

# **Backwell Environment Trust**

## **Bulletin 34 - Spring 2017**

**[www.backwellenvironmenttrust.org](http://www.backwellenvironmenttrust.org)**



### **A very warm welcome to our latest spring bulletin**

As ever, the trusty BET volunteers have been working extremely hard over the autumn and winter seasons beginning with the annual scything of our fabulous wild flower meadows and finishing with the completion of the final phase of the 'Coupe' meadow restoration project.

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

**BET Membership**

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### **It's Membership Renewal Time!**

Well, it's that time of year again when we hope you will consider renewing your BET membership for another 12 months, so with your Bulletin you should receive a 2017/18



membership renewal form. When BET was established way back in 2004, we set the annual membership fee at £5 per person or £10 for a family and I am pleased to say that our subscriptions haven't increased in all that time.



We try to make renewal as easy as possible for you, so if there is no change in your circumstances please write '**No Change**' across the form. But please remember to confirm your gift aid status. If you want to pay by electronic transfer then please identify the payment with your name and again write '**Gift Aid Yes**' or '**Gift Aid No**' in the message space.



You can hand deliver your form to any of three addresses on the form or post it to Andy Smith who is our membership secretary (1 Manor Court, West Town, Backwell, BS48 3BS).



# Membership Renewal



The membership year runs from April 1<sup>st</sup> to March 31<sup>st</sup> and renewals for 2017/18 are now due. We really hope you will complete and return the enclosed form.

Membership subscriptions and donations are BET's only source of income



- we do not receive annual grants.



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.



## Thank you for your continued support



**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 change as the year progresses but usually include country crafts such as hedgelaying, meadow scything & dry stone walling.

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

The arrival of autumn sees the BET volunteers starting the long process of hand scything our fabulous wildflower meadows. As we have restored some two acres now, this is no mean task and it usually takes us to the end of the year to complete the cutting (when we all secretly breathe a huge sigh of relief!). With the coming of the New Year, our main task was the completion of the Coupe Meadow restoration project which we first started way back in 2006. Restoring this final section of grassland came with the added advantage of finally opening up the view from the Jubilee Stone which has been obscured by scrub for the past 50 years.



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

## Scything the Wildflower Meadows

Every year, starting in the early autumn, BET's wildflower meadows are cut by hand by our volunteers, using traditional scythes. There's no denying it's a big task, but without this annual hay cut, our meadows would inevitably decline and would ultimately be lost in a few short years. Over time, we've got pretty good at scything and we managed to complete the last meadow cut just before Christmas.

## Turkey Oak Thinning



Turkey oak (*Quercus cerris*) is a deciduous broadleaf tree found in our woodlands which is native to south-eastern Europe and Asia Minor. It was introduced to the UK in the 18<sup>th</sup> century both as an ornamental tree and in the forlorn hope that it could be used for building ships for the Royal Navy. It can be distinguished from our native oaks by its elongated leaves and 'hairy' protrusions from the end of its stems.

The Turkey oak is nowhere near as valuable to our native wildlife as either the English or Sessile oaks and has the major disadvantage that it has become the host tree to the gall wasp, *Andricus quercuscalicis*, whose larvae damage the acorns of native British oaks.

In line with The Wildlife Trusts, BET has been slowly reducing the number of Turkey oaks on our reserves, either by felling or ring-barking.



**Turkey Oak  
Ring-barking**

## The Cabin Cliff Path



One of the two paths leading from Church Town passes by a spectacular cliff face on its way to the Cabin. Not only is this a very significant geological feature but this area is simply amazing in springtime when the woodland floor becomes carpeted with ferns and primroses.

We wanted to let just a little more light into this area so this year we've coppiced a few selected trees to give the spring flowers a bit of a helping hand.



## Archaeological Enhancements

This winter, the two lead mines at the lower end of Jubilee Stone Wood were strimmed of the encroaching bramble and the Warrener's Cottage had three ash trees removed to protect what remains of the ruins. Both these improvements ensure these fascinating archaeological features are now much more visible in the woodlands.



## Expanding the 'Coupe' Meadow



Traditional limestone grasslands are getting pretty rare these days (over 97% have been lost in the UK over the last 70 years), so restoring them has always been a big priority for BET. The wildflower meadow known as 'the Coupe', located just downhill from the Jubilee Stone, was the first of BET's meadow restoration projects which we undertook way back in 2006. Since then, the meadow has been periodically expanded as we came to learn just how rich and unusual its wide range of wildflowers were. So this year, we undertook the very last section of the restoration process, finally linking the Coupe meadow with the Jubilee Stone meadow. This had the added advantage of opening up the view from the Jubilee Stone - a view that had been lost to scrub encroachment for the past 50 years.



