

**Backwell Environment Trust
Bulletin 35 - Autumn 2017
www.backwellenvironmenttrust.org**



A Very Warm Welcome to our Latest Autumn Bulletin

The trusty BET volunteers have once again been busy with a wide range of projects over the summer, including opening up the overgrown pathways, rebuilding an historic dry stone wall, recording our plant and animal species as well as scything our fabulous wildflower meadows.

**BET AGM
Moth Discoveries
Summer Walk
Woodland Report
New Species
Scything Workshop
NS Nature Net
Dry Stone Walls
Dormice & Ivy**



Somerset Wildlife Photography

Well, it's that time of year again when BET holds its Annual General Meeting, this time on **Saturday November 11th, at 2pm in the Parish Hall**. We hope you will be able to attend and find out just what your Trust has been up to over the past twelve months.





BET Annual General Meeting

Saturday November 11th 2017

Backwell Parish Hall

Your trustees will be on hand to serve refreshments and 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 Chris Stevens from the South West England Dry Stone Walling Association.



Agenda



AGM minutes from November 12th 2016
The Chair's Report Treasurer's Report
Secretary's Report Woodland Report
Election of Trustees Any other business



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

The minutes can also be found on the BET website under 'About BET' / 'AGM'



BET's Moth Discoveries

After weeks of high winds and generally unfavourable 'mothing' weather, our chosen night for the first moth trapping session in Badgers Wood was perfect - light winds, dry and warm. We set up in The Layers meadow close to the Cabin as it is superb for wild flowers and has the advantage that it is surrounded by woodland which gave us the chance of attracting as many species as possible. Colin Higgins ('Higgy' from YACWAG) and I started putting the moth trap together at around 9pm and then we waited for dusk to fall. As it started to get dark, we saw five pipistrelle bats hunting for insects over the meadow and then heard some fox cubs screeching in the distance. The declining light then started to bring the moths out and we managed to catch a few before the trap was switched on at around 10pm. Higgy was using this particular battery-powered, ultraviolet LED light moth trap for the first time, so he was just as keen



as us to see how effective it was going to be. We left the meadow at around 10:30pm and Higgy bravely volunteered to return at daybreak to switch off the light and put the captured moths into the cool of the Cabin until the trap was opened at 9am.

When the trap was opened, the moths were carefully put into plastic containers so they could be more easily viewed and identified by the attending BET members. There are around 59 species of

butterflies in the UK but approximately 2,500 species of moth, some with very variable colours, which made the identification of some species a little tricky! After our close inspection, the moths were photographed and then released into the surrounding vegetation. In all, we added ten

new species of moth to our species list and hope to follow up with more trapping sessions over the course of the summer.



BET's Summer Walk

With warm and sunny weather predicted for the BET and Friends of Trendlewood Park summer walk, the stage was set for a convivial afternoon mini-hike. However, because half the walkers were based in Backwell and half in Nailsea, plotting out where cars needed to be to ferry people to the start of the walk and return them at the end, was no simple matter! Fortunately with the transport arrangements finally sorted out, we all converged on the BET Cabin for the 2pm start.

Our illustrious leader, David Jones, gave a quick team briefing to the 16 assembled hardy souls and described what pleasures awaited us on the terrain ahead. So off we set, initially wandering peacefully through the lush green ferns and rock outcrops of



the shady 'Fern Way' before finally emerging into the warm sunshine and the fabulous sight of the BET wildflower meadows in full bloom. Walking at a slow pace, we reached the Badgers Wood viewpoint with its amazing panorama of the quarry, the Severn Estuary and the Welsh hills beyond. Then it was on to the Jubilee Stone with its equally stunning, but contrasting views of the lush countryside between Nailsea and Clevedon.

