were found during the dormouse survey (pages 4, 5 & 13) it could possibly have been the rare yellow-necked mouse?



Once again the owl boxes showed no sign of owl habitation although one contained two very surprised and lively grey squirrels. We know that owls have nested in Jubilee Stone Wood, although not in our boxes, so this year we will probably re-site.

In Badgers Wood we have one owl box and twelve ordinary boxes. We haven't been able to find one of them (No 4) for two years running. It's somewhere near the garage clubhouse so if you come across it please let me know! Only five of the small boxes were occupied, four tit's nests and one nuthatch. The latter is made up of dry leaves, Mike thought it looked *'like mashed up corn flakes'*.

Once again there was no sign of habitation in the owl box, not even by squirrels.

On a percentage basis, Jubilee Stone Wood is clearly more successful than Badgers Wood but we hope this will change as our management and restoration plans progress.

Bill Charnock

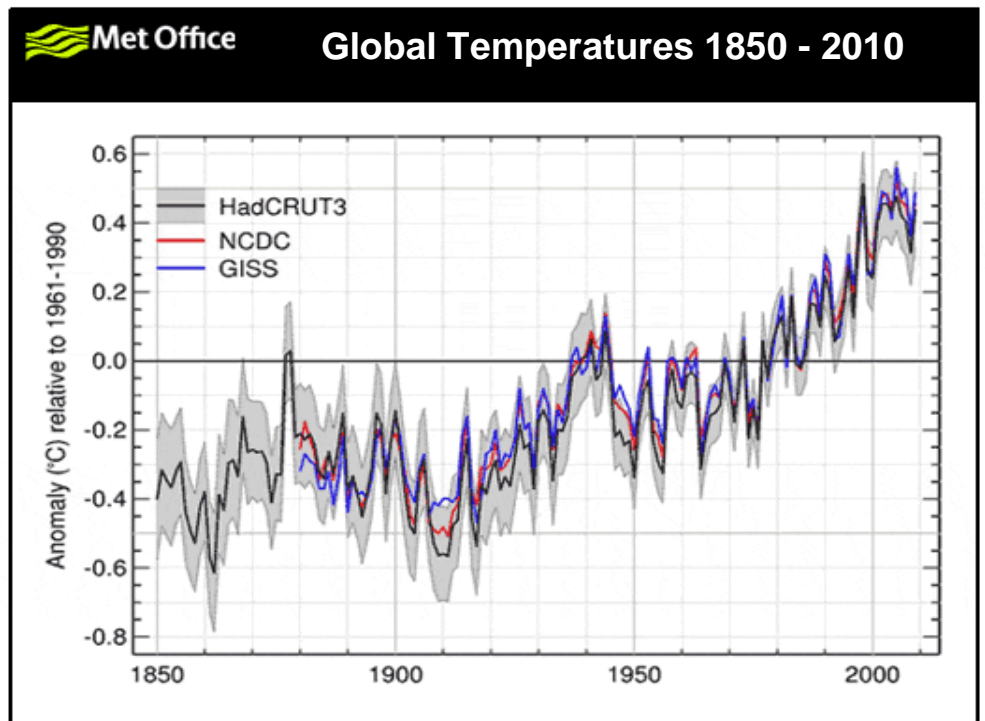


Weather 2010

The weather in 2010 made life quite difficult at times, both for the plants and animals and for the volunteers working hard to improve BET's nature reserves for wildlife. One of the most difficult aspects of the weather to deal with was the lack of rainfall, especially during the first six months of the year. Incredibly, our two ponds lost nearly $2\frac{1}{2}$ tonnes of water through evaporation which required many bucket loads of water to be laboriously carried long distances to at least keep them from drying out completely. In our area, 2010 only had about 72% of our normal annual rainfall which made it one of the driest for many a decade. The drought also seriously curtailed the germination of dormant seeds in our wildflower meadows and we shall probably now have to wait until this coming spring/summer to see what comes up.

2010 was also a cold year for the UK with temperatures in 10 out the 12 months being below our long term average. The harsh winter with local temperatures down to -9°C , not to mention the heavy snowfalls, has probably had quite an impact on a large proportion of our reserve's wildlife and we may well unfortunately see reduced numbers of some species during the coming year.

Naturally on our planet there are always two sides to any story. As the UK was experiencing its exceptionally cold winter with icy blasts of freezing air from the arctic, places such as Siberia and Greenland, for example, were recording record high winter temperatures. In fact globally, 2010 saw the second highest temperatures ever recorded since records began in 1850 and world temperatures are now about 0.75°C higher than they were a century ago (see Met Office graph).



