

Backwell Environment Trust
Bulletin 43 - Autumn 2021
www.backwellenvironmenttrust.org



A Very Warm Welcome to our Latest Autumn Bulletin

Work has finally begun to remove the dangerous ash trees infected with ash dieback disease to ensure the safety of our visitors and neighbours, now and into the future. Our reserves have continued to see large numbers of people reconnecting with nature and so path maintenance and step repairs have been an ongoing task for the volunteers. We've also been busy excavating the

BET Membership

AGM

Ash Dieback

Woodland Report

Snake Search

Peregrine Falcons

New Species

Cottage Excavation



remains of a cottage next to Church Town, cleaning out an old cattle pond as well as restoring a superb boundary wall dating back to the 1800s.

Membership Renewal

The membership year now runs from October 1st until September 30th and renewals for 2021/22 are now due. We really hope you will consider renewing your membership for another year and complete the enclosed form.

Membership subscriptions and donations are BET's only source of income, we do not receive annual grants.

Gift Aid is 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

Since BET was established in 2004, our annual membership subscription has remained the same. However this year, with the huge financial commitments placed upon us to deal with the extensive ash dieback situation, we have reluctantly increased the annual subscriptions by £2 to £7 for individuals and £12 for a family. This will be our first increase in subscriptions in seventeen years and we hope you will still consider renewing your membership with BET for another year.

If you have received a membership form with your bulletin, it means that your BET membership is due to expire.

Please remember to confirm your Gift Aid status – either 'YES' or 'NO'

If you would like 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 either of the two addresses shown, or post it to Andy Smith who is our membership secretary (1 Manor Court, West Town, Backwell, BS48 3BS).





BET Annual General Meeting

Saturday November 13th 2021

Backwell Parish Hall

The AGM will start at 2pm and after the presentations, we will finish with tea, coffee and cakes.

Your trustees will be on hand to answer any questions you may have about BET and its activities, past, present or future.

Because of the ongoing situation, our AGM this year will be shorter than usual with chairs more widely spaced.



Agenda



Annual Report from 2020
The Chair's Report Treasurer's Report
Secretary's Report Woodland Report
Election of Trustees Any other business



Printed copies of the 2020 annual report and the accounts will be available at the meeting.

The link to the report can also be found on the BET website on the homepage.

If you would like to consider becoming a BET trustee, please do get in touch via the website : www.backwellenvironmenttrust.org



Ash Dieback Disease

Dealing with the consequences of ash dieback disease on our nature reserves has been by far the greatest challenge BET has ever faced. We have been working continuously since June 2020 selecting a suitable contractor, raising funds, assessing the environmental impacts of the work, establishing land ownership, obtaining permission to fell the trees, arranging to close the road, commissioning a tree safety assessment - but finally, we were given the go ahead to start work on the 20th September.

Letting nature take its course with this terrible disease could never be an option. In a very short period of time, infected ash trees will start to lose their branches, falling onto the road, footpaths and houses with the potential for serious personal injury. A few years later, entire trees will start to collapse with even greater consequences.

The harsh reality is that a high proportion of the ash trees on the BET reserves now have a crown loss of 50% or more and there is no realistic hope that they will survive.

BET's legal responsibilities in this matter are very clear.

We are bound by the:

- Health & Safety at Work Act (1974)
- Occupiers Liability Act (1957 & 1984)
- Highways Act (1980)
- Compensation Act (2006)

As the land owner, under both civil and criminal law, we have a clear responsibility for the health and safety of our visitors, road users and neighbours when they use, or pass through our land. Allowing diseased trees to fall onto houses, roads and footpaths simply does not even begin to meet that level of care.

However, notwithstanding our legal obligations, I know the trustees and members would be devastated if someone was injured by a tree that we had been told presented an unacceptable level of risk and we had decided to ignore the recommendation.

Ash Dieback 2017 - 2021

It was in the spring of 2017 when we first noticed the signs of ash dieback disease affecting some of the smaller ash trees in our woodlands. However, within a few years, the situation very quickly deteriorated and now virtually all of our ash trees are showing signs of the devastating effects of the fungal infection. Unfortunately, when a tree becomes infected, invariably, it is simply a matter of time before the tree succumbs to the disease and eventually dies.



During the summer of 2020, BET approached twelve professional tree surgeons with a view to quoting for the felling of all diseased ash trees bordering roads, footpaths and houses. At this stage, the consensus was that approximately 300 trees would have to be felled. Quotes were received and after careful consideration, a local company, Claverham Trees, was selected to complete the project at a total cost of £20,000.