From the Stone it was then mercifully downhill all the way, passing some of our newly-restored wildflower meadows now alive with bees and butterflies, before finally

leaving BET's nature reserves to walk down to St Andrew's Church. Then onward, meandering lazily through slowly ripening wheat fields in the summer sun, heading sure and steadily towards Nailsea. When we finally arrived at the Trendlewood Park meadows and woodlands, Pat Gilbert talked to our ambling group about the Park and then led us on a tour taking in the hidden gems of Nowhere Wood and also their amazing seeded wildflower meadow project.

With the long distance walk behind us now and the heat of the day starting to take its toll, the lure of a team debrief in the Old Farmhouse Pub finally became too much for us and so we retired to the garden to wet our whistles and reflect on a very enjoyable afternoon stroll.



Woodland Report

This year's weather was, as usual, somewhat topsy-turvy with seven weeks of drought in April and May followed by a hot, dry June followed by a cool and wet August. The dry weather did initially hold back the growth in some of our newly restored meadows but they quickly caught up when the rain returned! Ash dieback disease finally reached the whole of the Backwell area in the spring, but so far the effects have been somewhat minor and there are hopes that the disease will not turn out to be as disastrous as initially predicted.



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

Wildflower Meadows

Once again our restored wild flower meadows looked fabulous this year. It was the first real flowering year for the Coupe extension meadow and it did not disappoint - bursting with colourful wildflowers and a real haven for foraging insects. In fact, BET's nature reserves are in flower from March right through to the end of October so for those of you that missed the show, here are just some of the highlights...



August



September



Scything the Meadows

BET starts scything its two acres of restored wildflower meadows in the autumn to ensure that all the seeds have had ample time to set. The annual cut ensures that the invasive species such as bramble are kept in check, whilst removing all the cut material will, in the long term, reduce the fertility of the soil which will ultimately benefit the wildflowers.



Path Maintenance

During the springtime, the BET volunteers took the opportunity to line the edges of some sections of the bridleway in Jubilee Stone Wood with some old, previously cut logs. This not only nicely delineated the path but as the logs slowly decay, they can become a fabulous source of fungi.

We also worked hard to open up the bridleway where it had become overgrown over the past few years. The narrow sections were widened and the height of the path raised to allow both horse and rider to pass through without too much ducking.

Path Lining



Path Trimming



Dry Stone Walling



During the summer, the BET volunteers restored a further 20 metre section of a collapsed dry stone wall in Badgers Wood dating back to the early 1800's. After only five Monday morning sessions, they had dug out all the buried stone and re-built the wall to their usual high standards.



... just five Monday mornings later ...



About a year ago, almost 2 tons of Nailsea pennant sandstone was donated to BET and since then, we've been looking for the perfect spot to use it. After a bit of thought, the path leading up to the Cabin in Badgers Wood seemed to fit the bill perfectly, so the volunteers set about constructing a one foot high dry stone wall next to the path. We also took the opportunity to raise the level of the soil behind the wall and plant up the newly raised bed with native wildflowers and ferns. We're really pleased with the result and I think it definitely improves the landscape around the Cabin.



Ash Dieback Disease

Although we had some suspicions at the end of last year that ash dieback disease may have reached our area, it became obvious during May when some of the smaller ash trees started to succumb to the disease. It's a difficult thing to judge, but maybe 1% of our small ash trees (1 to 3 metres tall) have died this year. We've only noted two large trees with the disease and interestingly these finally came into leaf at the end of July, implying that they were fighting back against the disease. Speaking to Avon Wildlife Trust, they are cautiously optimistic that the disease will not be as devastating as first feared.



Backwell Village Fete

BET had a stall at the very successful Backwell Village Fete in June of this year when we teamed up with two of the Tyntesfield Bodgers (both BET members). Despite the rather fierce winds, the weather was fine, which ensured a large turnout from the village and beyond. Both BET and the Bodgers attracted quite a crowd of interested villagers and we signed up quite a few new members!



