

# **Backwell Environment Trust**

## **Bulletin 44 - Spring 2022**

**[www.backwellenvironmenttrust.org](http://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 with the annual scything of our fabulous wildflower meadows, clearing bramble from our archaeological features and coppicing ash trees with advanced ash dieback disease. We've also had tree surgeons working on our reserves to remove some of the larger and technically difficult dead and diseased trees close to roads and footpaths.

**Ash Dieback Disease**

**Woodland Report**

**Xmas Bird Survey**

**Butterfly Survey**

**Winter Fungi**

**Scything Workshops**

# Ash Dieback Disease

After 15 months of intense planning, detailed assessments, surveys and approvals, the first phase of the removal of ash dieback infected trees started in September 2021 where the trees identified as being the most urgent bordering roads and houses, were felled. This complicated and potentially dangerous task was performed flawlessly by Mendip Trees & Landscapes Ltd (MTL) who have both the experience and remote specialist machinery required to carry out this type of work safely. Within the two week period we had MTL working for us, a total of 99 of the highest priority trees next to the road and houses were made safe out of a total of 112 trees identified from the independent tree safety assessment we commissioned in summer 2021. Unfortunately, due to the extremely high workloads of the most experienced tree surgeons dealing with ash dieback, frustratingly it was not possible to complete the remaining 13 roadside trees within the two week time slot that was available to us.



**Ash Tree & Cable**

## Mobile Elevated Work Platform



Consequently in February 2022, we commissioned Nuthatch Arboriculture to complete the roadside project using manual felling techniques working from a mobile elevated work platform. The task was made particularly difficult as numerous diseased ash trees were growing through a high voltage electricity cable and therefore needed to be dismantled very carefully. Nevertheless, the remaining diseased trees overhanging the road were removed with great skill and precision over a three day period.

Additionally, between December and the end of February, some of the smaller diseased ash trees overhanging the bridleway in lower Jubilee Stone Wood were removed by the BET volunteers.



Due to the very high density of diseased ash trees in lower Jubilee Stone Wood, we have reluctantly taken the decision to temporarily close a permissive path in that area to reduce the number of ash trees that will need to be felled for safety reasons.



One of the most obvious visual characteristics of ash dieback is when the uppermost leaves and branches start to 'dieback'. Up to a few years



ago, it was presumed that the extent of this dieback was a good indicator to how far the disease had spread through the tree. However, recent fatalities of tree surgeons have highlighted that this is clearly not always the case as a percentage of infected trees can exhibit quite marked internal fungal decay whilst only showing moderate levels of leaf

loss. This hidden, internal decay can have very serious, or even fatal consequences for tree surgeons as the tree can unexpectedly, violently split or fracture whilst being felled. Of the ash trees we have removed so far, between 5 - 10% of our trees have exhibited this extremely dangerous, internal fungal decay.



## Moving Forward

We aim to complete the removal of severely diseased path-side ash trees gradually over the next three years, or hopefully much longer, or even not at all, should the disease progress slower or be less severe than expected. Initially, only heavily infected trees whose canopies have thinned by 50 - 100% will be felled - the scientific consensus being that these trees have no realistic chance of long-term survival. Trees exhibiting canopy reductions of less than 50% will be left for the time being and re-assessed on an annual basis. Trees in the deeper woodland will be left to decay naturally without felling.

Where ash trees have been removed, these areas have been replanted with a mixture of native trees - hawthorn, rowan, blackthorn, silver birch, hazel, spindle and oak. These trees have been kindly donated by Nailsea and Backwell Rotary, the Woodland Trust and BET members.



In total, **243** native and locally-sourced trees have been planted this winter and we plan to continue replanting in subsequent years.



Although this devastating disease will undoubtedly have a profound effect on our woodlands over the next few years, there are still many reasons to be optimistic for the future. It has always been a key recommendation in our Management Plan to increase the biodiversity of tree species in our woodlands and to open up our footpaths to let in more sunlight. This work has been gradually proceeding for some years now with impressive results, so we are confident that in a very short space of time, our nature reserves will become even more wildlife-friendly than before.



