



#### 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 gradual thinning of a selection of tall and thin canopy trees, in accordance with our brand new management plan.



#### It's Membership Renewal Time!

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).



VOLUNTEER ACTIVITY MORNINGS - on <u>EVERY MONDAY</u> and the <u>THIRD</u> <u>SATURDAY</u> of every month from 10am – 12:15pm on both days.

The tasks change as the year progresses but usually include country crafts such as hedgelaying, coppicing, wildflower meadow scything and dry stone walling.

We <u>always</u> break at 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).

## YACWAG 2018 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 the Backwell area by enlisting the help of BET members.

### **100 Survey Forms Were Recieved - Many Thanks To Everyone Who Took Part**

#### Trevor Riddle reports:-





The months of November and December 2018 were reasonably benign weather-wise so the number of wintering birds in southern Britain was lower than average and to some extent, that was reflected in the numbers of birds seen (i.e. landed) in gardens. The survey period was blessed

with static, quiet weather and not the conditions to compel birds to come into gardens. That said, the number of birds seen per garden over the survey period was slightly up on 2017 from 38 to 39.

The most striking and pleasing statistic was the number of House Sparrows reported, up a whopping 30% from last year. This is a good indication that





numbers are recovering locally; the fine spring and summer weather is likely to have led to a productive breeding season for House Sparrows as well as other small bird species. Blue Tits and Great Tits also had a successful season and good numbers were recorded. Goldfinches,

increased again, they must surely reach an optimum level soon; but I think that every year!

Unsurprisingly there were few Redwings and Fieldfares and indeed numbers in the nearby countryside have been low. The mild weather meant that Blackcaps were less prevalent and the same applied to Reed Buntings. A few Tawny Owls were recorded and as there is an ongoing BTO Survey, I shall be very interested in any sight or sound records of this species.

Please contact Trevor: trid@btinternet.com







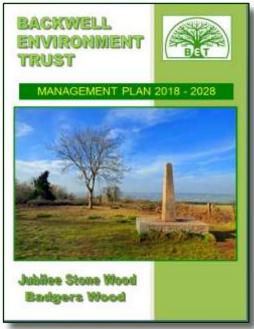
If anyone would like a copy of the full results please let me know. winlowman@hotmail.co.uk.



# Woodland Report

In November, BET's new management plan was unanimously approved by the members at our AGM. The plan was a full six months in the making, but all the hard work has now paid off as it is giving us a very detailed and precise guide to the management of our woodlands over the next ten years. All the practical aspects of the plan were compiled by the principal ecologist at 'Wild Service' (Avon and Gloucester Wildlife Trust's consultancy arm), so we can be assured of the highest possible standards in the management of our nature reserves.





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

#### Jubilee Stone Kissing Gate

The stile next to the Jubilee Stone has always been very well used by walkers, hiking up across the big field to reach our fabulous nature reserves. However, over the years, the structure has been slowly decaying and becoming a bit of a hazard to use. So the Parish Council decided to put up the money to replace the stile with a kissing gate and the BET volunteers were only too happy to install it for them. It was not an easy task as you won't be



surprised to hear that it is solid bedrock just under the soil, so digging the post holes was a bit of a challenge, but we were all pleased with the finished result and it will allow much easier and safer access to our reserves in the future.

#### 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.

#### 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 into 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 splits during seasoning and then rots very quickly when wet - so not ideal!). 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 our native British oaks. In line with our management plan and other wildlife organisations, BET has been very gradually reducing the number of these non-native trees on our reserves, either by felling or ring-barking.

#### Tree Canopy Thinning

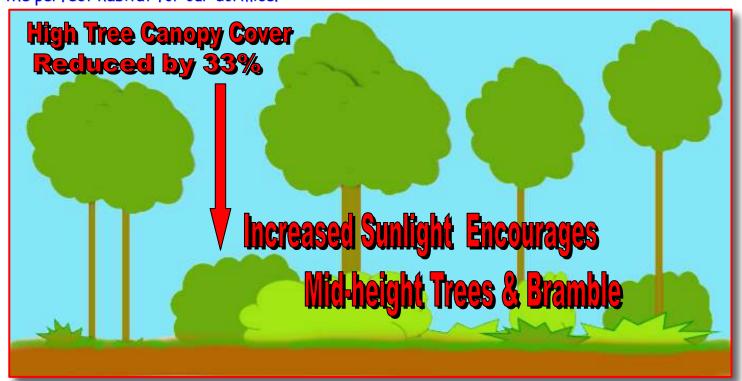


When the BET woodlands were surveyed by Wild Service in June 2018, one of their main recommendations was to coppice a proportion of the high canopy trees that were restricting virtually all sunlight reaching the ground. In many areas of our woodland, the tree canopy cover is approaching 100% and there is simply not enough sunlight filtering through to sustain any plants on the woodland floor.