Species List

The list of species recorded on the two BET nature reserves continues to rise and as we go to press, it now stands at [754](#) in number - a big increase since this time last year when just over 500 species had been recorded. As we identify more and more species, it really brings home to me just how unique our 22 acres of protected land on Backwell Hill really are. BET now shares its records with the Bristol Regional Environmental Records Centre (BRERC) and you can see the current full list of species on the BET website.



Volunteer Time

Every year, the BET volunteers freely put in a staggering amount of time and effort, both in the day-to-day running of the Trust, as well as the huge amount of practical work needed to maintain our nature reserves. Over the last twelve months, the fantastic figure of [2,569 volunteer hours](#) has been recorded - a **21%** increase over last year. Since the Trust began, an astonishing [22,047 hours](#) have been volunteered - so, once again, a **BIG BET** thank you to you all.



And finally....BET has a two thriving volunteer groups that meet **every Monday** morning and on the **third Saturday** morning of each month. Absolutely no experience is necessary and it's also great fun, so why not come along and give it a try?



New Species Found on the Reserves



Black & Red Froghopper

These impressive, colourful bugs are about 10mm in length with striking black and red colours serving as a warning to their unpleasant taste. They are very good flyers with brownish, smoky, translucent wings but also have the ability to jump up to 70cms using their strong back legs. The adults can be found from April to August and feed by mainly sucking the sap of grasses and other plants. The female lays her eggs at the end of summer. They then hatch into larvae that live underground on the roots of plants inside a foam nest that protects them from dehydration and predators. The larvae feed by sucking the sap from the roots of their host plants before finally emerging in springtime.



Variable Longhorn Beetle

These large, slim beetles have a body length of between 15 to 27mm and can be very variable in colour (hence the name!). They have long, usually red legs, with the characteristic elongated antennae. Their eggs are laid in the soil and on hatching, the larvae move off to find a suitable food source. The larvae then feed underground for two or three years on the dead roots of various deciduous trees before pupating underground, finally emerging as adult beetles in May to June. They can be seen from May to August on herbaceous vegetation on woodland margins. They are fairly widespread in ancient woodlands in the south of England.





Violet Oil Beetle

Violet oil beetles have a striking appearance, as light is refracted off their bodies to give them a purple, blue or green sheen. Juvenile beetles are tiny and when they emerge in spring, they wait on flowers until a solitary mining bee visits. They then hitch a lift to the bee's nest and feed on the food collected for the bee's own young.

Violet oil beetles are important for conservation as they are indicators of strong mining bee populations and of high quality wildflower-rich habitats. Once widespread across the UK, recent research has shown their numbers have shrunk dramatically over recent years.



Beefsteak Fungus

This soft, red bracket fungus looks remarkably similar to a slab of meat and can also exude blood-like droplets of moisture. Although it might look edible, it has a sour, slightly acidic taste. When it first emerges the fungus is small, rounded and pink but develops in a few weeks into a spectacular tongue-shaped bracket up to 25cms across. The upper surface is rough, like fine sandpaper and sticky whereas the underside where the spores are released, is smooth and white. They are most commonly found on sweet chestnut and oak trees from the start of August until the autumn on living or dead wood. They are relatively common in the UK.

BET's Scything Workshop

On Saturday 19th August, BET held a scything workshop at The Community Farm, Chew Magna. This free event was quickly taken up and within a few days, all of the 25 available places were fully booked. The enthusiastic volunteers travelled from all over our area and some even travelled from South Wales to meet up at the fabulous venue overlooking Chew Valley Lake.



BET has been using traditional Austrian scythes to cut its restored wildflower meadows for many years now and over time, we've built up quite a bit of experience so when we were asked by the Community Farm to pass on our skills, we were more than happy to help. Recently there has been quite an upsurge in interest in traditional scything using Austrian scythes for cutting meadows in an environmentally friendly way. Austrian scythe blades are widely recognised as being amongst the best in the world and are imported into the UK from a factory first established in 1540.