## BET Butterfly Surveys

Butterflies have a unique place amongst British terrestrial insects as they act as indicators of the state of the environment, allowing us to assess both the impacts of climate change and the progress of BET's ongoing commitment to conserve and enhance the biodiversity of our nature reserves. Butterflies make an excellent biological indicator species because of their rapid lifecycles and, in many cases, their high sensitivity to environmental changes. As they are regularly monitored all across the UK, over time the data collected will enable an accurate assessment of their abundance or decline.



BET is one of around 2,000 sites across the UK submitting annual butterfly records to the United Kingdom Butterfly Monitoring Scheme (UKBMS) which is one of the longest running insect monitoring schemes in the world.

BET volunteers perform the monitoring of butterfly numbers and species present on our

nature reserves every week between April and September. The same route is walked at a slow pace as long as the ambient temperature is 13°C or above and the weather is not too wet or windy. Butterflies are very sensitive to weather conditions and will not fly if the conditions are not suitable for them.

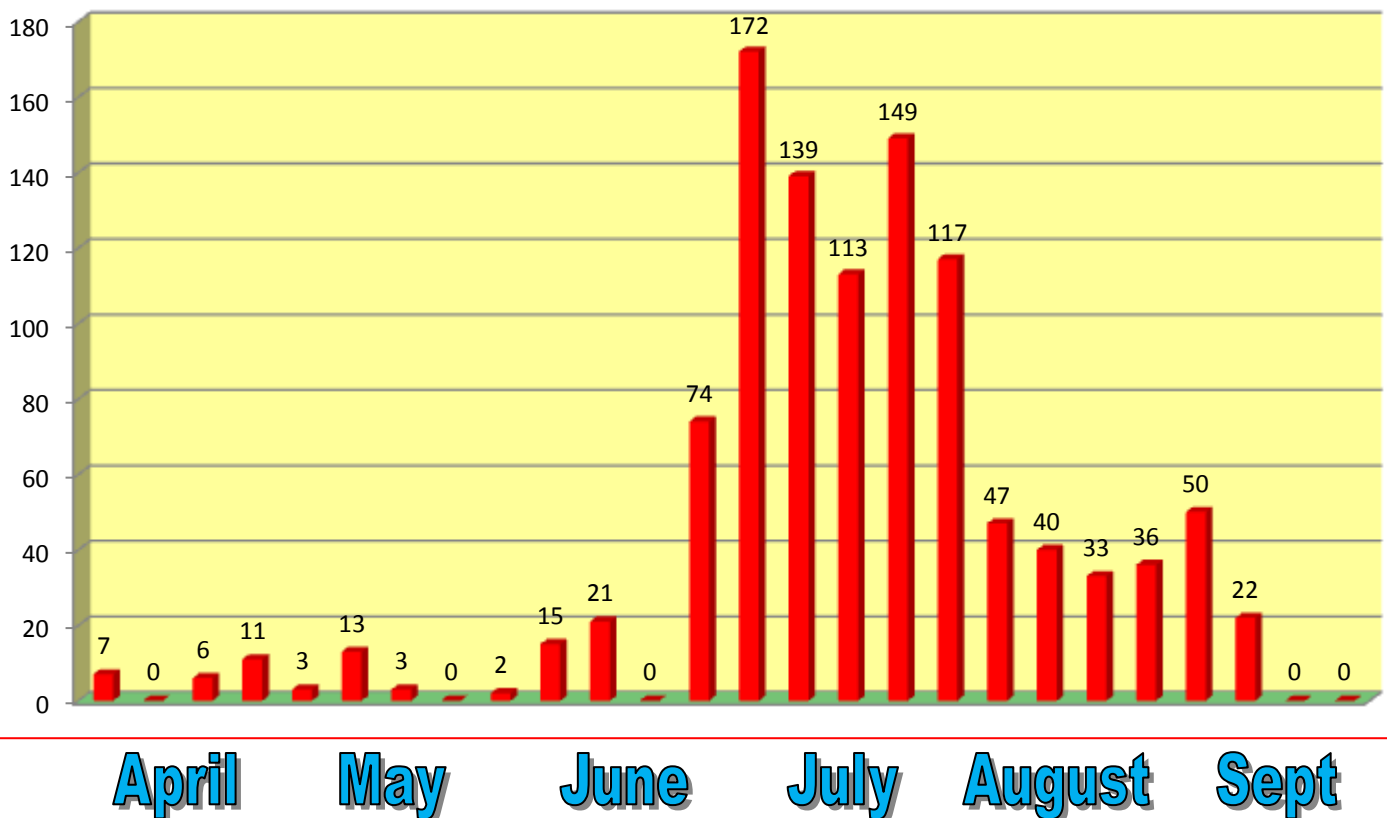
Between the start of April and the end of September (26 weeks), a total of 20 butterfly species were recorded with 1,073 individual butterflies logged. Surveys were only missed on five occasions within the

