

# **Backwell Environment Trust**

## **Bulletin 51 - Autumn 2025**

**[www.backwellenvironmenttrust.org](http://www.backwellenvironmenttrust.org)**



### **A Very Warm Welcome to our Latest Autumn Bulletin**

Whilst ash dieback disease is still very prevalent on the BET reserves, we're pleased to say that fewer trees are needing to be felled, thankfully, with each passing year. The BET volunteers have been busy over the spring and summer months keeping our network of footpaths clear of vegetation, removing diseased ash tree timber, scything our fabulous wildflower meadows and excavating the Warrener's Cottage.

**BET Membership**  
**BET AGM**

**Ash Dieback**  
**BET Hurdles**

**Wildlife Surveys**  
**Reserve Report**  
**New Species**







# **Membership Renewal**

Our membership year runs from October 1<sup>st</sup> until September 30<sup>th</sup> and renewals for 2025/26 are now due. We really hope you will consider renewing your membership for another year.

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

If you have received a membership renewal form with your bulletin, your BET membership is due to expire. The form and payment details can also be found on the BET website under 'About BET/Membership'.

Gift Aid is a very important source of income for us, so please tell us if there is any change to your Gift Aid status.

Please contact us on [Betwoods@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:Betwoods@yahoo.co.uk) if you have any queries.

**Thank you for your Continued Support**







# **BET Annual General Meeting**

## **Saturday November 8th 2025**

### **Backwell Parish Hall**

The AGM will start at 2pm and we will break for tea, coffee and cakes before presentations from the trustees on some of the highlights of BET's first 20 years.

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



## **Agenda**



### **Annual Report from 2024**

**The Chairman's Report**

**Treasurer's Report**

**Secretary's Report**

**Reserve Report**

**Election of Trustees**

**Any other business**



Printed copies of the 2024 annual report and the accounts will be available at the meeting.

The link to the report can also be found on the BET website under 'About BET/AGM'.



If you would like to consider becoming a BET trustee, please do get in touch via email to [Betwoods@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:Betwoods@yahoo.co.uk)





# Ash Dieback Disease

We are now approaching our fifth year of ash dieback disease and whilst virtually all ash trees on the reserves have the disease, significantly fewer trees will need to be felled this winter. Five years on and some trees appear to be in a steady, slow decline whilst others just may be fighting back against the disease and holding on to a large proportion of their leaf canopy. However, the future of our remaining ash trees is still very uncertain, but we always optimistic that at least some trees will weather the storm with this terrible disease and go on to populate our woodlands with disease resistant ash seedlings.

As in previous years, we have left some of the felled logs on the reserve to rot down naturally whilst the excess has been taken off site by Backwell Logs. BET and Backwell Logs entered into a mutually beneficial partnership where we are able to offload our excess timber in return for a donation for the wood.



## Another Hurdle Overcome!

In preparation for our Open Day in July, we thought we ought to smarten up the fencing in front of the Cabin. The old second-hand chestnut paling fencing was looking decidedly dilapidated and in need of replacement.

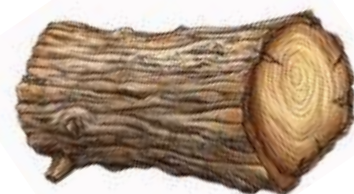
The initial thought was to make some traditional fencing hurdles from sweet chestnut, which is favoured for fencing, being easy to work with and long lasting. However, it is not grown locally and is expensive. So why not use our own ash logs which had been felled due to ash dieback disease?





The timber would be harder to work and would not last as many years, but it was free and waiting to be used!

Peter and Nicola used traditional green woodworking tools and techniques, as practised by them as members of the Somerset Bodgers at Tyntesfield. First the logs were split with wedges, followed by a 'froe'. This has a metal blade with a wooden handle at right angles which enables the split to be steered down the whole length of wood.





The resulting rails were shaped on a 'shavehorse' with a drawknife and tenons created at the ends to fit mortises made in the posts.

Making the hurdles took several weeks, but the hardest part was yet to come - erecting the fence on solid limestone bedrock! In the end we resorted to steel rebar rods, but driving them into the rock was a challenge. Andy came to the rescue and succeeded in drilling 16mm holes 30cm deep into the rock.



