

Backwell Environment Trust
Bulletin 40 - Spring 2020
www.backwellenvironmenttrust.org



A Very Warm Welcome to our Latest Spring Bulletin

The BET volunteers have been working extremely hard over the autumn and winter seasons beginning with the annual scything of our fabulous wildflower meadows and finishing with the coppicing/pollarding of selected woodland trees as well as the opening up of some of the overgrown pathways on our reserves.

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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).



Membership Renewal



The membership year runs from April 1st to March 31st and renewals for 2020/21 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 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 **always** 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 2019 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.



83 surveys were received this year - many thanks to everyone who took part especially the non-members, some of whom have supported the survey for several years.

THE TOP TEN - numbers in brackets show the number of gardens reporting the bird species.



The number of species which landed = 41, flew over only = 10 heard only = 1
In all a total of 52 species.

Over the past 4 years the number of species landed in gardens has decreased -

2016 = 49

2017 = 46

2018 = 44

2019 = 41

If this trend continues, it might indicate reducing biodiversity of birds in gardens.

It has been an extremely mild and wet winter so it is no surprise that **Fieldfare** and **Redwing** numbers are low - they are now able to winter further north and there are fewer cold snaps to

drive them south. There are very few birds on the local moors this winter with very few winter thrushes - climate change may be having an effect.



Song Thrush - none reported in gardens although they have been heard singing around Yatton.
Collared Dove - a 50% increase from last year which is a surprise as numbers had been falling perhaps partially due to predation by Sparrowhawks.

Goldfinch - now our most numerous garden bird; **Greenfinch** - good to see a 33% increase. There are signs that they are recovering from the Trichomoniasis disease.

Long-tailed Tit - they prosper in mild winters and are up by more than 50% from last year.

Jackdaw - doing well, up again this year and pre-roost flocks of 500 birds regularly reported.

We are always interested to hear about other wildlife visiting local gardens - this year badgers, squirrels, a deer and a vole were reported.

Win Lowman & Trevor Riddle



Nest Box Report 2019/20

Coincidentally, the nest box checking was within a few days of the previous year and once again we were lucky to have a good weather day. The regular team of Bill, Brian, Mark, Carrie, David and our dormouse licensee Gill Brown assembled, armed with ladders, tools and long gloves, (essential to give some protection against the fleas that frequent the nest boxes).

In all, **59** bird boxes were checked, **33** of which had a bird's nest. The number of dormouse nests totalled **18**, of which **12** were built on top of a bird nest. There was another nest which Gill decided was that of a yellow-necked mouse - we did have a brief glimpse of the occupant but it didn't hang around to be formally identified! In addition, there were the usual collection of slugs, earwigs and big spiders.

Interpreting the results this year has been quite difficult as there were a lot of boxes with varying amounts of moss which could indicate the intention to start a nest, but there were far fewer completed nests and of those even fewer appeared to have been well used which could indicate a successful outcome. We found un-hatched eggs in only 2

nests and no corpses apart from one quite well feathered nuthatch. So either everything was



very successful, or it was not a good year for nests, or the birds were finding suitable natural nest sites and did not use the boxes! The added complication is that dormouse nests on top of bird nests make it difficult to make a judgement as to the success of the bird nest.



However, preliminary analysis of information collected by British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) volunteer bird ringers and nest recorders suggests that many species laid eggs significantly earlier than average, possibly due to record-breaking February temperatures. Numbers of Blue, Great and Long-tailed Tits at the start of the breeding season were higher than average and each pair that bred produced a higher than average number of chicks.



Possible Wren's Nest?

One of the more interesting nest designs found was domed shaped. Apart from the Long-tailed Tit, Dipper and House-Martin, the Wren is the only British bird to build a domed nest so it is possible that it could have been built by a wren.

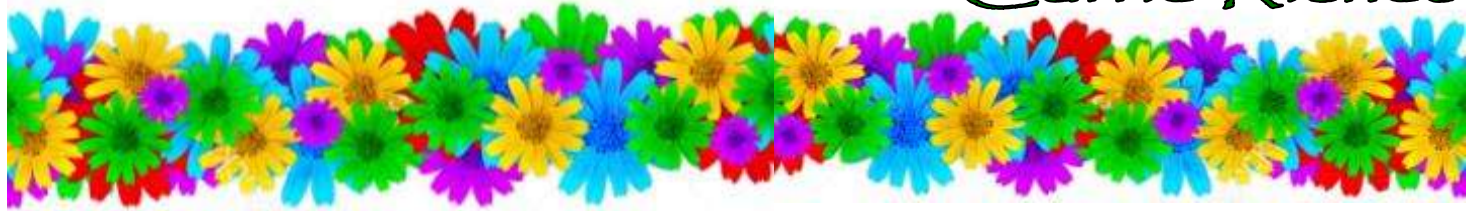
The male Wren builds several nests, the female then selects one and puts in the 'soft

furnishing' before laying a clutch of five to six eggs. She does all the incubation and rearing while the male goes off wooing a second, or even third, female.