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I'm pleased to say that BET carries out 99.9% of its nature reserve management work using hand tools, but even for the hard-working BET volunteers, there comes a point where we do need to bring in professional help. BET has been very lucky to be able to call on the services of Tim Curley who was, up to a few years ago, the manager of Avon Wildlife Trust's many nature reserves. Tim is not only a very skilled power tool operator but has a detailed knowledge of just how to best manage nature reserves for both wildlife and people.



**Tim Felling a Turkey Oak**

### Hedgelaying next to the Bridleway

BET has some fabulous wildflower meadows, but we came to realise that some of the best were hidden from view behind a dense thicket of scrub. So this winter, a section of scrub in Jubilee Stone Wood between the bridleway and the Coupe meadow was hedgelayed in its entirety to create a 5 metre wide living hedge. This will very quickly become an excellent wildlife habitat, letting more light fall on the rare acid-loving plants in this part of the meadow as well as hopefully tempting BET's (and one of North Somerset's) rarest plants, the Yellow Bird's Nest, to make an appearance once more.



### BET Volunteers

Both the Monday and Saturday volunteer task mornings are doing extremely well at the moment with volunteer numbers typically in the region of 12 - 18 per session on Mondays and around 6 - 8 on Saturdays. BET achieves almost all of its nature reserve management using our ever-enthusiastic volunteers and they are simply the sole reason we are able to achieve so much. So once again, a **BIG BET thank you** to you all.

**Jan Chambers**



# BET's New-Look Website

Over the Christmas break we took the opportunity to upgrade the BET website to more current software. The old site had been getting very 'back-level' and was in danger of collapsing in a heap!



So, to remove this risk, we had to upgrade all the system software components on the hosting server and then rework the look and feel of the website, as the old design wouldn't run on the new software! This also entailed revising all the articles.

We have tried to freshen up the look and make it easier to navigate, whilst maintaining a degree of familiarity.

One of the main advantages of the new software is that it's what's called 'responsive'. This means that the page layout changes when viewing it on a smart phone or tablet. The text, number of columns and pictures reformat dynamically to fit better onto these devices, making the site easier to use - wherever you are.



We have also taken the opportunity to add more articles about what you can see on the reserves and lots more photos of various interesting species. You will find new photo galleries under 'Nature and Wildlife' and can click on individual photos to zoom in and read about the species.



We hope you like the new website and find the information useful and stimulating. We trust it does justice to our fabulous reserves and the amazing work done by all the volunteers who frequently grace the front page and photo albums! Please do share the website link with your friends and family.

I would like to thank Chris Hoults for his invaluable support with this upgrade and Ian Chambers for his input to the wildlife photos and stories.

<http://www.backwellenvironmenttrust.org>

Peter Speight

# Geology Walk Discoveries

Members of the geology section of the Bristol Naturalists Society (BNS) were treated to a guided walk through the BET reserves by Richard Kefford from the Avon RIGS Group.

*In the past, there has been both small and large scale quarrying of Clifton Down Limestone but the reserve is now mainly a wooded area with numerous small rock outcrops. There is a small cave (Backwell Cave), opened up during quarrying with very unusual formations of crystals in the walls. We postulated that these were probably formed by hydro-thermal action and subsequently surface water had entered and dissolved some of the limestone. Adjacent was a fantastic face of limestone which had formed by a blue-green algal colony, the stromatolites growing through each succeeding layer of limestone, giving a very fine laminated appearance. The visible exposure is around 2 metres high, so consider how many thousand (million?) years that a stromatolite colony lived for. And there are still living examples in tropical seas today.*



*We also discovered a fantastic specimen of fossil colonial coral, **Siphonodendron martini**. These corals have daily growth bands, interestingly indicating that a year was 391 days long in Carboniferous times, so we are slowing down!*

*We then decamped to a pub for a late lunch and a drink, so all round a very interesting, varied and enjoyable field trip, enjoyed by eight BNS members and two WEGA guests'*

David Clegg (President Bristol Nats Geological Section)



## YACWAG 2016 Christmas 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 member's gardens over the festive period. This year they expanded their survey into Backwell and Nailsea by enlisting the help of both BET and NEWT members.

'With help from our friends at Backwell Environment Trust and Nailsea Environment and Wildlife Trust as well as many non-members, we received 120 surveys this year; almost exactly double the number (61) received last year. 49 species were recorded in gardens (up from 43 last year), there were 9 flyovers (same as last year) and a Tawny Owl heard. The average number of birds recorded in gardens was 34, exactly the same as last time.





