

Backwell Environment Trust
Bulletin 36 - Spring 2018
www.backwellenvironmenttrust.org



A Very Warm Welcome to our Latest Spring Bulletin

As ever, those 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 thinning of some seriously overcrowded ash trees in lower Jubilee Stone Wood.

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 if you receive a membership form with your



Bulletin, it means your membership is due to expire. 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 1st to March 31st and renewals for 2018/19 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 **THIRD 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, coppicing, wildflower meadow scything and 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).

Geology Walk Discoveries

Geology Field Trip Visitors



On Sunday 8th October eight members of the Harrow and Hillingdon Geological Society visited the Badgers Wood Geology Trail as part of a field trip to sites in North Somerset. They admired the paths through Carboniferous Limestone on the way to the top of the hill, spotting examples of marine fossils and shells over 300 million years old. Meanwhile, excursion leader Allan Wheeler explained the geological context of the Clifton Down Limestone Formation that stretches north beyond the Avon Gorge and south to Cheddar.

A particular highlight was the view over the quarry, where the exposed rocks allowed some expert eyes to read the shapes visible in the landscape around. The



group had visited Portishead the day before and were about to go to Aust, so Backwell Hill was the perfect vantage point from which to see how everywhere fitted together. There was some discussion about the unusual round shape of Nailsea on low land, while it was easy to identify ridges where the underlying rocks have been folded up in the earth movements that distorted the rocks around Battery Point.

BET volunteer Jas Smallbone was able to accompany the group and show them points of interest along the way. The Londoners were very interested in her tales of hedge laying, scything



and dry stone walling in the local style, and were delighted to see the panoramic view from the Jubilee Stone taking in the broad sweep of the Severn Estuary.

Great excitement was caused by a spectacular yellow caterpillar spotted on the wall at the end of the trail. It was identified as a Pale Tussock and Jas was able to report it as a new species for the site.



Liz Chiu

YACWAG 2017 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 members' gardens over the festive period. This year they continued the expansion of their survey into Backwell and Nailsea by enlisting the help of both BET and NEWT members.

102 Survey Forms Were Received - Many Thanks To Everyone Who Took Part



YACWAG CHRISTMAS BIRD SURVEY : 2017 REPORT



The blackbird maintained its position as the bird seen in most gardens - 94 out of 102; the rest of the top ten were wood pigeon and robin (91), blue tit (80), great tit (73), magpie (71), house sparrow (68), dunnock (55), long-tailed tit (53) and goldfinch (52).

The number of species landed in gardens was 46, the additional species that flew over was 8, the species only heard was 1.

A Grand Total of 55 Species were Recorded

Trevor Riddle reports:-

'In 2008, the wood pigeon wasn't even in the top 10 gardens (where it landed) and nine years later it is second and almost first. Wood pigeons have overcome their shyness of humans and were seen

in 90% of gardens. They may well out-compete collared doves, a species that has declined in abundance over a similar period, although collared doves seem to be more prone to predation by sparrowhawks.

Goldfinches go from strength to strength with a remarkable 457 recorded. But bullfinch may be the 'new goldfinch' - they are appearing in more gardens year on year and are a very popular visitor. It's good to see that greenfinches haven't declined further

this year - they are still suffering from trichomoniasis disease. One lucky member recorded two bramblings (eight just before the survey started) and just a single siskin was seen ; they are in very low numbers this winter.

House sparrows are holding their own, but starling numbers continue to slide. Wintering blackcaps continue to increase whilst just a single chiffchaff was seen. A few favoured gardens are still visited by the (locally) scarce marsh tit. Other notable birds were two kingfisher records (from Congresbury) and just outside





the survey period a garden woodcock in Backwell (23 December) and a fly over red kite at Cadbury Hill on 7 January. There were more sparrowhawk sightings this year although there is no evidence of an increase in numbers locally.

Other wildlife reported by surveyors were squirrels (especially 'stealing' bird food), fox, rats and, of course, cats. One surveyor recorded 27 visits per minute by various tits to a black sunflower feeder'.

If anyone would like a copy of the full results please let me know. winlowman@hotmail.co.uk.



Trevor Riddle and Win Lowman, January 2018



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 nearly two acres now, this is no mean task and it usually takes us to the end of the year to complete all the cutting. However, with each passing year we are getting quicker and this year, with a combination of more experience and higher numbers of volunteers, we completed it in record time. With the coming of the New Year, our two main tasks were the thinning of some seriously overcrowded ash trees in the lower reaches of Jubilee Stone Wood and re-laying the hedge in the 'Coupe' meadow.



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

Surveying the Reserves



When BET first acquired Jubilee Stone Wood in 2005, it comprised of approximately 96% woodland and 4% grassland. When Badgers Wood was added in 2009, it comprised of approximately 99% woodland and 1% grassland. So with most of the major wildflower meadow restoration projects probably behind us now, this year both reserves have been re-surveyed to record the woodland/grassland ratios we now have in 2018.

