

Sadlers Wells Community Woodland

Registered Charity Number 1105117



Newsletter No. 14 – Spring 2013

Welcome to the fourteenth Newsletter. We are pleased to say that at the time of writing we have received several offers of help with the future management of the Wood and we hope to make a formal announcement in the near future when details have been settled.

The Common Buzzard

The Common Buzzard (*Buteo buteo*) now lives up to its name and is estimated to be the commonest of our birds of prey at around 50,000 pairs, yet only twenty five years or so ago it was so rare that, when a pair nested in the open countryside between Tattenhall and Burwardsley, the site of the nest was kept a closely guarded secret. Now they can regularly be seen flying over the Village, sometimes several together. They used to be persecuted because they were believed to target game birds and their chicks, but in reality, they are an opportunistic feeder with a wide ranging menu, including rabbits, fresh roadkill, crows and pigeons down to even earthworms.

The buzzard is a medium to large bird with a wingspan of between 130 and 159 cm. (51 – 59 in). Its plumage can be quite variable but it is predominately dark brown with a short, round head, thick neck and fairly broad wings. It prefers to hunt over open spaces, and rests and nests in trees, favouring agricultural land and woodland fringes. It, and its associated races, are found in most of Europe and across Asia to Siberia and Japan.

The initial impression of size and its mastery of the air seeming to test and adjust to every breath of air suggest an efficient predator, but it rarely seems to exert itself so that some early authors criticized it as being lazy preferring to sit watching from some suitable vantage point for prey to come rather than going out hunting.

The sight of a buzzard soaring on a thermal on outstretched wings without a wing flap with the occasional mewing, cat-like cry is almost poetry in motion but it has rarely had a good press and its name has been used as a term of abuse.

Tree Diseases

Trees seem to be having a bad time just now, what with Oak wilt, Horse Chestnut blight and dieback and a fatal disease of riparian alders. Rhododendron too, together with

some conifers (mainly larch), are susceptible to attack by the disease *Phytophthora Ramorum*. Far more serious however is the threat to the native Ash, *Fraxinus Excelsior*. Without urgent and comprehensive intervention, it is extremely likely that Ash dieback disease will continue its inexorable advance westwards following its spread from the near continent by diseased imported specimens. The cause of this particular dieback is the fungus *Chalara Fraxinea* which causes leaf loss, lesions on the bark and dieback of branches of the crown of the tree. It is spread by spores from the fruiting bodies of the fungus on dead leaves; infected trees usually die soon after infection.

Ash is an extremely valuable component tree both in broadleaved woodland and as part of the general landscape, and it supports more than a hundred insect species, providing a food source for a variety of wildlife.

Any sightings of the disease should be reported immediately to the *Chalara* helpline on 08459 33 55 77 (8am to 6pm every day) or to plant.health@forestry.gsi.gov.uk

Bob Price

The Chairman's Notes

Never misses. Yes, Spring seems as though it is once again going to re-enact the annual miracle. The snowdrops have again beaten all comers and show that it is not just snow that can turn the world white. And what a magnificent show they are this year. If you doubt that, I recommend a walk in the lower burial ground at Church where you will see more snowdrops than you could ever count. Next, it will be the turn of the daffodils and then the Bluebells as we settle down to watch the emergence of the wonderful wild flowers that grow all around us. In the Wood we pride ourselves in encouraging all our native species, but are we kidding ourselves? There are about seventy five different species and varieties of snowdrop and so we must inevitably see more than just the natives. Can the snowdrop even claim to be native? Opinions differ; there is a school of thought that holds that snowdrops were introduced by the Romans but it seems much more likely that they only became common in the 16/17th Century. Certainly they became more noticed from then onwards. Considering the limited opportunities that bulbs have to spread and colonise, they have done pretty well to travel as far as they have.

Ask then, do the bluebells have a better claim to be native? Unfortunately not; in the last few years it has been discovered that we have long been the hapless victims of Spanish promiscuity. The "native" bluebell has been widely seduced by invaders from Spain. Our native bluebell is a modest plant that bows its head whilst the Spanish invader has a larger stalk and a more upright habit. A few years ago a campaign was launched to save the English bluebell from the attentions of the Spanish invader. It proved very difficult. To begin with, there has been an unwillingness, or inability, by gardeners to stick to the English varieties and many cultivars have been introduced. Perhaps more significantly, the invasion happened much earlier than anyone had imagined. So mixed up have things become that it proving difficult or impossible to define a pure bred English Bluebell. The interim conclusion of the researchers is that if it looks like an English Bluebell, then that is what it is. Bearing in mind this limitation, we can still say that both the main types

occur in Sadlers Wells Wood, English to the West, mixed to the East. The mixture is almost certainly helped by unauthorised tipping of garden refuse in the past. That still remains a problem even today. Remarkably, there are a few English Bluebells growing at the West (A49) end of the new wood. Remarkable because it takes at least three years for a Bluebell seed to produce a flower. The fact that the flowers appeared so early means that they must have been in the ground when the field was still pasture and the plants must have survived many years, even centuries, of being trampled on and grazed.

