

Backwell Environment Trust

Bulletin 31 - Autumn 2015

www.backwellenvironmenttrust.org



A very warm welcome to our latest autumn bulletin

Well, 2015 has been quite a year for BET! In the summer we celebrated our 10 year anniversary in style with a family wildlife celebration and a two day 'BioBlitz' when the BET reserves' flora and fauna were recorded in great detail by a whole host of wildlife experts. The BET volunteers have been busy improving our path surfaces, re-building old dry stone walls, creating woodland glades as well as finding the time to hand scythe around two acres of wildflower meadows!

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

BET AGM
New Species
Social Media & Photos

Woodland Report
BET Wildlife Event
Backwell Woodlands



Well, it's that time of year again when BET holds its Annual General Meeting, this time on **November 28th, at 2pm in the Parish Hall**. We hope you will be able to come along if you possibly can as we need at least 10% of our membership to be present to make the AGM 'quorate'.

Also, if you would like to stand for election as a BET trustee, then please let me know
(Ian Chambers, 463315, ianann24@yahoo.co.uk).

BET Annual General Meeting

Saturday November 28th 2015

Backwell Parish Hall

Your trustees will be on hand to serve refreshments and to answer any questions you may have about BET and its activities past, present or future.

The AGM will start at 2pm, and after the short official business there will be a break for tea, coffee and cakes.

After tea, there will be an illustrated talk by local naturalist Gill Brown on Otters.



Agenda



- ❖ Minutes of the AGM held on November 22nd 2014
- ❖ Treasurer's Report
- ❖ Woodland Report
- ❖ Any other business

The minutes of our last AGM and the annual accounts will be available at the meeting.

Volunteer Activity Mornings - on **EVERY MONDAY** and the **FOURTH SATURDAY** of every month starting at 10 am on both days and continuing for about 2 hours - or as long as your energy lasts!

The tasks will change as the year progresses and can vary according to your strength and interests. Please wear stout footwear and suitable old clothes.

We **always** break at about 11am for large amounts of chat, tea/coffee and biscuits.

Meet close to the lower entrance to Badgers Wood outside the Cabin just before 10am, or telephone in advance to find out where we'll be working (01275 463315).

Woodland Report

This year's summer was a tale of two halves. June to mid July was fairly dry, warm and sunny which then turned somewhat wetter for the rest of July and August, but somehow this combination seemed to suit our wildflower meadows very well and I think that this year they have looked the best they ever have.



Jubilee Stone & Badgers Wood Nature Reserves

As you know, BET celebrated its 10 year anniversary this year in June when we had two very busy days surveying BET's reserves by a fabulous and diverse group of wildlife experts. I'm pleased to report that they were all very impressed with what had been achieved in so short a time and some have made repeat visits to fully document the number of plant species we have. To date, we have recorded **283** species of plants on our two reserves (see BET's website & click 'nature & wildlife' for the full list) including some unusual and rare ones. To put this amazing figure into perspective, I recently visited an Avon Wildlife Trust reserve in the Gordano Valley which is a site of special scientific interest (SSSI) and they were very proud to report that they had around 150 species, so it just goes to show how special BET's nature reserves are.



Muddy Paths!

After a fairly wet winter, the paths on BET's reserves became very muddy in places, making walking in some areas quite tricky at times. So this year we had around two tonnes of woodchip delivered - very kindly donated free of charge by tree surgeon Julian Batt - which was put down over the mud to stabilise the surface and which has improved things a lot.



Dry Stone Walling

One of the BET volunteers' larger construction projects this springtime was the restoration of a dry stone wall at the upper entrance to Jubilee Stone Wood. The wall had laid derelict since BET purchased the woodlands 10 years ago and so it was decided to restore it to improve the look of the entrance to the car park as well as being a valuable habitat to all manner of creatures. The restoration work took around six Monday mornings to complete and although dry stone walling is a lot more tricky than it looks, I think you will agree that the volunteers did an amazing job.