However since 2020, two things have changed.

Firstly, during the winter of 2020/21, numerous injuries and several fatalities occurred in the south of England when experienced tree surgeons were killed felling ash dieback infected trees.

These trees were thought to be in the early stages of the disease as they were only showing minor symptoms of ash dieback, so were considered safe to fell manually. In light of these incidents, it became clear that the external signs of the disease were not always a good indicator of how extensive the fungal infection had affected the tree internally and consequently, the Forestry Commission changed their advice to use remote, mechanical means of felling whenever possible.



Secondly, in July 2021 with numbers of ash trees affected by the disease increasing rapidly, we commissioned an independent safety assessment on all trees bordering roads, houses and

footpaths. This survey recommended that in the very worst case scenario, we would have to fell up to 780 trees to ensure the future safety of our neighbours and visitors to our nature reserves.

These two changes have meant that the cost of dealing with our ash dieback problem has significantly increased, and we now expect the final bill to be in the region of £50,000 to £60,000.



However, we have been overwhelmed by the amazing generosity of our members and by using our own funds plus a significant grant from Tarmac and a large donation from Backwell Logs, we have now managed to secure the money needed to complete the project.

The first phase commenced on the 20th September when the ash trees identified as the most urgent bordering Cheston Combe and Church Town were felled. To carry out this complicated and



difficult task, we contracted Mendip Trees Ltd (MTL). MTL are one of the most experienced contractors dealing with ash dieback infected trees in our locality and they also have access to the very specialist machinery required.

Some of the smaller timber sections have been left in the woodland to decay naturally or used to create hedges and habitat piles. The timber removed from the woodland has been used in part-payment for the ongoing felling work.

In the spring, we made a start on the ash trees bordering our extensive network of footpaths. We hope to complete this task gradually over the next three years, or longer, should the disease progress slower 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 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. We have decided to close some minor permissive paths for the time being to minimise the number of trees needing to be felled.

Whilst the short-term impact of removing all the dangerous ash dieback trees from our nature reserves will undoubtedly be considerable, we have been planning for this eventuality for several years. A significant number of trees have already been planted and this will continue after the felling. With the reduction in some of the high canopy trees, a considerable amount of extra sunlight will be able to reach the woodland floor and so the regeneration of other tree species and ground flora should be very rapid. In a very short space of time, the woodlands will recover and become even more wildlife-friendly than before.



Woodland Report

The last six months have been dominated by the urgent need for us to manage the severe consequences of ash dieback disease and to make our nature reserves a safe place to visit now, and into the future. As reported earlier in this bulletin, the first phase of the project has now begun with a high proportion of the most dangerous trees next to roads and houses having been removed. We hope to finish the removal of all diseased trees bordering the roads over the winter and those close to our network of footpaths, gradually over the next three years or so. With the easing of Covid restrictions, our volunteers have returned to working on our nature reserves tackling many interesting and varied projects including exposing the remains of an 18th century cottage, digging out an old pond and restoring a wall originally built in the 1800s. I'm pleased to report that we are still experiencing a high number of visitors, so we've been busy repairing steps and keeping the footpaths free of encroaching vegetation.

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

Dry Stone Walling

About five years ago, the BET volunteers restored a 20 metre section of an old boundary wall dating back to the early 1800s in Badgers Wood. This summer we took up the challenge again by



digging out and restoring an additional 30 metres of wall next to the public footpath. The work restoring this section was however much more difficult than our first section and the whole

project ended up taking a whopping sixteen Monday morning sessions to complete. However, the end result looks stunning and we have had many positive comments from passing visitors.



Pond Restoration

Deep in the depths of Badgers Wood, close to the Fern Way trail, lies an old pond that was once probably used for watering livestock. Over the years, it has gradually silted up and so during the late summer, the BET volunteers tackled the very muddy task of digging out the accumulated debris to increase the depth of water. The pond has never really thrived because of the very high shading from nearby ash trees. However, since their removal, much more light is now reaching the pond surface which will be very beneficial to the pond life living there.



Scything the Wildflower Meadows

BET's wildflower meadows just seem to get better with every passing year and this summer's weather seems to have suited them very well. BET started the scything of our wildflower meadows in the late summer and hopes to finish before the winter sets in.