The resulting fence has a rustic charm and was instantly checked out by the local speckled wood butterflies!



## BET Wildlife Surveys

The BET volunteers carry out regular wildlife surveys on the nature reserves during the year to monitor and record numbers of butterflies, birds, bird nests, dragonflies and reptiles. This data can be invaluable to us and helps ensure we are continuing to manage the reserves in a wildlife-friendly manner.

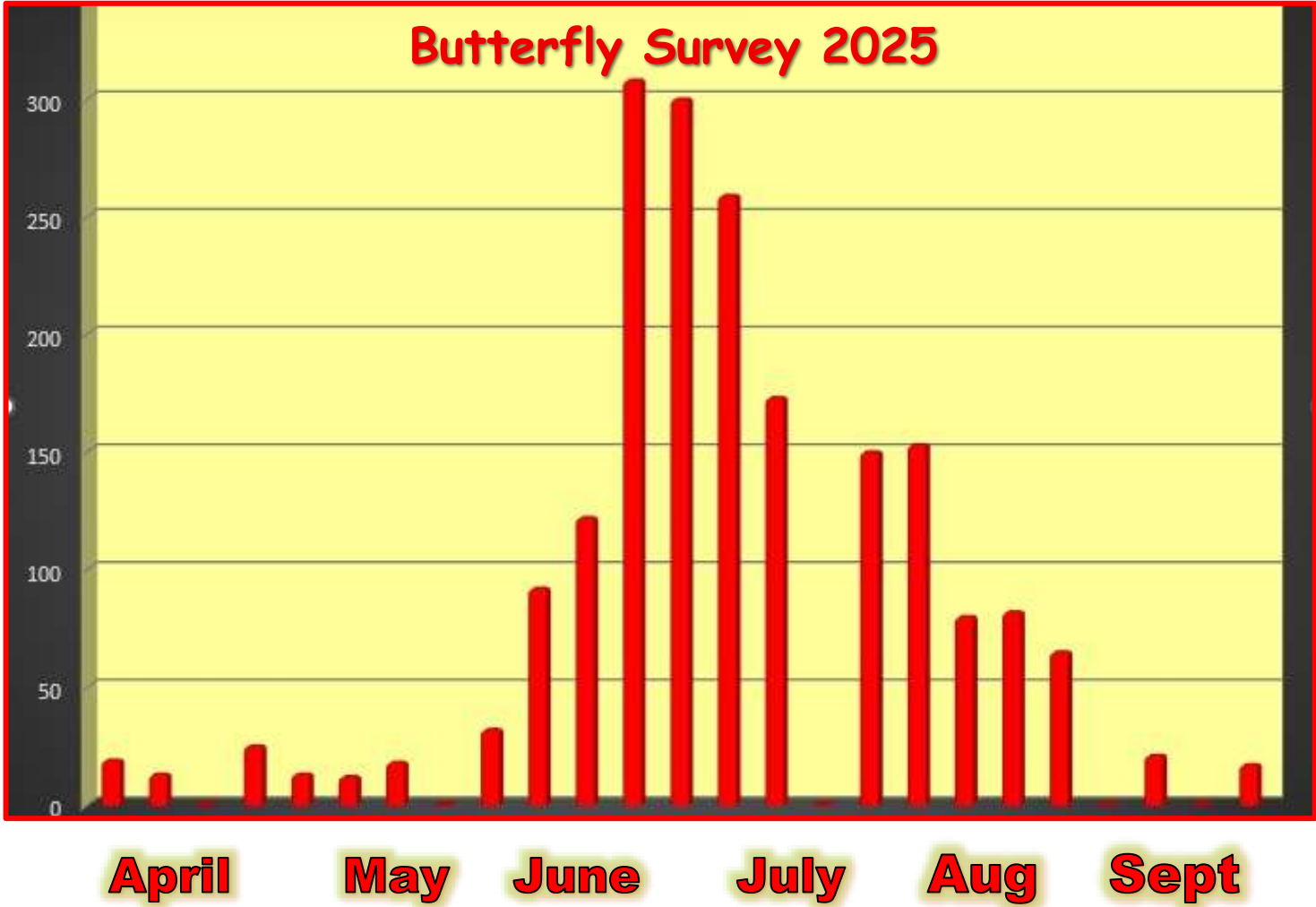


### Butterfly Surveys

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 late March and late 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.