Pond Cleaning

The two ponds in Jubilee Stone Wood, and the clearing surrounding them, were created in the winter of 2007/8 and they have been very successful so far. This year however, it was noticed that the number of species living in the ponds was starting to decline, so at the end of the summer, the ponds were cleared of the considerable amount of leaf litter and debris that had accumulated in them over the past eight years. Also during hot summers, the smaller of the two ponds has often struggled to hold its water due to a high evaporation rate, so we are proposing to create a larger, more sustainable pond close by (see 'proposed winter work').

Scything the Meadows

Every year, at the end of the summer, BET's wildflower meadows are cut by our volunteers, using traditional hand scythes. In the short term, the annual grass cut removes invading brambles and tree seedlings which would quickly swamp the grassland if left unchecked. Over the longer term, the removal of the cut material from the meadows will slowly reduce the soil's fertility which is good news for wildflowers because they can survive quite happily, whilst the less welcome plants often struggle to do so. This year we have purchased three more Austrian scythes to keep up with our ever-growing happy band of volunteers.

Proposed Winter Work

One of the great advantages for BET of holding our 10 year anniversary BioBlitz this year was having so many wildlife experts looking in great detail at our nature reserves and making suggestions where we could improve things still further. All their suggestions have been approved by the BET Trustees and work will start later on this year. As ever, with any restoration work, initially it may look a bit 'raw' until the spring & summer growth starts the transformation process - so please be patient! All the planned works this season will be in Jubilee Stone Wood.

Extend the Coupe Meadow, Top & Bottom

The lower part of the meadow is very unusual as the soil is acidic in nature (pH 5.5) which has given rise to a wide range of acid loving plants, heather being the most obvious. We're going to expand this area to meet up with the existing glade some 20m down the hill. The top of the meadow is also very special primarily due to its very poor soil. We plan to extend this section up to the Jubilee Stone which will also have the advantage of restoring the fabulous views from the stone.

Create Glades in the Lower Woodland

The lowest part of Jubilee Stone Wood is almost certainly semi-natural ancient woodland due to the mix of ground flora to be found there. We're proposing to create some more small glades by removing primarily Turkey Oaks and Sycamore to reduce the heavy shading.

Re-Coppice the Ponds & Create a New Pond

The ponds and their surrounding coppice were created in 2007 but they are now just starting to get too much shade. We're proposing to re-coppice the glade, create a third pond and convert the smallest pond to a boggy area. Two more pond water storage containers (used to top up the ponds in hot weather) have recently been constructed which has resulted in an increase in our water storage capacity from the current 1200 litres to a more generous 2500 litres.

