

Revealed: a massive cache of biodiversity in Brockweir

We don't know what biodiversity we have until we look, that is the lesson from a recent survey at Cutt's Orchard near Brockweir. Over 400 species of invertebrates and 68 lichens were identified, an impressive testament to the ecological richness of our local area. The surveys were undertaken last summer by a specialist entomologist, James McGill, and lichenologist Nicola Bacciu, with a focus on less well-known species of flies, beetles,



The survey under way in Cutt's Orchard

spiders, bugs, bees, wasps and ants, as well as lichens. Among the invertebrates, 12 are noted of national interest. At least ten species were recorded for the first time in Gloucestershire – though, it is important to note that not that many places have benefited from such specialist surveys!

The survey explored a variety of habitats, including broadleaved woodland, marsh and wet woodland, acid grassland and scrub. Each habitat contributed its own set of species, with a small marshy area proving especially rich, with over 40% of all the invertebrate species found. Veteran oaks, spring-line flushes and open-grown hawthorn scrub were all identified as key features for lichens.

Special finds in different micro-habitats included:

- a darkling beetle, *Eledona agricola*, the larvae of which feed on the fungus Chicken of the Woods, growing on a veteran oak tree;
- a Brown Tree Ant, *Lasius Brunneus*, usually associated with ancient parks and wood-pastures in South East England, it is expanding west and has been found elsewhere in the Wye Valley;
- a small dark metallic green leaf-beetle, *Apteropeda globosa* which feeds on mint and speedwell plants in marshy alder woods;

- a dark metallic blue Alder leaf-beetle, *Agelastica alni*, which was considered extinct in Britain but in 2004 it was found in Manchester, probably re-introduced on plant imports. Since then it has become very abundant and spread back in alder woods across much of England;

- a money spider *Hilaira excise*, generally found in north and west of Great Britain in damp woodland and bog – on the edge of this distribution in the Wye Valley it may be vulnerable to drying effects of tree felling or climate change;

- a litter bug *Ceratocombus coleopratus*, found in a small open, marshy area, was a new record for Gloucestershire;

- as was another money spider, *Agyneta mollis*, found in unimproved wet grassland in swards of Red Fescue, Sweet Vernal Grass, Greater Bird's Foot Trefoil and Lesser Spearwort; and,

- a lichen, *Cresponea premnea*, which is only found on trees more than 250 years old.

Discovering, sharing knowledge and appreciating our local biodiversity can help us protect our unknown and unseen wildlife. Knowing what is important, understanding the pressures and management options and possible outcomes can help us to make the best decisions – more on this to follow in our next newsletter!

This survey has helped us understand what matters,



Alder leaf-beetle, once thought extinct

in particular for invertebrates and lichens, at Cutt's Orchard and has given us some simple guidance on what we can do. We are very grateful for the support of the Parish Grassland Project in providing funding towards this survey.

Further details of the survey results are available on the PGP website: <https://parishgrasslandsproject.org.uk/invertebrate-survey-results-spring-2025/>

ANDY and GILL STOTT



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Mike Topp 01594 531496

Secretary, Treasurer and

Membership:

Sally Secrett 01594 530539

Committee Members:

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Eco engineering... a beaver dam in the Forest Photo Martin Morris

A Forest first to bring back the beavers

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NATURE WATCH

What to look for now



Chiffchaff



Cowslip

The pioneering role of the Forest of Dean in reintroducing beavers to the British countryside will be the subject of a talk at our annual general meeting, to be held at the Mackenzie Hall, Brockweir at 7.30pm on Thursday 19 March. The speakers will be Stewart Cooper and Rob Cullen, project managers for Forestry England at the Forest of Dean Beaver Project.

Britain is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world, and reintroducing beavers into our countryside is considered by many to be a critical step in addressing the climate and nature crisis. As "ecosystem engineers," beavers can transform landscapes, providing a range of natural solutions to environmental problems.

These large rodents were once widespread throughout the country, before being hunted to extinction about 500 years ago. Today beavers are a protected species and

successful reintroductions are taking place across the country. Working with experts from the Beaver Trust, Forestry England established its first beaver enclosure at Greathrough Brook, near Lydbrook, in 2018. A pair of Eurasian beavers were released into a 6-hectare enclosure. Soon they began to create natural dams, reducing downstream flood risks, improving water quality and enhancing biodiversity.

In 2024 a second Forest site was opened at Perry Hay Brook, near New Fancy with a 12-hectare enclosure, and a pair of beavers was successfully introduced. Recently kits (young beavers) have been born at both sites. A raft of volunteers help to monitor the enclosures, and carry out conservation and repair work where required.

The talk will be preceded by the normally brief business of the AGM. Admission is free to all, members and non-members.

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Hay presto!

Jonathan Cockburn on the joy of scything — and secrets of his mini-bales

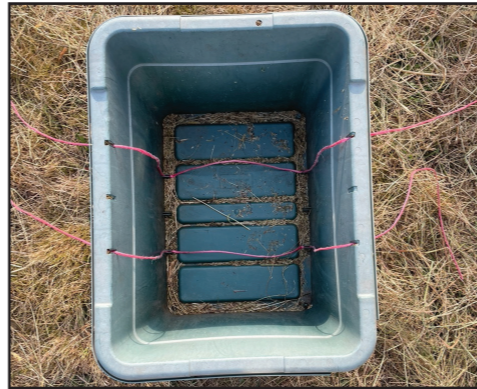
Many years ago I inherited a rather old, rusty, blunt and decrepit scythe. Very occasionally I would pull it out of our shed if our petrol-driven strimmer had run out of fuel or cutting tape/wire. I had never been shown how to use this scythe correctly. Consequently the result of my occasional labours looked at best as if I had just driven over an area of long stringy grass and nettles with a tractor, and at worst my hacking seemed to have made little impact at all.