JUBILEE STONE WOOD (10 acres) - Woodland = 90%, Grassland = 10%
BADGERS WOOD (12 acres) - Woodland = 92.5%, Grassland = 7.5%

Overall figures for the two reserves combined are 91.5% woodland and 8.5% grassland across the whole 22 acres which we feel just about strikes the right balance.



Scything the Wildflower Meadows

Every year, starting in the early autumn, BET's wildflower meadows are cut by hand by our volunteers, using traditional Austrian scythes. There's no denying that 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. This year the whole 1.9 acres of restored grassland was cut in just 3½ months - a new BET record!

BET Scythe Training

It seems word has clearly got around about BET's legendary scything skills! Last year, you may remember, that BET was approached by Chew Community Farm to see if we could organise a scythe training course on one of their meadows overlooking the stunning Chew Valley Lake. We did - and it was a great success. So this year we have received another request for two courses from Buglife as part of their Urban Buzz project in Bristol. This will be a great opportunity for us to promote BET to a wider audience as well as topping up our funds at the same time.



Training at Chew Farm



Lower Jubilee Stone Wood

BET's professional ecologist, Tim Curley (ex reserve manager for Avon Wildlife Trust), on a recent visit to the BET reserves, advised us that thinning out the extremely overcrowded ash trees in the lower sections of Jubilee Stone Wood should be our top priority for this winter season. The sheer number of trees in this area was blocking most of the light from reaching the woodland floor to the detriment of the spring flowers and other tree seedlings that were attempting to grow there. The thinning will also benefit our dormice as a more diverse tree canopy/understorey habitat will now be able to develop in the increased light levels. So the taller trees have now been coppiced by two days of chainsaw work, whilst the smaller ones have been coppiced by the BET volunteers. Because this area is so full of bluebells in the spring, the mild conditions of January started this year's bluebell growth off early so to avoid trampling, the coppicing was finished in early February. On the advice of Avon Wildlife Trust's dormouse experts, this area will be re-assessed again in the summer to see if any more coppicing needs to be done next winter.



Woodland Coppicing

Hedgelaying

When BET restored its first wildflower meadow in 2006 (the 'Coupe' meadow just downhill from the Jubilee Stone), we laid the hedge along our boundary with the adjacent agricultural field as part of the project. Twelve years on and we have returned to lay it for the second time. This time the hedge contained a lot more trees than when we first laid it all those years ago, so the extra thickness should make for a spectacular sight when the first green shoots of spring finally arrive. Our newly-laid hedge will also serve as a superb wildlife corridor as well as offering excellent nesting opportunities for the many species of bird we have on our reserves.



Hedgelaying

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 - 20 per session on Mondays and around 8 - 10 on Saturdays. BET achieves virtually 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



Winter Fungi on the Reserves

Well let's face it, January and February may not be the most colourful months on BET's nature reserves but if you keep your eyes open, you may just spot these highly unusual stunning, scarlet fungi, especially along The Fern Way in Badgers Wood.

Scarlet Elf Cup (*Sarcoscypha austriaca*)

These bright scarlet, shallow cups often appear singularly or in small groups on moss-covered damp, rotting wood in either broad-leaf or coniferous woodlands. The cups themselves can range from 1 - 5cms in diameter and usually stand around 1cm tall. They can be found throughout the winter to spring period and are considered not particularly common.



BET's New Management Plan

BET's first woodland management plan for Jubilee Stone Wood Nature Reserve was drafted for us in 2007 by the eminent ecologist Dr Tony Smith. However, way back then we couldn't even hope to dream just how successful the BET nature reserves were to become, so the BET



trustees have decided it's about time we commission a new plan to bring everything up to date. We've also decided that whilst the trustees *could* write the practical aspects of the plan, we feel the final result would be more beneficial and respected if we were to obtain an expert, independent view of the future management tasks that BET should perform in the years to come.

So this springtime, Tim Curley will be surveying our reserves and preparing a plan of action on how we can continue to increase our nature reserve's biodiversity in the future. Tim has excellent credentials for this role as he was formerly employed by Avon Wildlife Trust as their nature reserves manager before setting up on his own as a wildlife consultant a

few years ago. He also knows our woodlands very well and has helped us with tree surgeon work and advice over the years. Whilst his expert services will come at a cost to BET, we feel his independent assessment and years of nature reserve management experience will be money well spent. Management Plans can turn out to be quite large documents so, to save money, the BET



trustees will be compiling the background information necessary whilst leaving Tim to concentrate on the practical tasks.

When the first draft is complete, the Plan will be circulated to our local wildlife experts as well as BET members and visitors to the reserves, so everyone can have the chance to have their say on how we manage the reserves in the future. Hopefully by the autumn, we will have a document that everyone can approve and will stand us in good stead for the coming years.

Old BET Photographs?