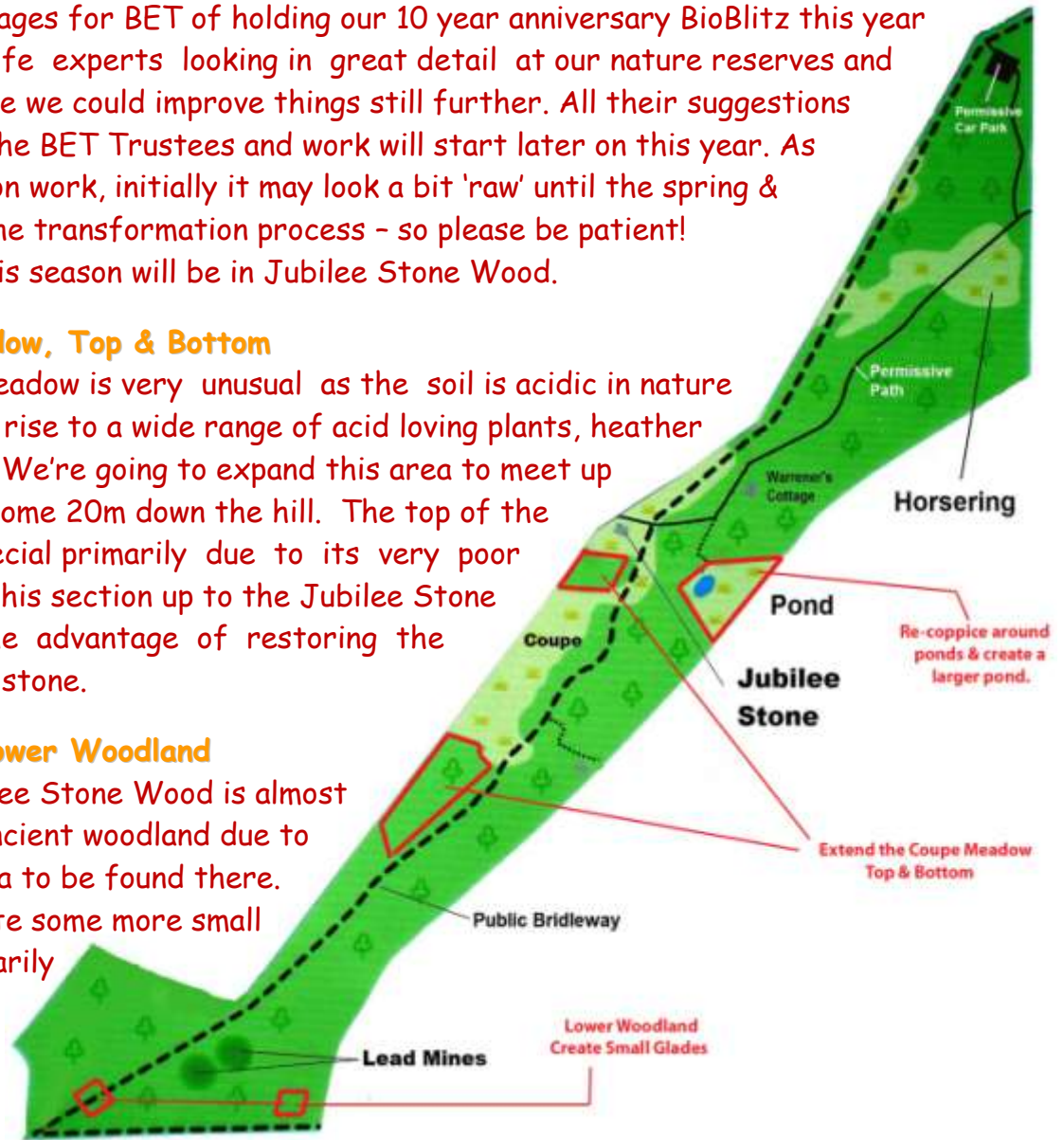
Volunteer Hours

Every year, the BET volunteers freely put in a staggering amount of time, both in the day to day running of the trust, as well as the huge amount of practical work we do on our reserves. Over the last twelve months, the fantastic figure of **1723 volunteer hours** were recorded - a 5% increase over last year - so, once again, a BIG BET thank you to you all.

Ian Chambers



And finally....BET has a thriving volunteer group that meets every Monday and the fourth Saturday morning of each month. Absolutely no experience is necessary and it's great fun, so why not come along and give it a try?



Some of the New Species Seen on the Reserves this Year.

Nettle-Leaved Bellflower

The toothed, heart-shaped leaves, similar to those of stinging nettles give this superb bellflower its name. The lower leaves are on long stalks, whilst the upper leaves are smaller and have short stalks.

The large (30-40mm) bell-shaped, blue/purple flowers stay on the plant from mid to late summer.

Size : 50 - 100cm

Flowering season : July to September

Habitat : Woodland clearings

Status : Uncommon



Flea Sedge

The small, perennial Flea Sedge is found in Wales, Scotland and Ireland but is less common in central and southern England. Flea sedges prefer alkaline soils in boggy ground. It also grows in wet moorlands, wet rock ledges and damp, unimproved meadows. The flowers resemble fleas attached to its stem, hence its name. The plants are wind pollinated and the ripe seeds spring off the plant when disturbed.

Size : 15cm

Flowering season : May

Status : Uncommon



Dark Green Fritillary Butterfly

The Dark Green Fritillary gets its name from the green background on the underside of its hind wings. This fast-flying butterfly is best spotted in open, sunny wildflower meadows.

Thistles are a favourite source of nectar.

Their eggs are laid on violet leaves and the chrysalis develops at the base of the plant.