The Blackbird retained the Number 1 spot appearing in 117 of the 120 gardens surveyed followed by Robin (114), Woodpigeon (101), Blue Tit (100), Magpie (90), House Sparrow (84), Great Tit (79), Collared Dove (70), Dunnock (60) and Starling (58). Winners this year showing increased number of birds recorded were Blackbird, House Sparrow, Magpie, Pied Wagtail, Starling and Wood Pigeon.



There was an influx of Blackbirds from the continent before Christmas and this is reflected in a 50% increase in numbers. All percentages are based on the average numbers reported for each garden survey, so that the larger number of surveys this year is taken into account.



The results for House Sparrow are particularly encouraging as after a long period of decline the local population seems to be on the increase again - numbers were up by 10%. Magpies have been stable for several years so a 50% rise this year was a surprise: not so Wood Pigeon which is now the third most common species in our gardens. It wasn't even in the top ten in 2008, but this species and Magpies are generalists, they are adaptable and are still increasing - there were 70% more recorded than in 2015. Species noted in reduced numbers were Blackcap, Blue Tit, Chaffinch, Collared Dove, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Goldfinch, Greenfinch and Long Tailed Tit.

There seems to have been a lot of natural food available in the Autumn and early Winter so less birds may have come in to gardens as a result. There are definitely fewer Collared Doves around and they do seem particularly vulnerable to predation by Sparrowhawks. Greenfinches are still suffering from trichomoniasis disease but it's a shock to see reduced numbers of Goldfinches and they have dropped out of the top 10 species seen. There have been some large flocks along the Strawberry Line and in Littlewood. I don't think that there is any evidence of a decline in numbers but after years of increase, they may have stabilised.



Win Lowman & Trevor Riddle

# BET's Grass Identification Course 2016

Poaceae is a large family of monocotyledonous flowering plants to which most of us don't give more than a passing glance. We might notice when the lawn needs trimming, or comment on the sweet smell of new mown hay but poaceae, or **grasses**, tend not to catch one's eye like more brightly coloured 'wild flowers'.

When Tony Smith visited the NEWT reserve at Moorend Spout to help with some plant surveying in June, he realised that several of us were struggling with identifying grasses and kindly offered to run a day course. This would be the first joint venture for the North Somerset Nature Net (NSNN), with attendees from YACWAG, NEWT and BET. BET's cabin would be the classroom, and on 11<sup>th</sup> July, after waving off the BET Monday morning work party, eight of us settled down for some serious study.

As the essential parts of grasses are so small and have a specialist vocabulary, Tony had brought along his 'visual

aids' - large scale paper models

showing the structure of grasses - and a training booklet which would enable us to key out the different families, and eventually to identify the grass in question. Tony patiently guided us as, armed with hand lenses, we poured over samples and compared their *ligules*, *lemmas*, *glumes* and *spikelets*, and were introduced to other more prosaic technical

terms such as 'pink stripy pyjamas'. After lunch, we ventured into the meadow for the challenge of some field work. Tony assured us that by following his training booklet, and with a little more practice we could all become proficient. To this end, he offered a follow-up day for more field work from which two of us were able to benefit.

I shall certainly look at grasses differently in future and recognise that in a traditional



meadow there are so many more species than the ubiquitous rye grass that so predominates in fields scalped for silage. The vernacular grass names are lovely - Crested dog's-tail, Sweet Vernal grass, Timothy, Yorkshire fog, Cock's-foot, Foxtail, to name but a few - though I do struggle with the Latin ones. (I know I should try harder with them as they do help to group families of grasses).

It was a very useful day and we are most grateful to Tony Smith for giving so generously of his time.

Carrie Riches



## Higgy's Magical Birds

*Colin Higgins, AKA 'Higgy' of YACWAG and Somerset Wildlife Photography fame, was brought up in Backwell and recently re-visited our two BET reserves in February.....*

'Having been suffering with this awful virus that has been doing the rounds for 4-5 weeks, and waking up to sunshine following my first full night's sleep for five days, the decision was easy; some good old fashioned 'medicinal' fresh air was required!

Where to go? Having grown up in Backwell but moved away when my wife and I bought our first home some 25 years ago, I couldn't resist a visit to my old 'stomping ground' of Backwell Hill!

Despite only living in Yatton, I rarely get back and enjoy those long walks up over the top of the quarry and out to Long Lane, so with some excitement, I left home and drove to the Jubilee Stone reserve now managed by Backwell Environment Trust (BET). Having long been involved with my own local conservation group YACWAG, it's always a treat to go and see the good work that other local groups are doing.