Between the beginning of April until mid-September (24 weeks), a total of 24 butterfly species



were recorded with **1,954** individual butterfly sightings logged. As the weather has been mainly warm and sunny this year, only five surveys could not be undertaken due to unsuitable weather conditions. If these missing surveys are estimated from the graph trend, a total of **2,221** sightings could have been expected which would equate to a very significant (76%) increase from last year's figures. Butterfly numbers in 2024 were significantly down right



across the country, primarily due to the poor weather conditions. In light of this, we expected numbers to be suppressed this year, even with the UK's hottest summer on record. However, to our great surprise, we recorded our highest ever count for the year, which highlights just how resilient nature can be and how quickly it can bounce back after an exceptionally poor season.

| Most Abundant Species | Sightings | Least Abundant Species | Sightings |
|-----------------------|-----------|------------------------|-----------|
| Ringlet               | 483       | Marsh Fritillary       | 1         |
| Meadow Brown          | 423       | Painted Lady           | 1         |
| Gatekeeper            | 334       | Brown Argus            | 4         |
| Common Blue           | 140       | Orange Tip             | 7         |
| Speckled Wood         | 126       | Holly Blue             | 8         |

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.



## Reserve Report

Over the last six months the BET volunteers have been busy cutting back the encroaching vegetation next to our network of footpaths, moving cut timber and scything our wildflower meadows - but the big project of the summer was excavating the interior of the historic Warrener's Cottage in Jubilee Stone Wood.

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

### BET's Summer Open Day

On Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> July, on a blisteringly hot summers day, BET held an open day to showcase the achievements of the Trust over the past 20 years. The event featured guided wildlife walks, displays, BET merchandise, a quiz and, of course, the ubiquitous tea and cakes.



### Scything the Wildflower Meadows

BET's wildflower meadows have done reasonably well this year but the high summer temperatures and drought resulted in shorter flowering times. However, in September after the first rains, some wildflowers had a second flowering which to our knowledge, is quite a rare event. The BET volunteers started the scything of our wildflower meadows in the late summer and we hope to finish well before the winter sets in.

### Footpath Clearance

During the spring and summer months, vegetation growth rates have been very high so keeping our footpaths clear of encroaching vegetation has been a priority task for the BET volunteers.



**Footpath Clearance**

### Warrener's Cottage Excavation

It was back in 2018 when the BET volunteers first excavated the outside of the Warrener's Cottage in Jubilee Stone Wood. The rabbit warren on Backwell Hill dates back to 1318 and



**Removing one of the Tree Stumps**



incredibly was in continuous use for nearly 500 years. The cottage remains visible today are probably from a later period, but it's difficult to be sure as there are no records before the early 1700s.

This year we set about excavating the interior of the cottage. The excavation was complicated by numerous, very large ash tree stumps embedded in the cottage's floor but, amazingly, and with huge volunteer effort, all but one were removed from the interior. When we excavated the external area, the extracted soil contained hundreds of artifacts, but to our great surprise, the internal excavation resulted in very few items, most of which were from relatively modern times.

The excavation of the lower storey of the cottage where the rabbits were processed (there would have originally been an upper floor where the warrener lived), revealed that the area was divided into two rooms, one with a lime cemented floor and one with a rougher surface. There is a large chimney breast in the room with a flagstone hearth to the left side where the fireplace would have