However, about two and a half years ago the PGP kindly subsidised the cost for me and my wife, Louise, to attend a one-day course on learning to scythe. This was run by expert scyther Beth Tilston, from her home just outside Blakeney. Since attending this course, with four or five others, my scything skills and hence my scything results have greatly improved. Admittedly there was a lot of scope for improvement!

After giving us the standard health and safety talk, Beth started by showing us all how to correctly assemble and set up our individual scythes — according to our height and the length of our arms — as scythes need to be adjusted to neatly fit the person using them. This was all news to me.

Next she showed us how to sharpen our scythes with whetstones (another new skill), and also how to hold a scythe properly and then how to start making sweeping semi-circular cuts. This was not as easy as she made it look, but by the end of the day all of us had got into a reasonable mowing rhythm and we were able to mow quite a large area of grassland.

Finally, Beth taught us how to “peen” a scythe. Peening is the process of hammering out the sharp edge of the scythe’s blade to make it extra thin. This makes the blade easier to sharpen, but also considerably increases the blade’s life and efficiency. Essentially, you



Memories of a summer’s day, clockwise from left: Jonathan at work with scythe; prepared bale box, with binder twine at the ready, grandson Dylan starts treading; another bale is ready; peening the scythe blade

put the sharp edge of the blade into a special jig device which secures it, and this allows you to strike a solid metal bolt-like tool with a hammer to flatten it out.

In early July 2024 Louise bought me a beautiful Austrian scythe as a birthday present, along with a large wooden rake and a whetstone sharpener. I cut enough hay that year to keep our small flock of 12 sheep happy when grass was scarce and when we got snow-covered fields a couple of times

There is a particular calming fulfillment in scything — it’s a very different world to using a strimmer

during the winter months. I replenished my haystacks again last summer.

There is a particular calming fulfilment in scything and it’s a very different world to using a strimmer. The pleasure comes from the virtual lack of sound. So when you are working away in the garden or field, all you hear is the swish of the blade, the sound of your feet moving gently through the grass and the occasional grunt made by yours truly!

And sharpening the blade itself also becomes a pleasurable task as you produce the little snip-snap skating sounds when you run your stone quickly along both sides of the blade.

It sounds corny, but it’s completely different to using a strimmer, chainsaw or tractor, all of which require you to wear ear-defenders. There’s no sudden loss of contact with the natural world and picking up the grass by hand, cut in one long clean swathe, makes haymaking easy.

What I do is scythe a patch of long grass about half the size of a tennis court on warm sunny days. I let it dry overnight and then in the afternoon of the following day make my bales. To do this I put two strands of binder twine into a green re-cycling box (like the ones provided courtesy of the Forest of Dean District Council for plastic and bottles).*

Next I add a bundle of hay and tread it down as much as possible — like someone making wine. I add another bundle of new hay and stamp that down too and so on, until the box is full. Finally, using the two pieces of baler twine already laid inside the box, I tie up the new bale and pull it out of the box! And hey presto! (or rather hay presto!) you’ve got your first home-made bale of hay.

There’s something very satisfying about

making your own hay. The beauty of these little bales is that because they are small and light, they are so much easier to carry or cart about than the big bales we usually see. I put mine up in a loft area in my tractor shed and they are very easy to throw up there!

So if you’ve got some land or a spare piece of lawn in your garden, then please consider leaving the grass to grow through the year and scythe it in good dry conditions in July, after the wild flower seeds have set. A typical lawn mower can’t handle the long grass at this stage, but a scythe is perfect.

You don’t have to be making hay either. It’s a good idea from a biodiversity point of view to let your grass grow on your lawn or in your field. Not just wild plants and flowers, but birds, butterflies, moths, glow worms and all sorts of insects will thrive too.

We’ve had the luck to own a few fields in Bailey Lane for over 30 years, and the year before last was the first time I’ve made my own hay! It seems ridiculous now, but it’s one of the most simple, rewarding and satisfying things you can do. I now do the first cut of our front lawn entirely with my quiet blade.

**I would like to thank Merlin Crossingham for giving me the idea to use re-cycling boxes to make bales.*

Reintroducing beavers: controversial or essential?

Reintroducing beavers into Britain’s countryside is considered by many to be a critical step in addressing the climate and nature crisis in this country. Britain is now seen as one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world. As “ecosystem engineers,” beavers can transform landscapes through den-building and canal-digging, providing a range of natural solutions to environmental problems.

The primary importance of their release includes the following:

- **Flood mitigation** Beaver dams create “leaky” barriers that slow down the flow of water during heavy rainfall, with the potential for reducing peak flood levels downstream by up to 60 per cent.

- **Drought resilience** The ponds and wetlands created by beavers store water, maintaining higher water tables and releasing water slowly during dry periods to keep rivers flowing.

- **Biodiversity boost** As a keystone species (an organism that has a disproportionately large effect on its natural environment relative to its small abundance) beavers create a mosaic of habitats, such as ponds, wet meadows and deadwood, that can support a wide variety of other wildlife, including a large number of invertebrates, otters, water voles, fish, amphibians and birds.

- **Water quality improvement** Their dams act as natural filters, trapping sediment and pollutants like nitrates and phosphates from agricultural run-off, thus resulting in cleaner water downstream.

- **Climate change action** Beaver-created wetlands are highly effective at sequestering carbon, helping to capture greenhouse gases and store them in the soil.

- **Economic and social benefits** The presence of beavers can boost local eco-tourism and provide people with greater opportunities to connect with nature.

MARTIN MORRIS