Climate Change



The Earth is warming faster than it has done in the past thousand years, hence the term 'global warming'. But 'climate change' is a better description, as some areas may, in fact, cool. It also describes other effects such as rising sea levels and more extreme weather. Natural sources, such as tree rings and glaciers, as well as human records, show that climate has changed significantly over the past few hundred years. There was a relatively warm period in Europe during the 14th century, followed by a quite sudden change to cooler conditions in the 15th century. This extended into the Little Ice Age of the 17th and 18th centuries, followed by a warming trend that has recently accelerated. The evidence for this recent warming comes largely from direct measurements of temperature. In the more temperate northern latitudes, winters are generally less severe than 30 years ago, with cold snaps generally being short-lived. The last decade was the warmest on record despite a major La Niña event, which temporarily cools the global climate system.



The scientific consensus is that it is *very likely* that most of the warming over at least the last 50 years is a result of greenhouse gas emissions caused by human activity. Before the Industrial Revolution, levels of carbon dioxide (CO₂) in the atmosphere remained pretty steady at about 280 parts per million (ppm), however today, CO₂ levels are rising alarmingly and now stand at 387ppm. Two-thirds of that increase has occurred during the last 50 years and CO₂ levels are now 30% higher than at any time over the past 800,000 years.

New Mammal Discoveries in Jubilee Stone Wood

Anyone walking past the Jubilee Stone over the last few months couldn't fail to notice that we now have moles on our nature reserves - their little mounds of earth are everywhere! Where they came from is a bit of a mystery as is how they survive because the depth of soil on this part of the reserve is not particularly deep. Also, during the annual cleaning out of our dormouse boxes, we discovered that we had both field voles and yellow-necked mice as well, so three more species to add to our ever-lengthening mammal list.



Mounds of earth about 6" high give away the presence of a tunnelling mole. They are rarely seen, only venturing above ground at night to collect nesting materials. Their powerful front paws can move over 200g of soil - twice the mole's weight - in a minute as they construct their underground passages. They are active all year and feed on earthworms, insect larvae and slugs. For most of the year they live solitary lives, only pairing up in spring to mate. The female builds a nest of leaves and grass in which around 3 or 4 young are born between April and June. They usually live for about three years. Head & body length is about 15cm, tail around 1.5cm.

The Field or Short-tailed Vole is one of the most numerous of all British mammals. They can be quite aggressive and noisy creatures, often battling with other field voles in defence of its small territory. It is one of the main food sources of many species of owl, as well as other predators including kestrels, foxes, stoats, weasels and snakes. Grass is the main food of the field vole, which nests under logs and other objects in long grass.

Their head and body are about 10cm in length with a fairly short, 4cm tail.



The Yellow-necked Mouse is slightly bigger than the wood mouse and much rarer. They are also more colourful with a bright orange coat, a whiter underside, and on its chest, a distinctive yellow band from which it gets its name. It can be quite aggressive when cornered and give a nasty bite. It lives in woodlands, hedgerows and even gardens and only comes out at night to feed. It can climb well, searching the tops of trees for nuts or new buds. It often enters outbuildings or houses in winter in search of food and shelter.

Their head and body length is around 10cm with a long tail.





BET's New Website



BET's brand new website is up and running and can be found at :

www.backwellenvironmenttrust.org

On it you can find out everything you ever wanted to know about BET and, most importantly, keep yourself up to date with all the many activities that we are planning over the coming year. The listings of events can be found on the right hand side of the homepage so it couldn't be easier.

Put it into your computer's 'favourites' section right now !



Bluebell Woodlands

The arrival of spring to the British countryside is often heralded by the truly amazing sight of a sea of bluebells shimmering in the early morning light under the woodland canopy. It is a spectacle that we may sometimes take for granted, but it is often the envy of botanists from around the world as the UK has more bluebells than any other country. Bluebells are known as 'oceanic' or 'Atlantic' plants because they are mainly found in areas of western Europe exposed to the moist and mild Atlantic winds. They are widely distributed throughout the British Isles, especially in more wooded, lowland regions. Bluebell bulbs are poisonous in their fresh state but when dried and powdered, they have been used in herbal medicines. The gooey, white substance in the bulbs ('mucilage') has been used as a glue and as a starch substitute for stiffening Elizabethan ruffs. A woodland floor carpeted with bluebells is often a sure sign that the forest floor has remained relatively undisturbed for hundreds of years and is consequently used



as an indicator species to identify ancient woodlands. Somewhat paradoxically though, it is only in woodland that has been coppiced or sympathetically managed that the best displays are to be found. Ancient woodlands are defined as those woods having had a continual tree cover since the 16th century and are usually much richer in wildlife than more recently established woodlands. Characteristic indicator species include the Wood Anemone, Yellow Archangel and Dog's Mercury - all of which can be found on BET's nature reserves. The northern slopes of Badgers Wood are probably the oldest woodlands we have, with many veteran trees well over 350 years old.