Boxes needing attention, replacing or relocating were noted and will be subsequently revisited.

Many thanks for everyone's help again this year, enabling us to get all the boxes inspected in just one long morning.

Carrie Riches



Backwell Bones

Way back in 2009 when BET was in the process of purchasing Badgers Wood, we thought we were buying 15 acres of land including the historically important Backwell Cave. Unbeknown to us however, the land owner was secretly selling 3 of 'our' 15 acres to another purchaser - something we didn't find out about until it was way too late to do anything about it. Today, the Cave is still owned by the developers (Bristol & South West Developments Ltd) who have converted the weighbridge at the entrance to the recycling centre and have planning permission to build industrial units close by. We still live in hope that one day we will be able to own and protect this very important archaeological site for the people of Backwell.

So we were very interested to hear that Cardiff University PhD candidate, Adelle Bricking, is currently researching Iron Age mortuary practices in southwest England and her studies include the bones from Backwell Cave.

The cave, which is located in the woodlands, very close to Badgers Wood, was excavated in 1937 and bones from up to 30 individuals were found. Using new analysis methods, Adelle hopes the bones can help answer questions about when and how the burials took place and what foods were eaten at that time.

This research is really exciting and we look forward to hearing about Adelle's findings and conclusions.



Backwell Cave

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Hello! My name is Adelle, I'm a PhD candidate at Cardiff University researching Iron Age mortuary practice in southwest Britain. As part of my research, I am going to be looking at the human remains excavated from Backwell Cave to help solve the puzzle of who these people were and how they ended up in the cave. Research background During the Iron Age, burial practice was characteristically varied and there appears to be no "formal" way to dispose of a body. Cemeteries and 'typical' inhumations within graves don't become common until the later Iron Age (c.100 BC - AD 43). Instead, human bone is found within domestic sites,

particularly grain storage pits and ditches that surround the settlement, in all states of articulation. Sometimes it will be a whole skeleton, others it'll be a torso or a leg, but more often it's a part of a skull or a single bone from an arm or leg. Part of my research is trying to figure out what these processes might have been. Previous studies on Iron Age burial have focused on burial within settlement sites since the majority of the evidence originates from them. However, human remains are also discovered in caves throughout the southwest, particularly in south Wales and Somerset. Backwell Cave makes a fascinating case study site because of the concentration of human bone within a small area as well as the confusion over the type of



burial. The bones were not laid out in neat, anatomically correct positions, rather they appeared to be disarticulated and scattered. Tratman (1937) suggested that these were either re-deposited after being unearthed from disturbed burials elsewhere, or inhumed individuals that had parts removed from scavenging animals. We can't say for certain if this assemblage represents a single event, such as a widespread illness or massacre, or if the bodies were deposited over a longer period of time. However, we can use scientific methods to determine how these individuals were laid to rest in the cave using histological light microscopy, what they ate using stable isotope analysis, and when they died using radiocarbon dating. I have now sampled five right adult humeri (upper arm bones) from the assemblage. The bones are very fragmented and considering the comingled nature of the deposit, I wanted to be sure that each sample represented a discrete individual, so I wouldn't duplicate data from the analyses and therefore

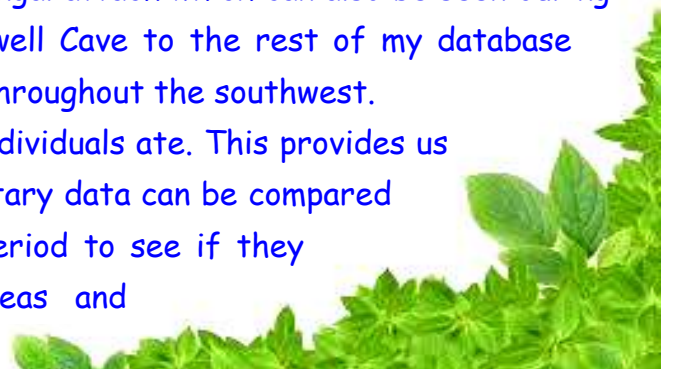


skew the results. The analyses I plan to use are:

Histological light microscopy of bone diagenesis. This sounds very scientific, but it is quite simple and very useful to study individual bones or assemblages that do not make anatomical sense. To briefly summarise, after death, putrefactive bacteria that lives in the gut make its way into the skeletal system through small pores in the bone called Haversian canals. The bacteria begin to eat away at the collagen that make up the bone microstructure. By cutting a very thin section off of a piece of cortical bone, the degree of destruction can be viewed under the

microscope. The bio-erosion is then scored on a scale of 0 to 5. The longer an individual was left whole after death, the more destroyed the microstructure will be. If the funerary treatment facilitated rapid decomposition - for example, excarnation, or being left open to the elements to be rapidly de-fleshed, then the microstructure will have minimal bacterial damage. If the samples from Backwell Cave show good microstructure preservation, we can suggest that these bones were brought to the cave after undergoing a funerary process that caused rapid removal of flesh or body parts. If not, we can suggest that these individuals were buried whole. Additionally, certain soil environments can cause bioerosion and fungal attack which can also be seen during this analysis. I will compare the results from Backwell Cave to the rest of my database comprising of about 200 samples from various sites throughout the southwest.

Stable isotope analysis - this will tell us what the individuals ate. This provides us with more information on what life was like. This dietary data can be compared to other sampled individuals from the same time period to see if they match or if they might be from different areas and therefore eating different things.



Radiocarbon dating - Tratman (1937) suggested that these individuals were of Iron Age date based on some metalwork found among the burials. However, since the assemblage was so mixed and the reports do not give us stratigraphic information on the excavations, a radiocarbon date will give us more a secure date. These analyses will give us a more comprehensive understanding of the use of the cave as a place of burial. Comparing this data with other samples from sites across the southwest will give us a better understanding of where Backwell Cave fits within Iron Age burial practice. These bones have such an incredible story to tell, and I'm so grateful to the University of Bristol Speleological Society Museum for giving me access to their collections. Watch this space as their story unfolds!



More information can be found on the BET website under 'visiting the reserves' → 'archaeological features'.

Adelle Bricking



Woodland Report

So far, this winter's weather has been wet, windy and mild with temperatures around 2°C above the seasonal average and very few frosts. This has probably suited a lot of the wildlife on our reserves but probably not any hibernating species such as our dormice. Whilst it is not unusual for hibernating animals to wake up during the winter, food is often in short supply, or even non-existent, so too many warm spells could burn up their precious fat reserves.



Fortunately, the weather on our BET volunteer mornings has been kind, with only a few sessions curtailed due to the, now familiar, storm-force winds and heavy rain!

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 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 on Monday mornings in just 3½ months.

Coppicing & Pollarding



This winter, we have continued to coppice and pollard a proportion of the high canopy trees that were blocking virtually all sunlight reaching the woodland floor. The recommendation was to reduce the high tree canopy cover by a third and we have been gradually working towards this goal and we are well on track to make this a reality by 2021/22. The thinning will encourage the mid-height trees (such as hazel) as well as bramble to thrive once more - which will just happen to be the perfect habitat for our dormice.



Jubilee Stone Wood - Coppicing

Path Widening & Glades

Some sections of our public footpath/bridleway network and BET-created permissive paths have become quite overgrown over the past few years to the detriment of both wildlife and people. Wider pathways through the woodland, interspersed with sunny glades can be easily created to provide warm, sheltered habitats and so this winter, we have embarked on a programme of selective path widening. The aim is to widen the major pathways to approximately 3 to 5 metres and in so doing, create the very valuable 'woodland edge' habitat and glades whilst maintaining numerous tree canopy links to enable our dormice to still travel easily through the woodland.

Hazel Tree 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



Hazel Planting

principle sources of food for fattening up our dormice prior to hibernation and it 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.

So when we were approached by the Nailsea and Backwell Rotary Club to see if we would like to apply for a grant to buy more trees for the BET woodlands, hazel trees were our number one choice. Our grant application was successful and we took delivery of 60 small trees supplied by The Woodland Trust and planted them in the areas where the high-canopy trees had recently been coppiced.



Fallen Trees

Unfortunately, we've had two very large trees fall over in the past six months during periods of high winds and/or heavy rain which required us to bring in professional tree help.

In the summer, a healthy, large ash tree growing out of the Warrener's Cottage in Jubilee Stone Wood was blown over, causing some damage to the archaeology and threatening to fall into Cheston Combe Road.



We were extremely grateful to Julian Batt Woodland Services who came and removed the tree for us at no cost to BET.

In the winter, an exceptionally large lime tree in Badgers Wood was blown over blocking The Fern Way trail. Local tree surgeon, Alan Brock came out and cut a section through the 2ft diameter trunk to enable us to re-open the trail - and then wouldn't take any payment for his services.

These incidents would have cost BET a considerable sum of money and so we were really touched by the generosity of both of these tree surgeons who made the trees safe for us whilst refusing to take any payment for their services.