Their recommendation was to reduce the

tree canopy cover by a third, so when you look up, you should see two-thirds tree canopy and one-third open sky. So over the next few years we will be gradually working towards this goal. This thinning will encourage the mid-height trees and bramble to thrive once more - which will also be the perfect habitat for our dormice.



#### Limestone Pavement





Excavation of our extremely rare limestone pavement has continued over the winter months with another section now uncovered on the other side of the Fern Way path. Some of the accumulated soil from the 'grykes' (the fissures found in the pavement) has been removed and we are hopeful that they will soon become colonised with shade-loving plants over the next few years. From



numerous test digs across the hillside, we know that this exceptional geological feature is by far the largest of its kind in the of whole southern England. However, there is now the exciting possibility that Bristol University will be visiting Badgers Wood this employ geophysical year to inspection techniques to fully map its extent under the soil. We are also looking to list the feature as a 'RIGS' - a regionally important geological site.



#### Hazel Planting

Many areas of our woodlands have an overabundance of high canopy trees but very few of the all-important mid-height trees such as hazel. Hazel can be one of the principle sources of food for fattening up our dormice prior to hibernation (that is if the grey squirrels don't get to the

hazelnuts before them!). Hazel also supports a wide range of insects, including caterpillars, which are also good dormouse food. The tree forms a mid-height, continuous understory of interwoven branches which is ideal for dormice to travel through the woodland. We are 'layering' hazels on

the reserves to increase their number and this spring we have also planted 25, locally-sourced, hazel tree saplings to expand a small section of woodland in Badgers Wood.

#### Seed 'Islands'

In 2016, we experimented with sowing wildflower seeds on a small patch of meadow in Badgers Wood. It turned out to be a great success and so this year we will be using the same techniques to try to improve areas of existing meadow where wildflower numbers



could do with a helping hand. The hope is that by seeding numerous small areas within the existing meadow, their seeds will eventually spread out into the grassland and make the meadow much more attractive to pollinators.

#### **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 on Mondays and around 8 - 10 on Saturdays. BET achieves virtually all of its nature reserve management using our everenthusiastic volunteers and they are simply the sole reason we are



able to achieve so much. A BIG BET THANK YOU TO YOU ALL!

lan Chambers



### Dormice Report 2018

2018 was a good year for dormice in the BET woods. Although I was only able to carry out five monthly surveys instead of the usual seven, we saw over 50 animals by the end of the year, which

was our best ever total. Some of these will have been recaptures, but even so, it is an impressive number for such a small area. They must have enjoyed the hot summer!

I was particularly encouraged by the number of young and juveniles we found this season. (Juveniles are animals living independently from their mothers who haven't gone through their first hibernation; they can be distinguished from adults by their greyer fur). In September we found a female with four young as well as six juveniles and in October, we found two females with young (one with three and one with four) and three juveniles. All the young were healthy and active and should easily have found enough food to reach a good hibernation weight. Dormice are long lived for



small mammals (up to five years), so these are a welcome addition to our breeding population.

In January, when all sensible dormice should be hibernating, I went with the bird box team to check the bird boxes for dormouse nests before they were cleaned out and renovated ready for the nesting season. Thirteen of the

boxes contained dormouse nests (some constructed on top of bird nests after the chicks had

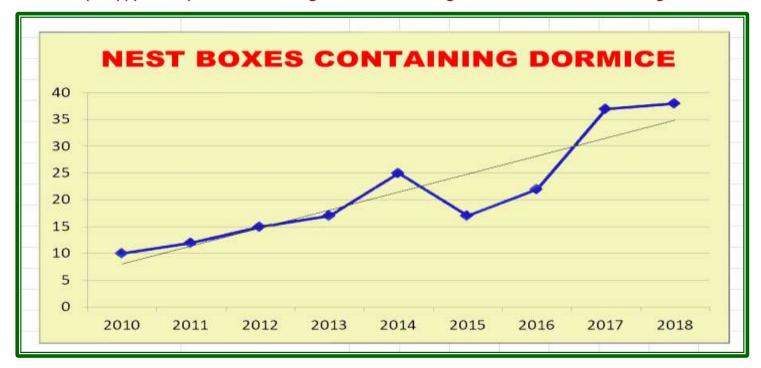
fledged) and one of these contained a sleeping dormouse!