Do you have any old photographs of what are now Jubilee Stone Wood and Badgers Wood that you can share with us? We have photographs from around 2005 onwards when BET started acquiring the land on Backwell Hill, but it would be really useful if you have anything even just a bit older. Old photographs can be fascinating and a real help in determining our future plans when we know what was there in the preceding years, so if you do have anything that you would be willing to let us copy please get in touch - Ian Chambers



ianann2424@gmail.com



Dormouse Surveys

Every year from early spring to late autumn, the dormouse boxes in both Jubilee Stone and Badgers Woods are inspected on a monthly basis to check for the presence of dormice. BET is very lucky to have the services of Gill Brown, an English Nature approved licensed dormouse handler, as one of our volunteers to take on this difficult and time-consuming task. Each year, the results of these inspections are sent to the People's Trust for Endangered Species (PTES) so they can be entered into the National Dormouse Monitoring programme (NDMP).



At the end of last year, you may remember that Gill reported that 2017 had been a pretty average year for dormouse numbers with just over half of our boxes being occupied over the course of the year. **However, that didn't turn out to be quite the end of the story....**

When our bird boxes were inspected and cleaned out in early December we had quite a surprise.

Out of the 57 bird boxes inspected, a total of 18 dormouse nests were recorded - with one actually containing a hibernating dormouse. So when you add these records to the occupancy rates of our dormouse boxes, it all adds up to a very significant number which Gill has said is of national importance.

So spurred on by these amazing results, we have now compiled all of the records from both our dormouse and bird boxes dating back to 2010 using GPS to locate the exact position of each box. These have now been plotted on Google Maps by one of BET's trustees, Peter Speight, to give a fascinating animated view of the distribution over the years. From the map of the 2017 records you can clearly see that dormice are present in quite large numbers in the upper sections of Jubilee Stone Wood and both the upper and lower sections of Badgers Wood.



However, the map would also seem to imply that both the lower sections of Jubilee Stone Wood and the middle section of Badgers Wood do not offer the best habitat for dormice. (Of course, just because we haven't recorded a dormouse in a box doesn't mean they aren't present in that area. We probably have many more dormice than our records would suggest as they may well choose to nest, for instance, in a thick bramble patch which we would never be able to locate).

As our dormice are a priority species for BET, especially with their legal protection status, we are always very keen to ensure that we are managing the woodlands in their best interests and we are also eager to learn if there is anything else we could be



doing to improve and expand their habitat.

So in January, BET invited Avon Wildlife Trust's (AWT) dormouse experts to come and visit our woodlands and to offer any advice they might have. It was a very worthwhile exercise for BET and we were very pleased to discover that in AWT's opinion, our woodlands are being well managed for dormice and we also came away with some valuable tips on how we could improve our woodland habitat for our rare furry friends still further.



BET's Bird Boxes

We had been watching the temperature week by week, keen to get the bird boxes cleaned out before the really cold weather set in. In early December Gill (our licensed dormouse handler) decided that it had been cold enough for the dormice to have started their hibernation,



so a date was set and the team assembled, joined by new BET trustee Mark Davy. This year we used two ladders so that Gill could check a box then leave it for the roof to be re-secured while she went on to the next box. This system enabled us to whizz round the 57 boxes in one long session.

This year we found more dormice nests in the bird boxes than ever before, six in Jubilee Stone Wood (JSW) and twelve in Badgers Wood (BW). One contained a sleeping dormouse that had not read the book to know that bird boxes were not suitable locations for hibernation! This year there were no other unexpected occupants.

In JSW, 14 of the 26 boxes had nests, and in BW, 11 of the 31 checked had nests. Most inhabitants are likely to have been blue or great tits, but one was almost certainly a nuthatch. Looking back over the past few years it



is interesting to see that some boxes are used year on year while with others usage is more sporadic. Are birds returning to a particular box? If they survive the first year, it is thought that the average life span of birds like tits may be 2-5 years, although a blue tit has been recorded at 21! There is also a tendency for dormice nests to be in the same boxes - dormice are thought to have a life span of up to 5 years.



Many thanks to Gill and David, Bill, Brian and Mark for all their help.

New Bird & Dormice Boxes

Our bird boxes have a hard life! They are made from untreated wood and are of course out in all weathers. They are also prone to attack by predators such as woodpeckers and squirrels. As a result each year some boxes need to be repaired or replaced.

This year, we decided to experiment with some new bird and dormouse box designs that should have a longer life. Some of these boxes are made from red cedar wood which is very durable. Other boxes are made of 'WoodStone' - a mixture of concrete and wood fibres. These are rot-proof, very long lasting and also provide good insulation in the summer.

So in February (before the snow!), the team spent a morning erecting 10 new boxes around the woods. Over the coming years we'll report on how well the new boxes have performed.



Carrie Riches & Mark Davy



And Finally - a Date for your Diary

Did you know that the rabbit warren in what is now Jubilee Stone Wood was granted to Sir Richard de Rodney on the 10th June 1318 by order of King Edward II?

This year marks the 700th Anniversary of that prestigious event and we are hoping to have an event on Sunday 10th June 2018 to celebrate it. We're still in the planning phase at the moment but please put the date in your diary!