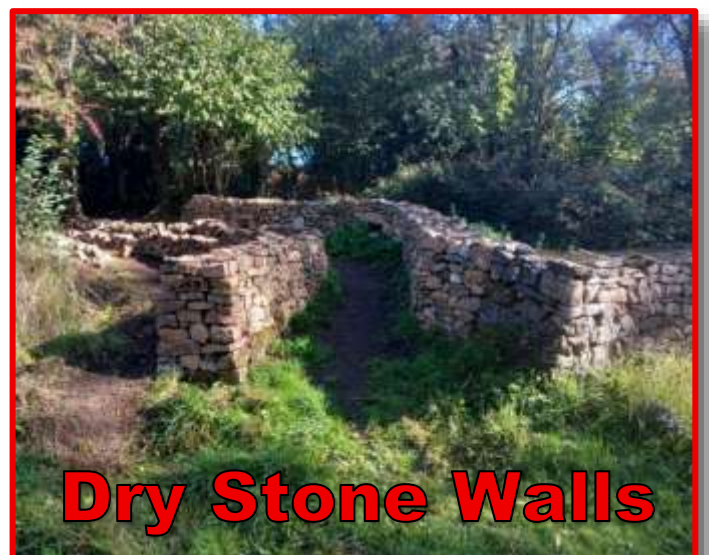
been. Imbedded in the side of the chimney breast are remains of some fire-resistant bricks and it has been suggested that they may have once comprised a bread oven.

The excavation of the internal cottage took many hours of heavy work so when the project was finally completed, we marked the occasion with a celebratory BBQ for the volunteers on

one of those many hot and sultry summer evenings. The excavation resulted in a very large number of stones being removed from the cottage interior, so we took the opportunity to reuse them by creating two dry stone walls along the entrance to the site and widening the path at the same time.

### Volunteer Time

Every year, the BET volunteers freely put in an amazing 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, the fantastic figure of 2,303 volunteer hours has been recorded. Since the Trust began, an astonishing 44,142 hours have been volunteered so, once again, a **BIG BET** thank you to you all.



## New Species on the Reserves

The **Wasp Spider** (*Argiope bruennichi*) is a striking and relatively recent addition to the UK's spider fauna. First recorded in the country in the 1920s, this species has spread rapidly in recent decades, particularly across southern England. Its bold yellow and black striped abdomen gives it a distinctive appearance, resembling a wasp - a form of Batesian mimicry used to deter predators.

Native to continental Europe, the wasp spider prefers warm, grassy habitats such as meadows, heathlands, and coastal grasslands. Climate change and warmer UK summers are thought to have supported its northward expansion. The female is significantly larger and more colourful than the male, often reaching up to 15mm in body length, while the much smaller males are often overlooked.

The wasp spider builds large, vertical orb webs near the ground, typically among tall grasses. A characteristic feature of its web is the zigzag-shaped silk band called a *stabilimentum*. Whilst the exact function of it remains unsure, it may help to attract prey or act as camouflage.

Mating is a risky business for the male, as females are known to consume them post-copulation. Egg sacs, produced in late summer, contain hundreds of eggs and are suspended in vegetation, overwintering until spiderlings emerge in spring. Although it looks fearsome, the wasp spider is harmless to humans. Its presence in the UK reflects ongoing ecological shifts and provides a fascinating example of how species adapt and expand in response to changing climates and habitats.





The **Marsh Fritillary** (*Euphydryas aurinia*) is one of the UK's most beautiful and threatened butterflies. Once widespread across the country, its population has declined significantly in recent decades due to habitat loss, fragmentation and changes to land management. Today, it is largely restricted to parts of western England, Wales, and Scotland, where conservation efforts are



helping to stabilise some populations.

This medium-sized butterfly is easily recognised by its striking orange, brown, and cream chequered wings. It favours damp, unimproved grasslands, especially those rich in devil's-bit scabious (*Succisa pratensis*), which is the sole food plant for its caterpillars. These grasslands must be managed carefully to

prevent scrub from taking over and to maintain the plant diversity the species relies on. As devil's-bit scabious is a wildflower not recorded on the BET reserves, 50 seedlings of the plant have now been introduced to the top meadows of Badgers Wood.

The marsh fritillary has a complex lifecycle. Eggs are laid in clusters on the underside of the food plant's leaves in late spring. The caterpillars hatch and live communally in silk webs, which they use for protection as they feed and grow. They overwinter in these webs, becoming active again in early spring before pupating.

Because marsh fritillaries are highly sensitive to environmental change, they are considered a flagship species for conservation. Efforts to protect them benefit a wide range of other plants and animals in the same habitats. The species is now a priority under the UK Biodiversity Action Plan, and ongoing work by conservation organisations continues to monitor and restore suitable habitats across its remaining strongholds.

Both of these rare species were recorded only once during the summer, but hopefully with careful management, their numbers will increase over the coming years.