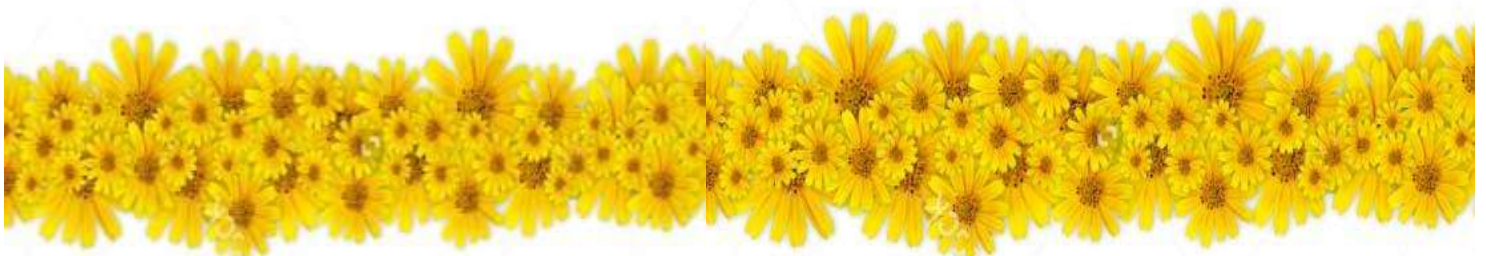
In 2022, we will be very pleased to welcome back the Somerset Rare Plant Group to our restored meadows in the hope of identifying yet more rare species.

Volunteer Time



Every year, the BET volunteers freely put in a staggering amount of time and effort, both in the day-to-day running of the Trust, as well as the huge amount of practical work needed to maintain our

nature reserves. Over the last twelve months, even in these difficult times, the fantastic figure of **2,438 volunteer hours** has been recorded. Since the Trust began, an astonishing **32,509** hours have been volunteered - so, once again, a **BIG BET** thank you to you all.



Dylan Cleave's Snake Search

Hello, my name is Dylan Cleave and I am 10 years old.

I am obsessed with wildlife, especially reptiles - snakes in particular. This year, as part of a project during lockdown, I decided to ask BET for permission to create a habitat perfect for reptiles. In my life up until now, I have seen two snakes which were the adder, the only venomous snake in the UK, and the grass snake which is non-venomous and the largest snake in the UK.



I was really hoping that I might have the chance to see one in Backwell by creating an inviting habitat. So, I laid down some corrugated sheets in an area of the nature reserves that looked like adder territory - it had places for them to bask, facing the sun in the morning as well as rocks and long grass. The rocks are a place for them to warm-up and the long grass is so they can creep up and kill their prey with their venom which are rats and mice. An adder bite can be serious but nobody has died from an adder bite for 20 years. This is no reason



to be scared of adders; people live their whole lives in the UK and never see a reptile. The one I saw got away as quick as it could as these awesome creatures are really quite shy. Recently we went down to check out the corrugated sheets and we found a grass snake! They are fairly common round here and are non-venomous. Another species we have seen a lot more than snakes is the slow worm which looks like a snake but in fact it is a lizard. There are a lot of differences between a snake and a lizard but here are just two:

1. Lizards have eyelids, snakes don't.
2. Lizards are normally shorter than snakes.

It has been a really good project to enjoy during lockdown as we have been able to walk up to the snake habitats regularly which means we have enjoyed fresh

air and watched the seasons change over time.



Thank you to BET for letting me put down some sheets and creating a habitat for the reptiles.

BET's Peregrine Falcons

One of the great local wildlife experiences has to be watching Peregrine Falcons flying and hunting over our nature reserves. These impressive birds of prey have been successfully nesting next to Badgers Wood for some years now and this year, two chicks were ringed in an incredibly well planned and organised procedure. The nest was reached by abseiling down the cliff using experienced climbers from the British Mountaineering Council, the chicks then brought to the top of the cliff, ringed and measured by a licensed British Trust for Ornithology ringer, and then safely returned to the nest.

Two very healthy male chicks were ringed; they were estimated to be about 24 days old and they went on to fledge around the end of July. Ringing can provide essential information that can help to conserve the species. In all, there were three chicks in the nest but



because one was of a smaller size, it was left undisturbed in the nest. However, subsequent sightings of the nest has confirmed that the smallest of the three chicks was doing well and it hopefully fledged a few weeks after the others.

During the whole process, the adult female Peregrine, somewhat surprisingly, sat quietly watching the action from a distant cliff, only

returning to the nest when the chicks were returned.

The five man team considered the exercise a great success and were impressed with the location, ease of access and preparation - and we at BET were very proud to be involved with such a competent, well organised team of professionals.