Prior's Wood

What's in a Name?

Although 'bluebell' is now a universally accepted name, there has been a surprising amount of controversy in naming the plant over the years. It has been known as 'culverkeys', 'auld mans bells', 'ring o' bells' and 'jacinth' and is still known to many in Scotland as the 'wild hyacinth'. So maybe it's safer to refer to the plant by its current scientific name of *Hyacinthoides non-scripta* to ensure the naturalists amongst us are talking about the same plant? That said, even the scientific name has been subject to change – in fact three times since the 1980s! The current name is derived from Greek mythology, where the Spartan prince Hyacinthus was accidentally killed by the god Apollo. Legend has it that bluebells sprang up where his blood had been spilled and so Apollo inscribed on the flowers the letters 'AIAI' ('alas'). Unfortunately our native bluebells show no trace of these letters so it was named 'non-script' or 'unlettered'.

The best BET bluebell displays can be found in the lower south-western section of Jubilee Stone Wood and the upper woodlands of Badgers Wood. We have been busy sympathetically managing our bluebell woodlands over the last few years, opening up the forest canopy to allow more sunlight to reach the woodland floor and so help our bluebells to thrive and to expand their range. So a visit to BET's bluebells this coming spring is a must - but if you want to see what we could potentially achieve over the coming years, then Avon Wildlife Trust's Prior's Wood Nature Reserve near Portbury, has one of the best displays in the whole of south-west England.

Bluebell Factfile

Size : Height up to 40cms tall, individual flowers up to 2cm long.

Habitat : Oak, beech and ash woodlands, hazel coppice and hedgerows. Prefers moist acidic soils.

Flowers : Up to 16 (insect pollinated) purple-blue flowers per stalk. White or pink variants can appear after the plants fifth year of life.

Seeds : Up to 100 rounded, charcoal-black seeds are produced by each plant. Around 2mm in diameter and housed in 15mm wide paper-like capsules, the seeds germinate in the autumn.

BET's Winter Walk

With a few days to go to the walk, the weather forecast for our proposed Sunday afternoon ramble was looking decidedly dodgy. However, the day dawned fine, and seventeen hardy

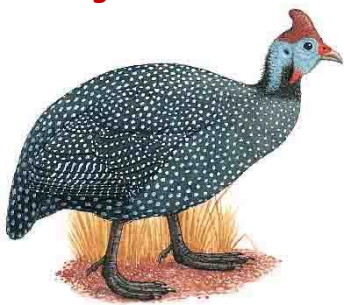


walkers with three excited dogs in tow, all met up with scarcely disguised nervous anticipation. Our two illustrious leaders, Amanda and Caroline, gave us a team briefing warning of the muddy hardships to come but, as we clearly looked like a hardy bunch, decided we were up to the challenge. So off we set, wandering peacefully through a beautiful

green landscape with the first signs of spring all around us. However, a mile or so into the walk, we realised that something was definitely wrong. Along the way we had inadvertently picked up a cheeky stow-a-way as our dog count had mysteriously risen to four. So Carrie kindly headed back into the woodlands in the direction of some forlorn distant calling, to re-unite said dog with said owner. All present and correct again, off we trot over open fields to come across one of the best sights of spring - young lambs frolicking in the meadows.



Turning down a track, we suddenly get harassed by a gaggle of guinea fowl. A tense stand-off ensued but after a swift assessment by the birds of the resolve of the BET ramblers, they very sensibly turned tail and ran. On through a farmyard with the first few blobs of frog spawn floating in the pond. And then there it was. Most of us had been trying to put the dreaded fear of the unavoidable muddy section out of our minds, but it was here now and so we faced it bravely with



true BET resolve. It wasn't pretty and it has to be said that a few of our number came perilously close to a chilly mud bath, but Amanda & Caroline talked us safely through. Another mile further on and we're getting close to home ground as we overlook the impressive Coles Quarry and Welsh hills at the top of Badgers Wood. Diving into BET's second nature reserve, we all stop to admire the views (and take a quick breather) from the new viewpoint and then stand aghast at the stunning quality of our newly-laid hedge. Feeling refreshed, we all head off downhill through the slowly awakening woodland, passing the BET clubhouse on the way and then, all too soon, reaching the (relative) civilisation of Church Town. Then suddenly, and out of nowhere, the lure of tea completely overwhelmed us so we quickly said farewell to all our fellow walkers and illustrious leaders and headed home to put our feet up and savour yet another cracking BET walk!