six month survey period where the weather was either too cold, wet or windy. The graph shows the number of individual butterfly sightings for each week of the survey. If a survey was missed due to inclement weather, it has been labelled '0' on the graph.



**Gatekeeper**

## Butterfly Survey Results 2021



**Painted Lady**



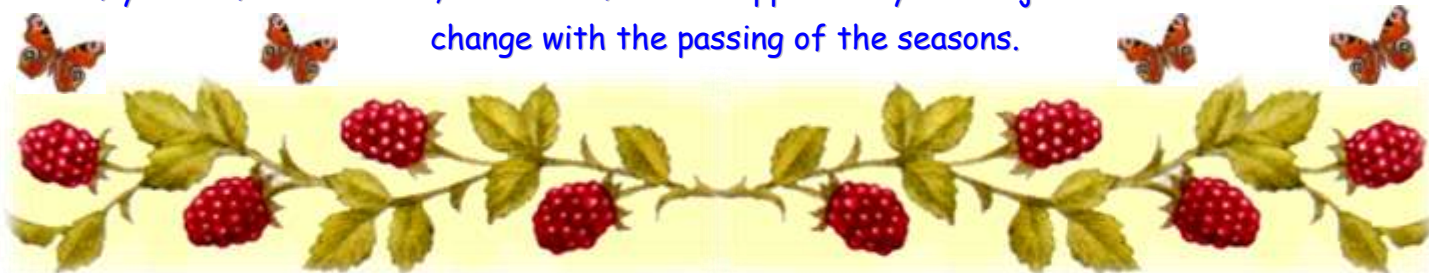
**Marbled White**



**Small Tortoiseshell**

| Most Abundant Species | Sightings | Least Abundant Species | Sightings |
|-----------------------|-----------|------------------------|-----------|
| Ringlet               | 233       | Painted Lady           | 1         |
| Marbled White         | 156       | Small Copper           | 2         |
| Gatekeeper            | 141       | Holly Blue             | 3         |
| Meadow Brown          | 137       | Large Skipper          | 4         |
| Speckled Wood         | 135       | Orange Tip             | 5         |

Whilst taking part in the survey is undoubtedly a big commitment and requires a fair degree of butterfly identification skills, it's also a fabulous opportunity to see just how our nature reserves change with the passing of the seasons.



# Winter Fungi

There are very few fungi that fruit in the depths of winter but one of the most spectacular has to be the **Scarlet Elf Cup** (*Sarcoscypha austriaca*). This brilliant red fungus is either circular or oval in shape, ranges from 1 to 5 cms in diameter and usually stands about 1 to 2 cms tall. The underside of the cups are either a light pink or white colour and they are attached by a thin stem to the dead wood on which they are most commonly found.

The Scarlet Elf Cup is fairly widespread



throughout the UK, although not particularly common. They favour damp, shady woodland areas and the best place to see them is along The Fern Way in Badgers Wood. Although not poisonous, they are considered inedible to humans but are often eaten by rodents and slugs. In ancient folklore, it

was believed the elves of the woodland would visit the cups in the early morning to drink the dew from them - hence their name.