New Species Found on the Reserves

Lesser Whitethroat

Although only very slightly smaller than the common whitethroat, this species prefers a habitat with taller trees and shrubs. It is most easily distinguished by its brown wings which lack the reddish tinge of the whitethroat.

Their song often begins with an animated warble then continues with a rattling note repeated rapidly five or six times.

The nest is concealed within thick vegetation and is formed into a cup shape with grass and rootlets.

The birds are migrants and spend the winter mainly in East Africa, just north of the equator.



Yellow Shell Moth

This moth species can exhibit a wide range of colours from pale yellow to orange-brown, with the darker specimens more common in the north of the UK. Numerous fine white and brown lines cross the wings and there is often one or two broader brown bands of variable width and density present. Their wingspan is in the range 28 – 32mm and it flies from dusk onwards. This is a fairly common species and can be seen flying between May and August. Its food plants comprise dandelions, dock and a wide range of other low growing plants. Their caterpillars are generally green in colour.



Pyramidal Orchid

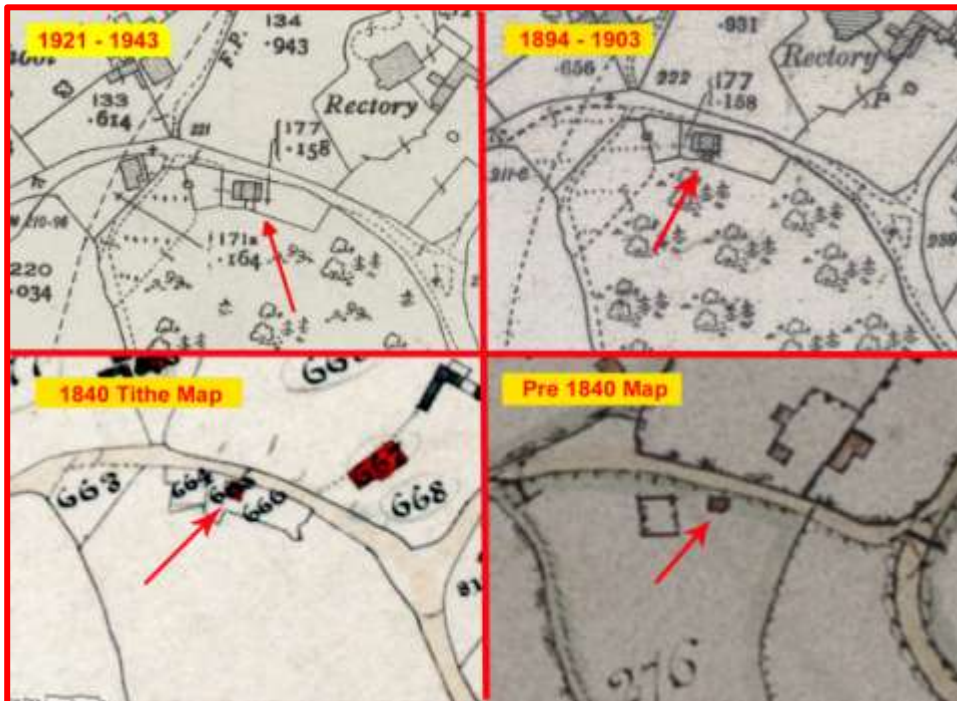
This hairless orchid typically grows to between 20 – 30 cms high and can vary in colour from a deep magenta through pale pink to even a pure albino white. They get their name from the fact that most flower heads are arranged in a circular, pyramid shape. These orchids are most common on limestone or chalk grassland and prefer the milder climates of England and Wales; they are much scarcer in Scotland. They flower between June and July in open grasslands and meadows. Like many orchids, they require a specific fungus to be present in the soil to be able to reproduce as orchid seeds do not store enough food to germinate on their own. In this symbiotic relationship, the orchid's roots protect the fungus.



Church Town Cottage Excavation

If you'd been walking up the footpath close to the narrowest section of Church Town last winter, you may well have seen the remains of an abandoned cottage hidden deep in the undergrowth. So in the springtime, the BET volunteers spent a few Monday morning sessions exposing some of the buried walls and amazingly uncovered a flight of steps that were completely buried under the soil.

From old maps, we can be sure the cottage was in use before 1840 and was still lived in up to at least 1938 as it's just captured in this old quarry picture.



Coles Quarry in 1938



The cottage was small in size, the main building being only 6x4 metres in area. It had a ground and an upper floor with two chimneys. The newly-discovered steps would suggest that there was a cottage garden on the flat area to the rear of the property. Considering the cottage was only abandoned around 80 years ago, it's incredible how little of it remains today.