The volunteers were taught the correct techniques for hand scything by BET's Peter Speight and in a very short space of time were all scything away, cutting the grass at an astonishing rate. After scything, the grass was raked up into piles and removed from the meadow using pitchforks - a very traditional English scene. After trying out the three different designs of scythe blade

we had brought along, quite a few of the volunteers were keen to purchase their own scythes to use on their own patch of grassland when they returned home.



Lunch of delicious home-made soup and rolls was served from the Farm's yurt and we all spent the lunchtime sitting in the glorious sunshine discussing the finer points of blades, snaths (scythe handles) and peening (restoring the blade's profile). We all finished the day tired, but I think everyone had a fantastic day, learnt some new skills, made some new friends and went away, hopefully inspired to carry on this ancient country craft on their own patch of land.



Gardening for Wildlife Ideas

The more habitats you can create in your garden the more wildlife you will attract to it. A mixture of trees and shrubs, year-round flower borders, ponds, log and stone piles, compost heaps, stone walls will all be quickly discovered by a wide range of wildlife.

BIRD BOXES

Natural nesting sites are always scarce, so put up bird boxes around the garden. Different bird species will require a different design of box so be creative.

VEGETATION

Plant dense deciduous hedge species such as hawthorn or blackthorn for nesting and a safe haven for wildlife.

IVY

English Ivy is a hardy evergreen and provides brilliant bird nesting opportunities. It is a late flowerer so highly prized for attracting insects in late summer.

WALLS

Climbing shrubs on a wall will be a good nesting site and also be good for insects.



Think about leaving a patch of your lawn uncut and if your garden is enclosed by a fence, consider cutting a hedgehog-sized hole in it to encourage these very garden-friendly mammals. You simply cannot fail if you put up a bird table or a feeder which is bound to attract a wide range of birds to your garden. Simple 'bug hotels' can easily be constructed and should increase helpful insects.

TREES

Small trees offer great nesting opportunities and fruit trees can be a good food source.

BE MESSY

Don't be too tidy - log piles and decaying vegetation in a shady spot will be great for wildlife

SHED

Sheds can be fabulous places for wildlife.

EVERGREENS

Early nesters such as robins and blackbirds will build a home here if it provides good cover. Great for insects hiding out during the day.

BRAMBLES

Brambles offer a safe haven, for wildlife, long-lasting flowers and fruit in late summer.



North Somerset Nature Net

The North Somerset Nature Net was formed to strengthen the ties between local groups such as BET and to help share our knowledge, resources and experiences. In the past six months we have used the Nature Net to set up our moth identification session with YACWAG, our summer walk with Friends of Trendlewood Park (FoTP), our scything workshop at Chew Community Farm and shared tools with NEWT and FoTP. Using the website, (www.northsomersetnaturenet.webs.com) you can find out just what all the other local groups are getting up to in North Somerset.



Dry Stone Walling

For the last few years, the BET volunteers have been reinstating some of the old, collapsed dry stone walls on both of our reserves. The walls on Backwell Hill were constructed during the early 1800s to demarcate field boundaries and so are a very important part of Backwell's history.



Dry stone walls are often a common sight, especially on upland limestone areas such as the Mendips and the Yorkshire Dales. They are usually found on high ground because the soil tends to be thinner, so hedges may struggle to grow and there is often a good supply of suitable stone. Although there are approximately 400km of dry stone walls on Mendip, a recent survey found that nationally, only 13% of walls were in good condition. On the BET reserves, we have many

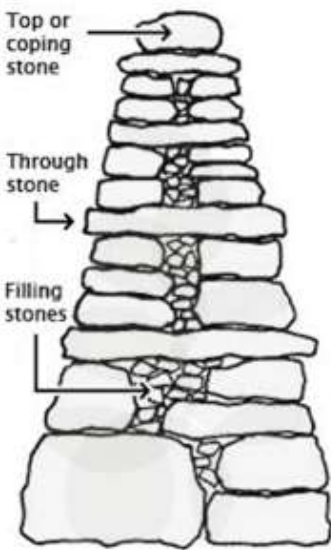
hundreds of metres of wall, but I'm afraid to say that virtually all of it, apart from our restored sections, is in very poor condition, so over the coming years we'll be re-building as much as we can.

