



#### A Very Warm Welcome to our Latest Spring Bulletin



As ever, the BET volunteers have been working extremely hard over the autumn and winter months with our two main tasks being the completion of the annual scything of our fabulous wildflower meadows and coppicing ash trees with advanced ash dieback disease.



## Ash Dieback Disease

5 adly, ash dieback disease is continuing to take its toll on many of the ash trees on our reserves as well as over the rest of the country. However, with the removal of the most heavily

infected trees overhanging houses, roads and footpaths during the last two winters, this year has seen a significant reduction in the number of trees scheduled for felling. In fact, we have only required the services of our tree surgeon for just one day this winter, far less than the two to three weeks required during the onset of the disease in 2021. In line with the current scientific advice, we are only removing ash trees within striking distance of roads and footpaths when they lose 50% or more of their leaf canopy, the consensus being that at this advanced stage of decline, there is no realistic hope of recovery.



During the first season of felling in 2021/22, approximately 7% of the ash trees removed were showing evidence of

internal fungal decay. The second season (2022/23) saw that figure rise to around 25% and this winter the percentage has been well over 50%. This hidden decay can present a significant danger to personnel when trees are being felled, as a weakness in the timber can result in the tree behaving unexpectedly during the felling process. Consequently, both our volunteers and tree surgeon are continually on the lookout for any unusual behaviour when cutting into the timber and we're pleased to report there have been no health and safety incidents over the three years of felling.



With the additional light now reaching the woodland floor, our woodlands are recovering very rapidly with all other tree species putting on a surge of growth to take full advantage of the extra sunlight.

As we have had to remove quite a number of diseased ash trees from our reserves this year, our partnership with Backwell Logs has been, once again, very useful to us with our volunteers moving the timber to a suitable road-side location for collection.



## BET Bat Survey



In the late summer, BET was invited to take part in the 2023 'Citizen Science' North Somerset Bat Survey run by North Somerset Council and the University of Bath with the hope of recording the individual species of bat that use or fly over our reserves.

All 17 breeding species of British bat play a very important role in the environment and are able to consume large numbers of insects in a single night of feeding. In the UK, some bats are defined as 'indicator species' because changes to these bat populations can indicate either positive or negative changes are happening in their environment. Bats are legally protected under both national and international legislation and in these times of increasing development, they must be taken into account before any large-scale building work commences.

An automated sound recorder was set up on the edge of Jubilee Stone Wood to capture the ultrasonic sounds made by passing/feeding bats over six nights. The recordings were then uploaded to a computer sound analyser to identify the individual species.





Our allocated survey slot was in mid-October, which is actually very close to when bats go into hibernation for the winter, so it's fair to say our expectations were not that high. However, we were amazed to have a total of 661 individual recordings with up to nine species of bat recorded, many of which were new species for BET. The results show that the BET reserves and surrounding farmland are offering good feeding opportunities for many species of bat and we're hoping to be able to continue monitoring our bat populations during 2024 and beyond.

# Reserve Report

Our volunteers have once again been very busy on our nature reserves during the last six months completing the hand scything our two acres of wildflower meadows and removing some of the smaller ash trees close to the footpaths with advanced ash dieback disease. We've also been cutting back vegetation along our network of footpaths, replacing steps and creating hedges using cut materials.

So just what have those hard-working BET volunteers been up to over the past six months?

#### Wildflower Meadow Scything

Every year, starting in the early autumn, BET's wildflower meadows are cut by hand by our volunteers, using traditional Austrian scythes. This year the whole 1.9 acres of restored grassland

were cut on Monday mornings in just 3½ months.

#### Jubilee Stone Hedging

After the well-used path to the Jubilee Stone was closed by the landowner of the adjacent field in 2021, a high wooden barricade was subsequently put up to deter walkers where the kissing gate used to be. This barricade was then later coated with



a very sticky, black anti-climb paint as a further deterrent. At the time of writing, the village's



as a public right of way by North Somerset Council was still in the process of consideration. However, in the meantime, the unsightly barricade has now been partially covered up by a hedge on the Jubilee Stone side in an attempt to improve the visual aspect of the area whilst the footpath application is progressing.

#### Ash Tree Coppicing & Pollarding

Over the winter months, our volunteers and BET's tree surgeon have continued to coppice or pollard ash trees in an advanced state of decline within striking distance of our footpaths. The excess timber is, as in previous years, being used to offset the costs of the work. Whilst we've found natural tree regeneration occurs very rapidly with the extra light reaching the woodland floor, we have supplemented this



by planting 70 locally-sourced English oak saplings to increase the diversity of the woodlands.