Parking up, I could immediately hear the usual suspects in the form of Blue Tits, Great Tits and of course a friendly Robin who was first to greet me at the gate. I moved down the path towards the Jubilee Stone and bumped into a small flock of Goldcrest who were actually being quite vocal for a change! I had the usual wrestling match with my camera whilst trying to



get a snap of this tiny but beautiful bird as it flitted in and out of branches, but I was finally rewarded with a couple of pictures that might be OK as a 'record shot'.

Moving on, the sound of bird song was obvious and I was accompanied through the wood by the alarm calls and chattering of Tits who clearly gave away my position and any hope of a stealthy approach!



With my cover blown, I veered left and crossed the road over into Badgers Wood Reserve. I noticed straight away the work that has been carried out to make the site accessible to fellow nature lovers. I was heartened to hear the sound of birdsong actually increasing on this side of the road and at the top of the slope I was met with an amazing view over the old quarry and across Backwell and beyond. The clear sunny February day made it a pleasure to stand there and take in this wonder! Unfortunately, a huge flock of Jackdaws were in full voice and although I

do enjoy Corvids, they can tend to be a bit noisy! But I'm stuck to the spot at the amazing aerial display that these unappreciated birds were now giving me, tumbling and diving one after the other, truly spectacular!

'Honk Honk', the Ravens are also in full voice but beyond the trees and out of sight, a Buzzard calls high up on the thermals but again is as mystical as the Ravens.



Over the stile, which is always a bit tricky with one false hip,



but with no one watching, I take the chance and luckily land on both feet! I love this section now on top of the quarry or as kids forty years ago we would shout '*on top of the world!*'. I pass the horses feeding and then I'm in the open field, but keeping close to the fence I can observe the Buddleia, Gorse and Hawthorn bushes that abound the top of the quarry and I strike gold! The February sun has bought out hordes of Bullfinches that are stripping the berries and seed-heads. Although wearing camouflaged clothing and hat, I'm exposed here and only manage a

couple of snaps before they take to the air like a squadron of RAF fighter jets with their pale rumps following them! I sit and wait to see if they will come back and I'm joined instead by another small flock of Goldcrest after the same seed-heads. They 'pose' a little just long enough

for me to get a couple of slightly better snaps. I spot some Fieldfare, a Wren and of course plenty more Finches and Tits before I turn around to head back, but something catches my eye and yes, I'm right, in full flight and flying with purpose, a Peacock butterfly passes me heading in the opposite direction! This reminds me that I must come back here for butterflies this summer...



I wander back to the viewing platform and something is wrong! It's quiet, ghostly quiet! One of those moments when in a horror film a

'mad axeman' might run out of the dark damp woods, but it's clear and bright and the sun is causing me to pull the peak of my cap over my eyes.... and then there it is right in front of me! 'Aggh I hadn't expected that' I exclaim as I wrestle with camera and binocular straps to get a shot at this beautiful predator and the reason why not a bird can be heard. The Peregrine must have been sitting up right under my nose and now it's racing across the huge void of the quarry

and I'm struggling to get focus on it or even keep my camera following it! I snap as many pictures as I can, I think I may have a blur that looks partially like a Peregrine but it's proof if nothing else! I wait to see if this magnificent bird will grace my presence again but realise that it's fruitless when the Jackdaws go into overdrive and at full voice appear to come tumbling out of every tree. But the target of their excitement soon becomes clear as the huge Buzzard comes over my head, probably only twenty feet above me and now firmly in my sights.



Fulfilled and content, I stroll back across the coombe and back up into the Jubilee Wood Reserve and then take five minutes sitting on the wooden bench by the two ponds to have a sip of tea from my flask. The day has been so busy that I'm several hours in and haven't thought to stop until now! As I

sit there in the sun, a second Peacock butterfly flutters by as in a determined race as the previous one seen above the quarry. A real treat to see not one, but two, of these beautiful insects out in the February sun.

Some rustling to my left alerts me to more company and this time it presents itself in the form of a beautiful brightly coloured Blue Tit, again so often overlooked but one of the first birds that we all learn as a child and one that should be admired along with the rest!

It really is time to go now and although I could stay here for several more hours easily, I have chores to do. I head back to the entrance of the reserve and I'm happy to see more Goldcrest and then in the top clearing I come across a family of Long-tailed Tits chattering away together. They always make me smile and it's now that I realise what a tonic nature is, even when feeling ill or of low mood, the wonder of simple pleasures is unquestionable. I'm close to the gate and a Coal Tit darts across in front of me and finally I'm back at the car and it's time for another quick brew before I leave this wonderful place. But of course I couldn't leave without my new best friend 'Mr Robin' coming to wave me off!