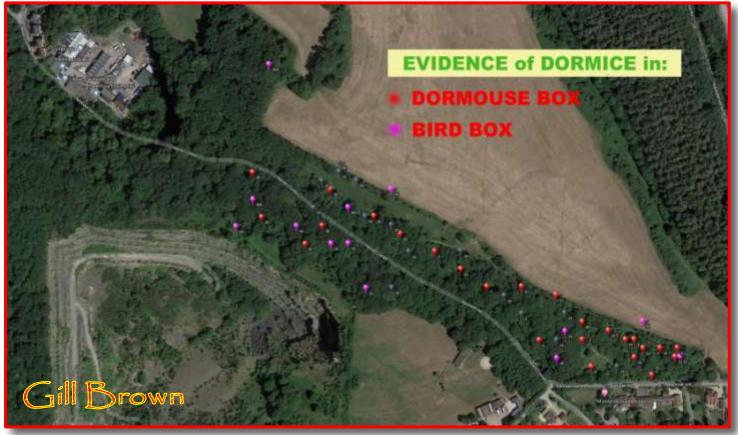
According to all the textbooks, dormice hibernate at ground level, but finding them in boxes during the winter seems to be quite a regular occurrence. It was previously thought that once dormice went into hibernation they didn't move all winter, but recent studies using radio tracking have shown that they can make more than one hibernation nest and may move between them. It's possible that our sleeping dormouse woke up during a mild spell and had a snooze in an old nest before going



back into hibernation at ground level. Interestingly, a few weeks later a dormouse was found sleeping on the grass by the side of a path close to the Jubilee Stone, which suggests that they do move about during mild spells. It was subsequently hidden in a much safer place nearby, so

hopefully when it woke up it found its way home. That makes a total of 52 dormice in 38 boxes and a very happy surveyor - I am looking forward to seeing what the 2019 season brings.







### **Help Raise Funds for BET**





Last year over 300 people raised more than £26,000 for local charities on the Rotary Club Nailsea and Backwell sponsored walk and run. This year the walk will take place on Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> June with a choice of 5k, 10k and 20k routes, to suit all ages and abilities. If you and your family or friends would like to take part, please choose BET as your nominated charity. Full details and registration forms can be found on the Rotary Nailsea website or via the BET website.

### Nest Box Report 2018/19

We had to wait until early January for the weather to become cold enough to be sure that the dormice would have found appropriate hibernation hidey-holes and not still be in the bird boxes - though there is always one ...!

In total we checked **59** boxes, of which **33** contained bird nests. There were dormouse nests in **13**, often built on top of used bird nests. This was fewer than last year, but should not be seen as indicative of the dormouse population - a more accurate picture can be gained from Gill's

monthly dormouse checks.

As usual, most of the boxes will have been used by either Blue or Great Tits, though there was one nest we thought could possibly have been that of a Marsh Tit. Last year we recorded use of a box in Badgers Wood by a Nuthatch and interestingly the same box showed evidence of Nuthatch attention this year, although not a nest. In the photo you



can see the

mud that the birds have put in place to seal the lid. We also found another box that had been used by a Nuthatch - and then taken over by hibernating hoverflies. Subsequently, boxes in need of repair or replacement have been attended to and we are now

looking at the patterns of use.

With more than seven years of records, it is interesting to see which areas of the reserves seem to be more favoured.

Many thanks to Gill, David, Brian, Bill and Mark for their help again this year.

We were also pleased to find that several of the new 'Woodstone' boxes put up a year ago have been successfully used. Indeed, one contained both bird and dormouse nests. This winter we have put up another five, replacing some life-expired wooden boxes. These new concrete/wood fibre boxes should have a much longer useful life.

However, one of our Woodstone boxes is missing! Box W15

was erected in Badgers Wood near the limestone pavement, but has now totally vanished. So when you are walking in the woods, please keep an eye open for it - it is brown and black in colour with 'W15' painted onto the front in white.

Carrie Riches & Mark Davey



## It was fun while it lasted!

At the last BET AGM we showed some fascinating aerial views of the BET reserves taken from a small drone. These views provide a different perspective of the landscape and our woods. As well as showing the wonderful seasonal colours, they provide us with useful information about the tree coverage and the connectivity between the different areas. We hoped to use the

aerial survey photos to help us monitor the progress of our management plan for the reserves.

We would also like to keep an eye on the condition of the quarry cliffs bordering Badgers Wood and check for any changes in the rock face over time.

These small sample pictures were taken from up to 300 feet





above the woods. The higher resolution versions on the BET website and Flickr show much more detail and are well worth looking at. However, a change to drone flying regulations on 13<sup>th</sup> March has increased the no-fly zone around airports from 1km to 5km, which unfortunately covers the BET area. We hope it may still be possible to continue to fly occasionally, with permission from Air Traffic Control, and we will be investigating the necessary procedures.

Peter Speight