Inevitably, the felling process results in a considerable amount of timber being produced. Whilst we shall be leaving some logs on the reserves to rot down naturally, it wouldn't be feasible, safe or desirable to retain it all. Our partnership with Backwell Logs means that we have an outlet for the



wood, but getting it to a point close to the road where it can be easily collected has, once again, proven to be a considerable challenge. This year, due to the smaller amount of material to be moved, we decided to move everything by volunteer power alone in combination with BET's trusty log mover, 'Archie'.





#### Frog Spawn

The pond (actually an old animal watering station) just off The Fern Way in Badgers Wood had always struggled due to the lack of sunlight in its sheltered location deep in the woodland on a north facing slope. However, one silver lining of ash dieback disease is that additional light is now reaching the woodland floor. This has resulted in a healthier pond which has led to



numerous frogs returning after many years of absence and a considerable amount of frogspawn being laid this year.

#### Wall Lizards

Our very rare Wall Lizards were last spotted in mid-October last year and I'm very pleased to say that our first siting of 2024 was recorded in mid-March.



The Wall lizard is a diurnal animal and a lover of strong sunshine. It has only the loosest concept

of hibernation and it's not unusual to see them basking on bright, sunny days even in the winter months. As it seems our colony has successfully made it through the winter, let's hope they continue to thrive and increase in numbers over the coming year.

#### **Badger Setts**



Whilst working in the woodland over the winter period, we noticed that an old badger sett appeared to be in the process of being newly excavated as a



considerable amount of fresh soil had been removed to the entrances. So Roger, one of the regular BET volunteers, set up an infra-red motion detector camera close by one night and managed to capture some amazing video footage of the sett being used once again by a group of badgers.



### BET's Badgers

For thousands of years, and long before Britain became an island, badgers have been continually rooting around in the vegetation of our woodlands and meadows. The European Badger is a social, burrowing mammal which lives on a wide variety of plant and animal food. Although ferocious when provoked, the badger is generally a peaceful creature and has even been known to share its burrows with other species such as rabbits.



If you are lucky enough to see one of these extraordinary nocturnal mammals in the daytime, it will become immediately apparent that they have been designed for digging with their wedge-shaped appearance and short, powerful legs. The badger's main digging abilities are employed in creating a home for itself and its offspring by the construction of a large underground burrow system known as a **sett**. In constructing a sett, badgers will first loosen the earth with rapid strokes of their forelimbs and then use their claws as rakes to winkle out any stones. The loose earth collects underneath their body, but by arching its back it is able to bring its hind legs forward to sweep the



earth backwards. When enough soil has collected behind it, it moves backwards using its behind as a bulldozer until it reaches the entrance - when the soil is unceremoniously ejected by a series of aggressive kicks.

Badger setts can often be traced back many years as they can be handed down from generation to generation. In most setts, badgers tend to use a single chamber for breeding and separate ones for sleeping. Out of necessity, they also enlarge the tunnels every few metres to form passing places. Tunnels can go as deep as 4 metres but most are less than 1 metre underground, often

following the contours of the surface. Ancient setts can get extremely large; one well-established one in the Cotswolds had 12 entrances with a maze of tunnels and chambers totalling 310 metres long. From the length and diameter of the tunnels it was estimated that over the years, the badgers had excavated 25 tonnes of soil!

Jubilee Stone Wood has a large active badger sett hidden deep in the woodland, its many entrances made especially noticeable by the large mounds of excavated earth piled up outside. However, many badgers from neighbouring setts also regularly use both of BET's nature reserves for



foraging; look out for their well-worn paths and boundary latrines when walking in the woodlands.

The diet of Badgers can be quite variable but earthworms are by far their most important source of protein. They will also eat insects, small mammals, eggs, carrion, cereals, bulbs, fruit and your



garden vegetables - if you let them! Badger cubs are born in the first few weeks of February in our part of the world and initially weigh in at around 100grams and are about 12cms long. For the first five weeks or so, they are blind but are born with the badgers' characteristic head stripes. The cubs are weaned in summer and start to play and feed above ground, so summer is probably your best chance of observing them. If you aren't lucky enough to see a badger in the wild, keep a sharp eye out for their tracks in soft mud, or better still if we get another harsh winter, their paw prints can be clearly seen in the snow.

It is thought that a badger's stripes are a warning colouration which would lead any potential predator's gaze firmly in the direction of its very powerful jaws. Consequently, badgers have few natural predators,

other than man. The stripes are also easily seen at night when badgers are most active which may help to keep badgers from other setts at a distance as they can be very territorial.

