

**Backwell Environment Trust**  
**Bulletin 42 - Spring 2021**  
**[www.backwellenvironmenttrust.org](http://www.backwellenvironmenttrust.org)**



**A Very Warm Welcome to our Latest Spring Bulletin**

Inevitably, the restrictions arising from the ongoing coronavirus pandemic have once again limited some of the projects we had intended to complete this year, nevertheless, work has still continued on our nature reserves. The BET volunteers managed to complete the scything of our fabulous wildflower meadows and also made a good start on coppicing some of our ash trees affected with ash dieback disease.

**Bird Survey**

**Ash Dieback**

**Biochar**

**Grant Application Success**

**Woodland Report**

**Charity Walks**

**Rotten Benches**



In these challenging times, our nature reserves have seen unprecedented numbers of visitors over the autumn and winter months with people using their exercise time to re-connect with nature. We've had many positive comments - and quite a few visitors signing up as new BET members!

# YACWAG 2020 Christmas Bird Survey

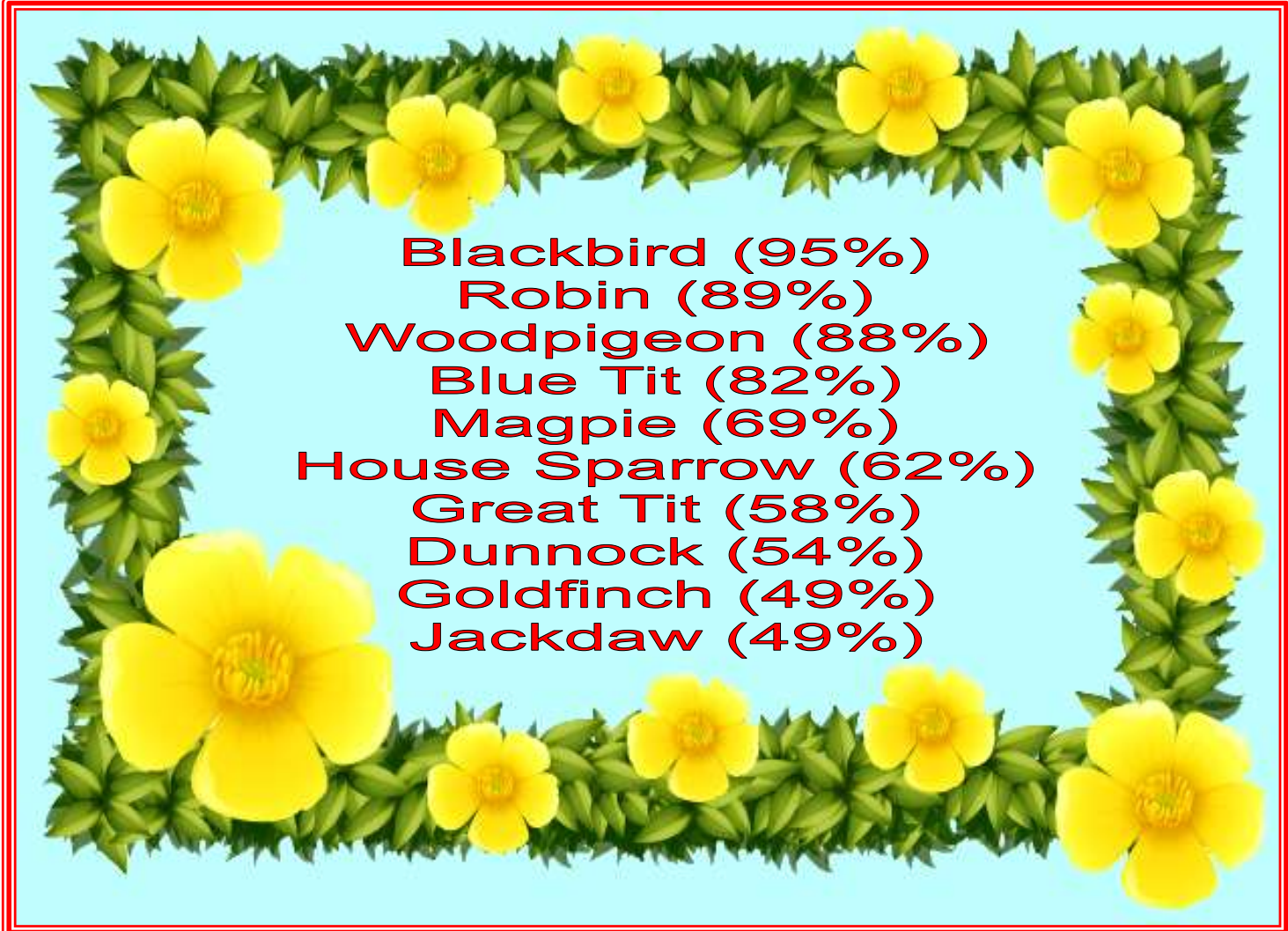
For many years now, YACWAG (Yatton and Congresbury Wildlife Action Group) has been organising a Christmas bird survey, recording all the birds coming into their members' gardens over the festive period. This year they continued the expansion of their survey into the Backwell area by enlisting the help of BET members.