Wingspan : 60mm

Flight : July to August

Status : Uncommon



BET Wildlife Family Event 5/6th June

After several months of planning, BET hosted a most successful two-day wildlife event in our woodland reserves. The event had been well publicised via flyers, local newspapers and social media. The lovely weather helped to make sure we had good attendance from existing members as well as attracting new families and visitors.

We were also very fortunate to have the support of a team of brilliant nature experts who shared their knowledge in such an enthusiastic and informative way. We had over 200 visitors and everyone went away buzzing with excitement at what they had seen and learned! You can read a very personal account by one of our volunteers in the next article.



The event started on the Friday and over 100 schoolchildren from Backwell Junior School came for walks, pond-dipping and bug-hunting. The experts really brought the woodlands to life for the youngsters.



On the Saturday, over 100 more people of all ages came for a programme of nature walks, bird-spotting, more bug-hunting, pond-dipping, etc, plus children's activities (colouring, badge-making, etc) and rural crafts, notably green woodwork and pole-lathe turning.

Other attractions included a Barn Owl, a Tawny Owl, a Kestrel and four chicks (which everybody loved) plus musicians and displays about local wildlife.

One aim of the event had been to celebrate BET's tenth anniversary - and this was achieved with a lot of tea and cakes, including two specially-made birthday cakes.

Underpinning the event was a Bioblitz with the nature experts identifying over 400 different species (plants, mammals, invertebrates) on the Backwell site, ranging from the huge (oak trees) to the impressive (peregrine falcons, buzzards) to the very small and quite unusual (24-spot ladybird, 'pseudo scorpion' and flea sedge).

We would like to thank all the experts and helpers over the two days, plus the Backwell Scouts for the loan of the marquees and other equipment.

Didn't We Have a Lovely Time....

I have just had the most brilliant couple of days at the BET 10th year anniversary celebrations. My sister Biz travelled up especially from London. Friday was for the school children predominantly, although adults could help. Various nature specialists had been invited to interact with the 100 or so children who came along.

They covered, pond dipping, flora, wild flowers, trees, insects and butterflies, bug hunting, small mammals, birds, etc. We joined in with the small mammals group but even before our group set out, a cucumber spider came down nearby, so we all looked interestingly at it.

The nature specialist, Gill Brown, showed plaster footprint moulds of hedgehog,



fox, vole, dormouse, etc. She pointed out marks on trees made by squirrels, and made everything so interesting. Gill showed them the dormouse boxes dotted around the woods, and asked many other things. We kept with the same group, when they changed to pond dipping with nature specialist, Andrew Town. That was really good, as we learnt the difference between a male and female newt. We saw a ramshorn snail, as well as the expected water boatmen, tadpoles, etc.

After lunch, we joined a group with flowers and trees. We saw a Wych Elm, and learnt how to identify a Hazel leaf, we debated about Spindle, as it usually has pink or orange flowers, but this tree had tiny white flowers.

There were so many other things to see. We watched a bit of the insect group. They seemed to be having great fun with their big white insect catchers and screamed when one caught a type of wasp by accident. Anyhow . . . all good stuff. We were learning as we went, and the children loved it.

Friday evening, we went on the Bat walk. We got there for 9:30 p.m. but it was too light, so we waited. We were all given frequency detector monitors . . . that was good fun. Bats were detected but we couldn't see them. Then one detector



registered loudly and a bat zoomed right over our heads. I saw it, but sadly, Biz was looking at her monitor and missed it. Once again, we picked up loads of info on them and how to find them.

Saturday we were up at the crack of dawn, in time for the bird walk. That was the most wonderful experience !!!! It was led by Chris Sperring, MBE. He was amazing. So down to earth and descriptive and 'on our level'. He started off the walk by expressing how much he loved . . . Brambles! Asked



us why, and obvious answers were given. He explained that they were a good source of food with the insects on the flowers first, then the berries later. He then proceeded to hurt himself, by plunging his bare arm into the heart of tangled brambles . . . saying OW! He did it to demonstrate that little birds make their nests inside bramble bushes, for a good source of nearby food, but mainly to keep predators like Magpies, or anything else away, because they scratch themselves and give up. When we humans cut down the brambles, we are taking this safe haven away from the smaller birds, so they have to find a more vulnerable place.