# YACWAG 2021 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 once again enlisting the help of BET members.

**87 surveys were received. 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 (84%)**  
**Robin (83%)**  
**Woodpigeon (78%)**  
**Blue Tit (73%)**  
**Magpie (61%)**  
**House Sparrow (61%)**  
**Goldfinch (49%)**  
**Great Tit (47%)**  
**Collared Dove (45%)**  
**Dunnock (44%)**

The total number of bird species which landed in gardens was 44, slightly up on 2020 but less than in previous years.



**2016 = 49**

**2017 = 46**

**2018 = 44**

**2019 = 41**

**2020 = 42**

**2021 = 44**



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

**In all, a total of 56 species, 2 more than in the 2020 survey**

Trevor Riddle reports that the 2021 survey attracted two thirds of the 2020 'lockdown' participants so he has extrapolated the data to provide a comparison with the 2020 results. Overall the change in numbers of birds recorded was in line with national figures. This is an early initial report and it may be possible to provide more in depth analysis later. Trevor selected 17 of the most regular garden birds (bigger numbers give more accurate statistics) and of these, seven species had increased, three had remained stable and seven had declined. Unsurprisingly, most of the increases were in generalist species which are faring well nationally: Wood Pigeon, Magpie and Jackdaw for example. 530 Jackdaws were counted which Trevor reckons is about the number in Yatton but the survey also covered Congresbury and other local areas. Some 2,500 were seen



flying over so there was almost certainly some duplication there. Starlings also showed a big increase which is slightly more surprising as numbers at the big Somerset Levels roost have been a bit smaller this winter. Some Starlings have been reported roosting at the former airfield at



Weston super Mare. Many passerines and in particular 'farmland' birds are struggling but the Goldfinch always provides a ray of hope - our survey birds increased by 30 percent. Greenfinches are steadily recovering from the trichomoniasis disease and were up by around 20 percent while Chaffinches, which have been struck by the disease more recently, were recorded in virtually the same numbers as last year.

House Sparrows remained stable, still much fewer than the 1970s but there has been a steady increase locally over the last ten years. The dry spring in 2021 was noted as reducing the productivity of our Tit species but looking at Blue, Great, Coal and Long Tailed collectively, we recorded equal numbers to 2021. Blue and Great Tits both increased whilst Coal and Long Tailed Tits were down. There is some concern that garden feeding and nestbox provision helps Blue and Great Tits to the detriment of more specialist species such as Coal and, where they occur, Marsh Tits. It is likely to be some time before science is able to be definite about this.

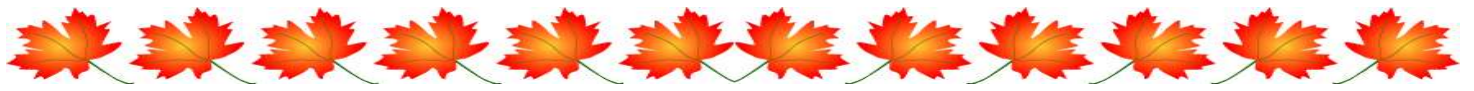




This year's star bird was the Black Redstart seen and photographed in a garden in north Yatton, probably attracted by an infusion of bark mulch spread by the owner. They love the insects that come in the mulch. Black Redstarts are rare birds but probably quite a few go unrecorded if they frequent private gardens. It would be an interesting, but impossible task, to assess the area of the 87 gardens and measure a similar area of countryside then compare the numbers of birds and species using the two habitats. Trevor's guess is that gardens would win by a very considerable margin. Other wildlife visiting gardens this year were

badgers, squirrels and a large rat!

Win Lowman and Trevor Riddle



## Woodland Report

With the easing of Covid restrictions, our volunteers have been very busy on our nature reserves over the last six months hand scything our two acres of wildflower meadows and removing some of the smaller ash trees close to the footpaths with ash dieback disease. I'm pleased to report that we are still experiencing a high number of visitors, so we've been keeping the footpaths free of encroaching vegetation and putting down woodchip on some of the more muddy sections.