130 surveys were received - a record number! Thanks to all who took part - members of YACWAG, BET and all non-members.



## The Top Ten

Numbers in brackets show the percentage number of gardens reporting the bird species.



**Blackbird (95%)**  
**Robin (89%)**  
**Woodpigeon (88%)**  
**Blue Tit (82%)**  
**Magpie (69%)**  
**House Sparrow (62%)**  
**Great Tit (58%)**  
**Dunnock (54%)**  
**Goldfinch (49%)**  
**Jackdaw (49%)**

The total number of bird species which landed in gardens was 42, slightly up on 2019 but less than in previous years.

2016 = 49    2017 = 46    2018 = 44    2019 = 41    2020 = 42

Bird species that were recorded flying over gardens was 11 and those that were only heard was 1.

**In all, a total of 54 species, 2 more than in the 2019 survey**

Trevor reports that the weather was generally benign with a cold snap arriving just after the survey period ended. The two previous surveys were also conducted in mild weather.

Generally, numbers were similar to the two previous years. No Goldcrests were recorded but there appeared to be fewer breeding birds in the villages in 2020. There were only three Reed Buntings seen, but records of this species are too few to make any meaningful statistical judgement in this year's figures.

On the credit side, Blackbird numbers were up around 20% and there have been good numbers of continental birds this winter, nearly all males. Jackdaws increased similarly, and one has to wonder just how much capacity the local area has to absorb any more.



The biggest increase, 30%, was for Wrens with 62 birds recorded and this aligns with local breeding season surveys. The run of mild winters has enabled them to multiply as they nest in almost any type of habitat. Long Tailed Tit numbers increased by a smaller amount, probably for similar reasons. Collared Doves and Dunnocks showed a more modest rise in numbers. It was good to receive records of calling Tawny Owls - but the stand out record was

the Peregrine perched on Yatton church on a couple of occasions. If anyone sees it there (on the small 'pepper pot' tower) we would be delighted if you would report it to Win. Indeed we are always pleased to have any wildlife sightings.

The amount of birds recorded far exceeds the numbers in the adjoining countryside where there seem to be fewer birds each winter. Gardens are increasingly becoming really important areas for all wildlife, so thank you to all green gardeners.

Other wildlife visiting gardens this year were badgers, lots of squirrels, roe deer and foxes.



## Observations on YACWAG's Christmas Bird Surveys : 2013-2020

YACWAG first started collecting data on the number of birds visiting gardens at Christmas 2013 so seven years on, it is possible to calculate and reflect on the changes that have occurred in that time. For many species, the number of birds are too low to give any meaningful statistic and the numbers of more common species recorded have been extrapolated to reflect the numbers per 100 gardens to compensate for the fact that we received 80 surveys in 2013 and 130 in 2020. The majority of the large increases and declines will come as no surprise to members who watch their garden birds on any sort of regular basis. The loss of Greenfinches has been well documented but the broadly similar reduction in Chaffinches is perhaps more shocking. Chaffinches also suffer from the Trichomoniasis disease, but it is generally thought to a lesser extent than Greenfinches. Probably



more of our winter Chaffinches are migrants from the north, and milder winters have enabled them to spend their winters further north. Certainly the number of Chaffinches in the local countryside has declined in recent years. The inexorable rise in Goldfinches in our gardens is well known. It is encouraging to report positive news and a

41 percent increase in House Sparrows is very welcome. The local Jackdaw population continues to thrive and these birds, together with Magpies, appear to be gaining ever more confidence to come into our gardens. The local Magpie population is not increasing so our figures suggest that they are using gardens more. Woodpigeon is another species that never used to come near a garden and as they have multiplied in gardens, so Collared Doves have gone the other way. Are these two factors linked? The answer is that I don't know but being much bigger birds Woodpigeons dominate their smaller relatives which do seem to be more prone to predation by Sparrowhawks. I am surprised by the reduction in Great Tits, but Long Tailed Tits and Wrens have certainly benefited from a run of mild winters.



**Win Lowman and Trevor Riddle**

# Ash Dieback Disease

At the end of the summer in 2019, we estimated that at least 50% of the ash trees in the woodland were showing signs of ash dieback disease. When we did the same survey in 2020, that estimate had increased to over 95% - and all the research suggests that when a tree shows any 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 have required us to take action.