That was all before the walk started! As we got going, we stopped to listen to a Wren, a Song Thrush, a Goldcrest, and a Chaffinch. He whistled a few notes, and the Song Thrush mimicked it back and repeated it. A Mistle Thrush would have had a single note or at least, not a repeat. (I could be getting this a little wrong, as we were on information overload through the day).



As we moved along, Chris pointed out a static robin calling strongly, then a static Blackbird doing the same. He pointed to one, then the other . . . one then the other . . . then said, when you hear a static Robin and static Blackbird alarm calling, there is probably a Tawny Owl nesting nearby. We crossed over the road from one section of the wood to the other . . . stopped and listened to the two birds still calling . . . then . . . as if by magic . . . out flew the Tawny Owl for all of us to see! Fantastic. That was the height of all our experiences !!!

Loads more birds were heard and explained in such knowledgeable detail. Then Chris talked about the Long-tailed Tits. He had heard them, then some of us saw them. Biz did but I didn't, but I could hear them. He said if you follow a flock of Long-tailed Tits, they are such good hunters that



other small birds follow them around. Chris went into great detail about Tree Creepers. At first I thought he meant vegetation, then realised he WAS talking about the birds. Fortunately, we had Pete, another "experienced on birds" gent at the back of the group, who helped explain things again for us. A Blackcap featured a few times on the walk. And so it went on . . . brilliant! Of course, we forgot most of it soon after, but writing this, I see I have remembered lots.

When we got back to base, where two Scout's marquees had been put up in a place they call, The Horse-ring, my husband, Ted and another

Bodger Peter, had set up their wonderful home-made pole lathes, and Peter's home-made wood shaving bench or 'shavehorse'. They were to demonstrate and help the visitors work on them. What a great success that was. We went home to have an early quick lunch and to collect Jo, my Mum. When we returned, Biz, Jo, and I, went on a tree walk. Exceptionally good gent Richard led that one. He complimented BET on their management of the woods,

and emphasized the need to remove the Turkey Oaks. We learnt so much on that walk too.

Small mammal traps had been set on the Friday night by Gill, and Pringles tubes were rigged up with peanut butter in the centre, and black paint mixed

with cooking oil was painted in two lines across white paper . . . so when a little mammal walked over it to get the food, it stepped in the paint, and then left footprints on the white paper. Such a simple idea that worked and there were lots of prints in the morning.

The rest of the afternoon was just as actioned-packed. I took over the activities for the children when Tabi had to leave. Live music by a twosome, complimented the festivities. Teas, coffees, and of course lots of cake were also appreciated.

Two wonderful celebration cakes had been made, and at the appropriate time, speeches were made and the cakes were cut. Then, apart from all the clearing up . . . it was all over.

Such a successful event and SO enjoyable.