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



## Meadow Scything

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 quickly decline and would ultimately be lost to scrub encroachment. This year the whole 1.9 acres of restored grassland was cut on Monday mornings in just 3½ months.

## Tree Coppicing & Pollarding

This winter, our volunteers have continued to coppice and pollard a proportion of the high canopy trees that were blocking virtually all sunlight reaching the woodland floor. With the high



incidence of ash dieback disease now on our reserves, this annual thinning was carried out exclusively on ash trees within striking distance of our footpaths. The timber produced is being used to offset the costs of the professional tree surgeons we have had to employ, whilst the remaining small branches are burnt to kill the fungus.

## Bird Box Cleaning & Refurbishment

Every winter, a dedicated group of BET volunteers survey the considerable number of bird boxes in our woodlands, recording usage and any other observations. At the same time, the opportunity is taken to clean out any old nesting material from boxes. Removing the old nest is an essential task as it removes any possible parasites and/or fungal spores which could have a detrimental effect on the chicks of the coming season. Our wooden boxes typically last between 7 and 10 years before requiring replacement but each year, a number are repaired/refurbished to extend their useful life as long as possible. When the boxes finally become irreparable, we are replacing them with 'woodcrete'



boxes made with a mixture of concrete and woodchip. Whilst these boxes are typically twice the price of the wooden boxes, they could last for up to 50 years and also offer better insulation for the nesting birds, protecting them from the extremes of hot and cold.

### **Fallen Trees**



The succession of storm-force winds we've endured this winter season resulted in eleven trees being blown over on our reserves, but luckily, most of them fell safely away from footpaths. Additionally, one very large tree fell into Cheston Combe Road blocking it for some considerable period of time and one fell blocking the bridleway just before the lower entrance to Jubilee Stone Wood. Fortunately, both were located just outside our boundary and were therefore the responsibility of North Somerset Council. However, a considerable number of large, heavy branches did fall onto our footpaths and we noted with some concern that all of them came from diseased ash trees. Fortunately, the safety work that we have carried out this winter to remove heavily diseased ash trees overhanging our footpaths, will significantly reduce the risk of falling timber in the future.



**Jubilee Stone Wood**

### **Archaeological Sites - Scrub Removal**

Both of our nature reserves contain important archaeological features which, in a remarkably short period of time, can get obscured by rapidly-growing bramble. This autumn/winter, both the 13<sup>th</sup> century Warrener's Cottage and the 17<sup>th</sup> century lead mines in Jubilee Stone Wood were cleared of scrub to make the features much more visible once again.



**Warrener's  
Cottage**

# Summer Scything Workshops

Last year we completed scything our wildflower meadows in record time - thanks to our enthusiastic and skilled volunteers. Their expertise is impressive and in demand by other local groups. Over the past few years BET has been asked to run training and demonstration days for a number of organisations keen to learn the art of scything with traditional Austrian scythes.

In 2021 we ran the third workshop for the Chew Valley Community Farm and half a dozen of their volunteers. We took a carload of scythes and a hand-picked bunch of BET volunteers to the amazing location close to Chew Valley Lake.



**Chew Valley Farm**

After an introductory talk and demo, the teams got stuck into scything and raking the field margins, which were pretty tough and brambly. Nevertheless, the newbies enjoyed themselves and were keen to do more and get their own scythes.



**Chew Valley Farm**

BET makes a nominal charge for these training days, which contributes to our fund raising efforts. Perhaps more importantly though, we are pleased to encourage people to take up this eco-friendly way to manage their meadows and to preserve this rural craft.

We also ran a workshop for Bristol City Council, having run a couple of sessions for them in 2018. This time the venue was the Lamplighter's Marsh nature reserve on the River Avon near Shirehampton. The participants from Lamplighter's and other Bristol wildflower meadow community groups were extremely keen and were soon motoring.



**Shirehampton**