Over the summer and autumn months, a total of twelve professional tree surgeons were consulted to both assess the number of ash trees that could have health and safety implications for BET and also to give a quotation for the work. In total, between 250 and 300 ash trees were identified as needing to be felled. After a long and detailed selection process, we accepted the



quotation from Claverham Trees to perform the work. The main project will start in late September and is scheduled to last approximately three weeks.

However, to enable us to gather valuable information before the main project commences, we booked a single day of felling with Matt and his team in early March. In all, about fifteen ash trees were felled and made



safe and it gave us a much better understanding of the amount of timber and branches that the felling will produce.

Where the felled ash trees can be easily extracted from the woodland, we shall be selling the timber to offset the cost of the project. The wood will then be used locally and made into logs for open fires and woodburners. The smaller branches will be used to make a special type of charcoal ('Biochar') that is used as a soil improver. The process also captures some of the carbon from the wood that would otherwise be released into the atmosphere as carbon dioxide or methane.



# phoenix biochar



**Phoenix Biochar is a community interest company (CIC) that aims to limit the social and environmental impact of the Ash Dieback pandemic. We transform unsafe, unhealthy or even unwanted trees into Biochar.**

We recognized that the devastating loss of the ash tree could be lessened by capturing some of this resource. There are an estimated 125 million ash trees in the UK alone, and the fungus (*Hymenoscyphus fraxineus*) is anticipated to kill up to 90% of these trees. By transforming some of these trees into Biochar, we are creating a new, long-lasting, substance. The inspiration for the project came from a North Somerset Times article that highlighted the ash dieback disease pandemic within the BET reserves.



Biochar is a stable substance that has numerous applications. It is a form of charcoal which is less dense as it isn't made from the hard heartwood -



but the trees extremities/branches (brush). It can in fact be made from many different organic materials - provided they are heated to a high temperature in the absence of oxygen (pyrolysis). This takes place within a kiln.



the kiln - means that there is relatively little smoke.



A typical burn lasts about 2.5 hours and brush is almost continuously added to the fire - this means the wood never gets the chance to completely burn before it is smothered by the new

wood above. Once the kiln is full of red-hot embers, water is poured over - quenching the fire and instantaneously creating Biochar.



The application of our Biochar is for use as a soil improver. Biochar was rediscovered in South America where in previous millennia, farmers added it to the soil. Those soils are still very stable and fertile - thanks to the Biochar. Biochar provides a structure within the soil for microorganisms, water/air, nutrients and fungi. All these elements are essential for healthy soil - and therefore healthy plants and the Biochar will last in the soil for hundreds of years. When gardeners use Biochar on their gardens, they will not only improve the soil but will also ensure the carbon contained in the Biochar is not emitted into the atmosphere as CO<sub>2</sub>, which we know is a greenhouse gas.



I am very grateful for my contact with BET - as it was the agreement for me to make Biochar from the ash on the reserves that encouraged me to create Phoenix Biochar CIC.

Evan Trower



## Grant Application Success

In the middle of last year we were suddenly faced with the challenge of finding the funds to cover the cost of felling our diseased ash trees. The potential costs of keeping our reserves safe greatly exceeded our financial reserves. We started hunting for sources of possible grants but soon found that most offered only small amounts or were prioritising coronavirus-related causes. Fortunately we discovered that the Landfill Community Fund was still operating and we appeared to be eligible.



*The Landfill Tax Credit Scheme (as it was originally named) was established by the Government in 1996. It enables landfill operators to donate part of their annual tax liability to enrolled Environmental Bodies for a variety of approved community and environmental projects. Landfill operators can reclaim 90% of their contribution as a tax credit which means the remaining 10% must be provided either by them or an independent third party.*

Several landfill operator companies participate in the scheme but have different criteria for funding projects. Our close proximity to the Tarmac Stancombe Quarry made Tarmac our most appropriate funder.



One key criterion to meet was that the project needed to be within 10 miles of any licensed landfill site. A bit of research showed that there are actually three licensed landfill sites within 3 miles of BET. Finally we had just four days to prepare and submit an application in time to meet the next round of grant allocations.

Eligible projects need to fall into specific categories such as Reclamation, Pollution Reduction or Historic Buildings. Our ash dieback project was able to come under the Public Amenity category - providing, maintaining or improving a public park or other public amenity.

After jumping through a few more hoops, in January we were delighted that Tarmac awarded BET a grant of up to £20,000, provided we contributed a Third Party Contribution (TPC) and other fees totalling almost £2,200. As members will be aware, we started a fundraising appeal which had a fantastic response. This meant we could pay the TPC and qualify for the grant.