Ash Dieback Disease

There can be no doubt now that ash dieback disease will have a major effect on our woodlands as well as having serious financial consequences for BET over the coming years. Last summer, at least 50% of the ash trees in the woodland were showing signs of the disease and I suspect that this year that percentage will only increase. The research suggests that when



a tree shows signs of the disease, it will not recover and will eventually succumb to the fungal infection. Whilst the majority of the ash trees in our woodlands can be safely left to decay, those close to houses, roads and footpaths will require us to take action - and in most cases, their size and location will mean we will have to employ professional tree surgeons.

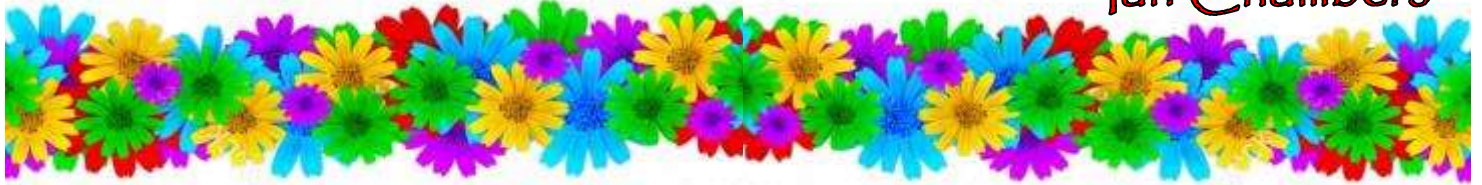
During the spring and summer, we will be undertaking a comprehensive survey of all the ash and other suspect trees in our woodlands using professional tree surgeons and BET volunteers. The results of this survey will give us a clearer picture of our future liabilities.

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 6 - 9 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, AS EVER, A BIG BET THANK YOU TO YOU ALL!

Jan Chambers



Ticks!

Just a reminder that when you are out and about in the countryside or even in your garden, it is always wise to be on the lookout for ticks. Ticks are very small insects

(between 0.5mm and 2mm) and when you walk through vegetation they can attach themselves to your clothing. Once on you, they will try to find some exposed skin - the softer the skin the better (!) - where they will very firmly attach themselves. Over recent years, it would seem a higher proportion of these insects now carry Lyme Disease which can turn out to be quite serious if not diagnosed and treated promptly. So when you're out and about in the great outdoors, always check for ticks when you get home and if you find one, the best way by far to remove them is with a tick remover (on sale at the vets) otherwise, you can use tweezers. If you remove the tick within about 24 hours of being bitten, the chances of being infected are almost non-existent, but even if find one after that time, the chance of you contracting Lyme Disease from a single bite is extremely low. However, just in case, if you get flu-like symptoms, especially with a red, circular rash where you were bitten, see your doctor ASAP.



Over the 25 years that I have been messing about in the countryside, I estimate I have removed around 1,100 ticks - and I have never contracted the disease, so please don't let them spoil your day out - just remember to have a good check when you get home!





BET Bonfires



It could have been that he was born on Guy Fawkes Day, or maybe that his middle name was Guy, but going way back in my childhood, I have fond memories of my Dad spending hours building and stoking wonderful bonfires. Not only were they a practical way to burn garden pruning and heavier tree branches, but the resulting ash would be dug back into the soil afterwards. It was a sad day for me when lighting bonfires in your garden was finally outlawed!



So imagine my delight, when I found that it was also a necessary part of the work we do in maintaining the woodlands. Unfortunately, quite a lot of our ash trees are now showing signs of ash dieback disease and it is recommended that all infected branches be burnt to slow the spread of the disease. This winter, the bridleway edges have been coppiced and pollarded as the trees and bushes have started to encroach on the path. The same needs to be carried out when some of our tall & thin trees block out the light to the woodland floor. Whilst a lot of cut material is left to rot down in the woodland, a bonfire is often essential to burn the smaller cuttings and any diseased wood.



Starting the fire is a great skill, especially if it has been raining. Those volunteers who tackle this first stage have

different ideas, so I watch and learn with enthusiasm. As the fire base gets red hot, layers are added, positioned all in the same direction to allow the air to funnel through. The fire can then be built higher, still keeping the layers going in the same direction. With all the cut material to be burnt, the team become a hive of industry, some dragging wood to the fire and others cutting off branches to feed the flames.

I used to feel that these big fires would catch onto other remaining trees, especially when we left at the end of a work session. However, having witnessed this winter operation for a few years now, I am reassured. Ian will often pop back later, just to double check, and make sure that the fire will burn itself out safely.



There are plenty of jobs to do if you are not keen on being near the fire, but it is pretty hard to get away without taking that smoky bonfire aroma home. It has been known that we have been treated to a toasted marshmallow or two . . . quite apart from the official tea break, when we all gather together near the warmth and listen to the crackling sounds.

Jas