By Jas . . . one of the BET volunteers



Social Media and Photos

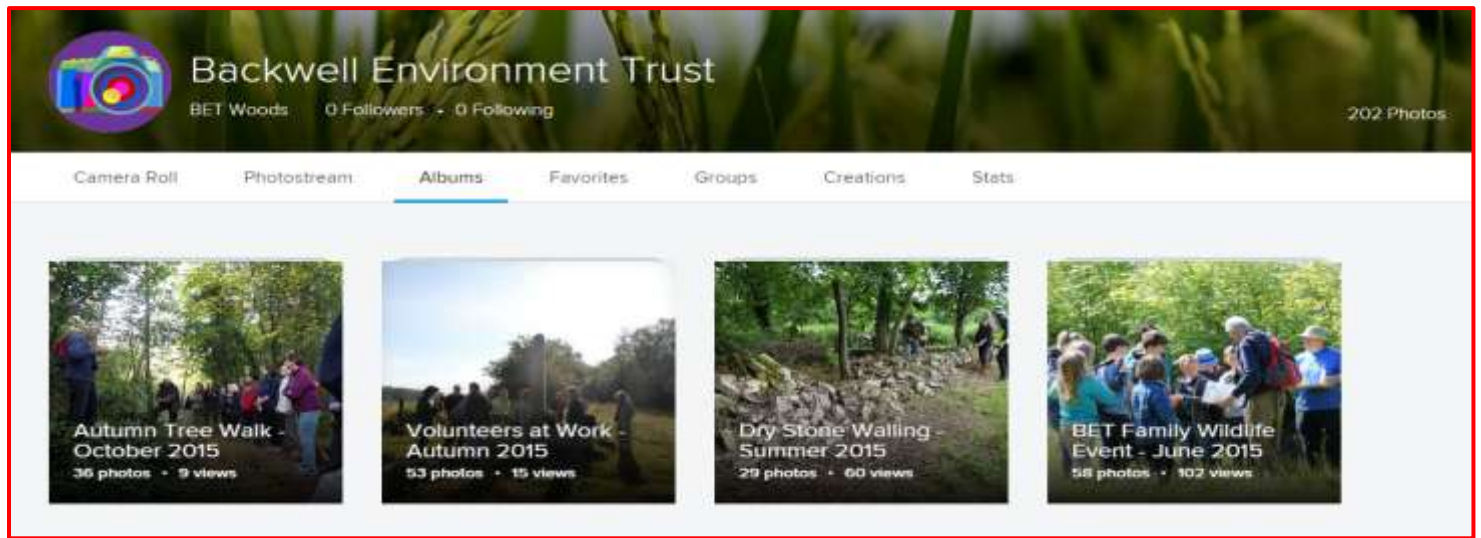


BET is on Facebook and has been seen by over 100 people. If you are into social media please help to publicise BET by Liking us and Sharing our page with family and friends.

We have made an effort to capture BET's 10th year in

photos and share them on our website. <http://www.backwellenvironmenttrust.org/>

Most of the photos in this bulletin, and many more, can be viewed online. Click on the Photo Gallery link on the left hand side of our website home page and you will be taken to our albums on Flickr where you can view and share the original full size photos of our lovely reserves and volunteers.



The Backwell Woodlands

I have been privileged to lead two walks in the two woodlands lying on either side of Backwell Coombe which are broadly similar to a number of deep dry coombes along the Backwell ridge. They contain a high proportion of the native deciduous tree species. In the past the woods would have been managed for firewood and timber, and the presence in Jubilee Stone Wood of Wood Anemone suggests that this area is ancient woodland which will have been managed in the past by coppicing to feed its Limekiln. The Badgers Wood is a steep north facing slope, deeply shaded, thus probably never managed for timber production, but it harbours a veteran Oak, and old Yews and an old Small-leaved Lime.



The overwhelming majority of the trees are less than fifty years old, and these are mostly Ash, Field Maple, Yew and Wych Elm with a few Common Whitebeams, Hazel, and a lot of young Hollies and Hawthorns. There are fewer Sycamore than might have been expected. They are virtually free from Laurel, Holm Oak, Turkey Oak and Norway Maple, which are spreading fast in many woods. But both woods are far more overcrowded and dark that they would have been when traditionally managed and although it would shock many members of the public to hear

it, they actually need fewer trees at wider spacing to let more light in, which would give woodland plants and the insects and birds that depend on them, more opportunity to flourish. Forest trees need to be



twenty metres apart if they are not to grow very tall and thin, and hence very liable to be destroyed by a storm. It is interesting that there is no sign of the destruction caused by the Burns Day storm in 1990, which suggests that the

woods are sheltered, but also the woods had far fewer trees twenty five years ago.

The objective of modern management as a nature reserve must be to maximise biodiversity by having as wide a variety of habitats as circumstances permit. I found 24 tree species, five of



them imported, 12 shrub species, seven of them imported, and 100 plant species, of which 35 were among the commonest 20% of all plants in the region. Now there is nothing wrong with common plants, but first class woodland habitat has a suite of specialist plants that may well need help to establish and spread, and getting the balance right is difficult but important.



One key to look for is the nature of natural regeneration, ie which species are producing saplings and, just as significant for the future, which are not. And controlling saplings is much easier than felling trees!

Richard Bland