Dry stone walling is an ancient craft that goes back thousands of years since the Neolithic period. Evidence of dry stone wall and house construction at Skara Brae on Orkney has been radiocarbon dated back to c3200 BC, amazingly preserved as it was buried by sand dunes until the farmstead was discovered in 1850. Dry stone walls can be found all over the world and can survive for a very long time. They can be very resilient structures, even to earthquakes as the 600 year old Inca dry stone walls at Machu Picchu, Peru clearly demonstrate.



Like a lot of things in life, dry stone walling construction doesn't actually look that hard, but there is a real knack to it and so it can initially be a tad frustrating for a first-time volunteer

builder! The technique, in a nutshell, is to place two rows of large stones slightly buried in the ground, to act as the foundation stones. Then it is a question of building up the wall in layers, ideally placing the longest section of each stone into the wall to add stability. As the wall slowly rises, small filling stones (or 'hearting') is used to fill the inner wall cavity thereby connecting the two sides of the wall. Whenever possible, a stone long enough to reach both edges of the wall (known as a 'through stone') should be used for extra strength. Finally, a top layer of large stones (known as 'coping stones') can be added to fully secure the wall.



For me, the skill in walling is *seeing and remembering* the empty space in the wall whilst you go off and search for the perfect stone that will exactly fit the space, which

is no easy task. However, when you do get it right (and it gets easier with practice!), it's amazing just how proud it can make you feel.

Dry stone walls, even collapsed ones, can be great places for wildlife. The stones quickly become colonised with moss followed by ferns and drought-tolerant plants making for a spectacular display. It's also not uncommon for the BET



volunteers to discover slow worms and toads at the base of a collapsed wall where the ground is moist and the stones offer safety. So the walls are great for wildlife and also an interesting chapter in Backwell's history.



Dormice & Ivy

The dormouse season started well with an active male in April and ten adults in May, which was a record for the month. I had great hopes for a bumper year, but the rest of the season hasn't lived up to the early promise and numbers for June to August have been about average. We found a female with 5 youngsters in September which boosted the numbers, but I would have liked to have seen more adults and some juveniles. There is one more check to do this year but so far we have found 19 adults, the 5 babies (about 2 weeks old), and a litter of 'pinkies' which I didn't disturb to count. The dormouse boxes only give a snapshot of the population, they seem to be equally happy in the bird boxes, but it just isn't practical to monitor these on a monthly basis. There will also be natural nests which are extremely difficult to find.



Dormice aren't the only animals we find in the boxes. They are regularly occupied by breeding birds, mostly blue tits and great tits, and a variety of other woodland mammals.



BET has a particularly healthy population of yellow necked mice; fierce attractive little creatures, best described as supercharged versions of their more familiar cousin, the wood mouse. They are legendary amongst dormouse handlers for their painful bite and the way they sometimes explode out of boxes when you open the lid (quite disconcerting when you are 8 feet up a ladder!).



It is always lovely to observe the changing seasons in the woods and I particularly enjoy the butterflies. In September it was wonderful to watch the red admirals in the abundant flowering ivy by the path next to the Horse-ring. On closer examination, we discovered that it was buzzing with pollinating insects including honey bees, bumblebees, several varieties of hoverflies and ivy bees which, I believe, is a new record for BET. Ivy is often thought of as an unattractive plant of little value, but in the autumn it comes into its own as a vital source of food for a huge variety of beautiful and beneficial insects. On sunny days in late summer and autumn, it is an absolute joy just to stand and watch them.