Many thanks to all at BET who have done a wonderful job saving what was my playground as a boy forty years ago. I truly enjoyed a wonderful day with easy access and lots to see! Great work, keep it up!

(All photographs by Colin ('Higgy') Higgins... and for more fabulous photographs, check out his website at [www.somersetwildlifephotography.com](http://www.somersetwildlifephotography.com)).

**Higgy**



## The Joys of Natural Hedgelaying

For some time now, Ted and I have been popping along on Mondays for our weekly BET get-together. We meet at the cabin, where, along with everyone else, we find out what the activity of the morning will be.

We have gained knowledge in so many woodland conservation projects, and have marvelled at the results achieved. I have always particularly admired living hedgelaying artistry and those who just seem to know how to do it.



Encouraged by Peter and Ian, in February we attended a two-day course in hedgelaying over at Yatton. It was organised by YACWAG, another local group, with similar conservation aims. The local award winning hedgelaying



**YACWAG**

expert, Malcolm Dowling, was our trainer for the weekend. He was a charming chap, who did not stand for any nonsense. You could see he had a passion for his craft and wanted to share it.

We learnt there was far more to the hedgelaying than we had imagined. For a start, each county has its own style. So North Somerset version is very different to Devon etc. It was fascinating to see just how to cut the tree, using a special tool called a bill hook (after a bird's bill). The tree or sapling, would then be manoeuvred over, to form the hedge structure. We were shown how to neaten up where the cut was made, in order for rain to run off naturally. This procedure allows the sapling, shrub, or tree, to keep growing, and thus form the living hedge.

We loved taking part in the course, and now it is down to practice, practice, practice so we can develop our new-found skills. Fortunately, BET has currently taken on a large project, restoring and reviving a long meadow up by the Jubilee Stone. Lucky for us, there is a great deal of hedgelaying to do, to bring light into the meadow. So, in time, walkers should be able to once again enjoy the meadow, and also be able to see the wonderful North Somerset views.

By the way... I looked up the origin of "to hedge one's bets" as it seemed topical and I was intrigued to see that yes, it does stem from actual hedging!



 **Jas**



# Ash Dieback Disease

'Chalara' or ash dieback disease, is a disease of ash trees caused by a fungus called *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus*. (The fungus was previously called *Chalara fraxinea*, hence the name of the disease). Chalara causes leaf loss, crown dieback and bark lesions in affected trees. Once a tree is infected, the disease is usually fatal, either directly, or indirectly by weakening the tree to the point where it succumbs more readily to attacks by other pests or pathogens such as honey fungus.

The chalara fungus has two phases to its life-cycle: sexual and asexual. The asexual stage, which spreads through affected trees, attacks the bark, twigs and branches. The sexual, reproductive stage, occurs on infected stalks of the



previous year's fallen leaves. The fungus is believed to have entered Britain on plants imported from nurseries in continental Europe. Recently however, infected older trees in East Anglia, Kent



and Essex with had no apparent connection to plants supplied by foreign nurseries, led to the suggestion that it might have already entered the UK by natural means. These could include being carried on the wind or on birds coming across the North Sea and English Channel, or on items such as footwear, clothing or vehicles of people who had been to infected sites in continental Europe.

The disease can be spread by the wind up to some tens of miles. Over longer distances the risk of disease spread is most likely to be through the movement of diseased ash plants. Movement of logs or un-sawn wood from infected trees might also be a pathway for the disease, although this is considered to be quite a low risk. Since 2012, around 850 cases of the disease have been reported in England alone.



Approximately 40% of the woodland on BET's nature reserves is made up of ash trees so, if the disease did take hold, there's no doubt it would have a



big impact on us. There has been a recent report of the disease in Cheddar which is well within the distance that spores could be carried on the wind. Unfortunately, there is really nothing that we can do to keep the disease at bay except being vigilant for signs of the disease (the disease indicators are best observed in August and September). If ash dieback did find its way into our woodlands, we would probably not be required to take any drastic action such as felling a significant number of trees, unless we were served with a statutory Plant Health Notice. However, if any

infected trees were located close to the road or footpaths, we would probably have to fell them on health & safety grounds.

But it's not all doom and gloom! It has been suggested that up to 3% of the UK's ash trees could be resistant to the disease and as each ash tree produces thousands of seeds each year with a very high germination rate, the resistant strains could soon re-colonise the woodlands.