We would like to thank Tarmac for their generous support which will help us to keep the BET reserves safe for our members and visitors.

We were delighted that representatives of Tarmac Stancombe Quarry were able to come on site to witness the start of the felling project in Jubilee Stone Wood.

*Peter Speight with Courtney Walker, Quarry Supervisor and Mike Mithan, Quarry Manager*



Peter Speight



# Woodland Report

It's been a challenging time for BET over the past six months with the last two coronavirus lockdowns having a serious impact on the work our volunteers were able to carry out on the reserves. Nevertheless, we still managed to get quite a bit of work done both during the usual volunteer sessions and by individuals using their exercise time to work on specific projects.

Unfortunately, the restrictions meant that the checking of our dormouse boxes was not able to be carried out last year, but the boxes have now been cleaned out ready for the coming season. We were also not able to clean out our bird boxes this winter, although the feeling is that missing one season won't cause too many problems for our nesting birds.



**So just what have those hard-working BET volunteers been up to over the past six 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. Because of the limited time available to us this winter, we concentrated on ash trees that needed to be felled because of ash dieback disease and on some sycamores whose leaves can cast a great deal of shade.

## Hedgelaying



Just downhill from the Jubilee Stone, next to the bridleway is a hollow where we have pollarded some sycamores this winter. As this will result in extra light reaching the woodland floor, we took the opportunity to lay a section of hedge next to the path using the hazel, whitebeam, hawthorn and holly growing there.



## 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 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 understorey of interwoven branches which is ideal for dormice to travel through the woodland.

Last year we were very pleased to take delivery of sixty small hazel trees supplied by the Woodland Trust and kindly donated by the Nailsea and Backwell Rotary Club. This year they awarded us another grant and consequently another sixty hazel trees have been planted in the woodland where they will thrive in the extra light created by the areas of ash dieback felling.



## Noticeboards

If you happened to be walking around Badgers Wood recently, you might have noticed the two new



noticeboards that have been put up next to two of the reserve's most spectacular sites.

On a clear day, the view from the top of Badgers Wood is simply stunning with features visible over forty miles away. We had talked about putting a noticeboard here for some time so when we were awarded a grant from the Nailsea Lions, we were very keen for it to finally go ahead.

The view takes in Coles Quarry, Clevedon and Worlebury on our side of the Channel, Steep Holm and Flat Holm in the Severn and Cardiff and the Welsh hills beyond.



BET's highly unusual limestone pavement in Badgers Wood is quite a sight to see and the method of its formation over thousands of years makes for a very interesting geological story. Up until now, we had a simple laminated notice at the site but we thought its geological importance deserved something better. Both of our new notice boards have been colour printed on aluminium and should last a very long time.



## BET Volunteers

When the current restrictions have allowed, the BET volunteers have been out performing essential tasks on our nature reserves. Even during lockdowns, paths have been cleared, steps replaced and hedges laid by individuals keeping the reserves ticking over. 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.

**Jan Chambers**

### BET Membership 2020/21

Just a reminder that we've changed our membership renewal date from April to October

**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/email in advance to find out where we'll be working (01275 463315 [ian.chambers676@gmail.com](mailto:ian.chambers676@gmail.com)).



## Charity Walks, Runs - and now Bikes!

This year, Rotary Nailsea and Backwell celebrates the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Nailsea Charity Walks and Runs event. In the past few years over £20,000 has been raised each year - even in 2020 with all the changes forced on us by the pandemic. It was a great success with 280 people taking part despite the difficult circumstances.



There are three routes to choose from - 5km, 10km and 20km. To make sure there is something to suit everyone, this year there is the exciting addition of Bike Rides, with a choice of three routes - 25km, 50km and 100km.



The event will take place on Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> June, starting at Scotch Horn, Nailsea. Or, if you prefer, you can take part on any day from then until the end of July.

The day is a great opportunity for people to get together, enjoy the local countryside and raise money for deserving causes.



We know that BET membership includes many keen walkers and cyclists. We hope there will be lots of participants this year and that the money raised will exceed last year's total. We would be pleased if you nominate BET as your charity of choice on the registration form.

Registration details and further information about the routes can be found on website

NailseaRotary.org



# Those Rotten Benches!

Some years ago we installed a number of benches around the reserves to give visitors places to



stop, rest and enjoy the surroundings. These were constructed from ash logs from the reserves. Ash is not very resistant to rotting and as a result some of the benches have needed to be replaced.

We have been able to make new seats using logs from the ash dieback felling which have not yet become

brittle or rotten. They split very nicely using simple wedges and, once secured to new posts, the seats were trimmed with a traditional drawknife.