Did you know Badgers Wood was so named by BET because prior to the excavation of Coles Quarry, there existed a valley called 'Badgers Combe'?

## Badgers Wood Fairy Rings

Badgers Wood has numerous examples of Fairy Rings, some well-hidden in the deep woodland and some easier to find in the wildflower meadows. They are naturally occurring circles made up of various species of fungi, growing out of the ground in a circular shape. The largest in Badgers Wood



has a diameter of 9 metres and is estimated to be between 40 and 60 years old. However, a fairy ring in France has a diameter of 600 meters and is thought to be at least 700 years old. Our rings are usually comprised of various varieties of funnel fungi which are typically cream to light brown in colour and can produce caps up to 10 centimetres across.

Fairy rings are caused by an individual fungus growing underground. The fungus sprouts lots of small

threads called mycelium in a circular shape. A year later, the fungi pop up out of the ground at the edge of the circle, starting off the fairy ring. The circle will naturally start off small in size, getting larger as it gets older.

Fairy rings are most commonly found in woodland and grassy areas. The best time of year to see



them is in late summer to early autumn and they are more likely to appear after a spell of wet weather. Different countries across Europe have their own folklore tales about fairy rings. In English and Celtic folklore, fairy rings were caused by fairies or elves dancing in a circle. It was said that if humans joined in the dance they would be punished by the fairies and made to dance in the ring until they passed out from exhaustion.

In German folklore, things took a more sinister turn as fairy rings were actually known as witches' rings. It was believed they were the place where witches would dance on Walpurgis Night, a spring celebration taking place exactly six months before Halloween.

In Austrian mythology, dragons were to blame for the appearance of fairy rings. It was said they burned them into the forest floor with their fiery tails.

Whatever you believe about fairy rings, they are definitely an exciting discovery if you ever stumble upon one whilst walking on our reserves.



### YACWAG Winter Bird Survey

For many years now, YACWAG (Yatton and Congresbury Wildlife Action Group) has been organising a Christmas bird survey, recording all the birds coming into their members' gardens over the festive period. This year they continued the expansion of their survey into the Backwell area by once again enlisting the help of BET members.



Thanks to the 23 members who took part, several commented on the unfavourable weather conditions and a decline in birds visiting their gardens generally. There isn't much doubt that colder Christmas times used to bring more birds into urban and suburban areas but in a milder climate, birds are less dependent on garden feeders.



### The Top Ten Garden Birds





Participants saw 34 species in their gardens and 6 more flying over, pretty similar to last year. A



single Grey Wagtail was probably the most unusual visitor spotted. Goldfinches were the most numerous garden bird with 87 seen, but perhaps most notable were the 50 Greenfinches. They have made a dramatic and welcome recovery from the parasitic disease trichomoniasis that affected them, and then subsequently infected Chaffinches, and may now be present in Goldfinches. Fortunately, it appears that Chaffinches are also beginning to recover.

Trevor Riddle

NAILSEA WALKS & RUNS 2024 (organised by Rotary Nailsea & Backwell) will take place on Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> June. If that date doesn't suit, you can do it anytime up to the end of July.

There are three routes to choose from – 5km, 10km and 20km. The day is a great opportunity for people to get together, enjoy the local countryside and raise money for deserving causes.

Full details, registration and sponsorship forms cam be found on the Rotary website:

https://bit.ly/nailseawalks24

## BET Bird Box Surveys

very winter, a dedicated group of BET volunteers survey the considerable number of bird boxes

in our woodlands, recording usage and any other observations. At the same time, the opportunity is taken to clean out any old nesting material from boxes. Removing the old nest is an essential task as it removes any possible parasites and/or fungal spores which could have a detrimental effect on the chicks of the coming season. When our wooden nest boxes finally become irreparable, we are replacing them with 'woodcrete' boxes made with a mixture of concrete and woodchip. Whilst these boxes are typically twice the price of the wooden boxes, they could last for up to 50 years and also offer better insulation for the nesting birds, protecting them from the extremes of hot and cold.



The 2023 the bird nest survey recorded 26 bird nests, 4 dormouse nests and 7 boxes containing



moss but with no proper nest structure. Out of the 58 boxes surveyed, 63% of them had occupied which been is relatively consistent with the results of previous years. will be interesting to see what impact ash dieback disease will have on our nesting birds. Whilst the reduction of ash tree foliage in the short term may prove a disadvantage, the increase in other tree species

and scrub growth over the medium term will, almost certainly, prove to be advantageous.