Those early spring walks are usually an occasion to inspect the damage the winter has wrought on the trees. It is inevitable that there will be a few casualties or even fatalities. We have never done a stock take of our trees but there must be well more than a thousand in the Wood. Eight hundred were planted in the new plantation alone. Trees do not live as long in a wood as they do when open grown but if we assume an average lifespan of eighty years then the mathematics says that quite a few will drop out each year, hence the need for the usual and regular inspections.

Spring this year brings the need for a new inspection with it. Last autumn there was much comment and concern expressed in the media about the possibility of our English Ash trees being affected by the Chalara fungus mentioned by Bob Price in his note above. It began to show at several locations. It is not yet known how far the infection has spread because the symptoms become obvious only when the affected trees are in leaf. It became widespread in Poland in 1992 and has since spread over most of Europe. Symptoms are that the leaves start to die from the tip downward (as shown in the accompanying photograph) and the crown starts to dieback and become smaller. It is now thought that the infection originated in Japan where it is not usually fatal, perhaps because the local species had time to adapt to it. Whatever the cause, its emergence has had devastating consequences elsewhere. In Denmark, for example, Ash is the major tree species and 90% of the population has been wiped out by the infection.

We do not yet know how heavily the UK tree population will be effected but the signs are not good. Once a site is affected it seems that felling is the only remedy.



The latest figures (25th Feb. 2013) that I have for the number of afflicted sites is:-

Tree	Nursery	Sites
19		
Recently	Planted	Sites
197		
Established	Woodland	Sites
170		
		Total
		386 sites

Goodness knows how many trees that is but there are 90 million

Ash trees in the UK.

We have a few mature trees in the old Wood and a selection planted in the new woodland. They were planted before nurseries started selling infected trees and this may offer some help in avoiding infection. In any case, we always insisted on whips with local provenance. We can only hope that it does not hit us, although

there is no room for complacency. The nearest recorded site is only about ten miles away. The Ash is a light loving tree and this means that it will often occupy conspicuous sites in hedge rows and at field boundaries. As one of the earlier trees to colonise our country it has become an important source of food, particularly for invertebrates. At the present time the only thing we can do is hope.

All this reminds me of a visit that I made to Poole Harbour in the sixties. I heard that the then Forestry Commission was felling trees on Brownsea Island in the middle of Poole Harbour because some of the trees were diseased. The felled trees were showing signs of die back at the end of their branches and the tips of leaves. Shame because, even in those far off days, it was not pleasant to think about landscape trees being felled. Beyond that rather casual thought, there was no concern. There was then little perception of the cause of the problem, nor how far it would spread. The spread soon became all too obvious. I was living in Worcestershire at the time and a million trees were lost to the County in a couple of years. Not just any trees because the Elm was the tree that made possibly the greatest contribution to the distinctive landscape. You have only to look at those wonderful landscapes painted by Constable to realise that England in particular can never look the same in our life time. Not just the trees we have also lost all that they supported. The Elm, usually the tallest tree in the district, attracted the Rooks who nested in the highest branches and the noise that they made as they squabbled for the best perches on a winter evening is never to be forgotten.

Since those innocent days we have learned a good deal more about Dutch Elm Disease. First, that it is not the Bark Beetle that kills. It is still deadly because it acts as the carrier for the fungus which then causes the capillary tubes which convey moisture and food through the tree to become blocked. Nor, despite the name, can we blame the Dutch for the disease. They simply did most of the research and like a successful doctor, had the disease named after them. In fact the fungus has been known in Europe since 1910 and in Britain since 1927. It is believed to have originated in the far east and from there went on to cause destruction in America. Events took a far more serious turn in 1967 when a more virulent strain of the fungus arrived from the States in a consignment of American Rock Elm. Our own native Elm (*ulmus procera*) has proved to be not very resistant with the resultant devastation that we have seen all too much of.

Attempts at finding a cure have been slow to show positive results. I suppose that this is only to be expected. Trees do grow slowly and an average age for a fully mature tree of say, eighty years, it might take a little while for the final result of any test to be known, even if we try to speed up the process. Meanwhile the Elm hangs on to life not as a magnificent tree but as a hedgerow plant. The Elm propagates by root suckers and the roots are not killed by the fungus. The suckers grow in the gaps left by the mature trees and the young Ash flourish until they are about seven years old. Then the bark becomes thick enough to attract the bark beetle and the whole sorry cycle starts again. Examination of the pollen records does point towards the Elm suffering periodic collapses of population from which it seems to have recovered. Unfortunately we will need a geological clock to measure the time span rather than a digital watch.

I realise that this piece might seem more like a distress signal than a welcome to the new life that spring can bring, so let us end on a cheerful note. The weather can't be as bad this year as it was last year. Can it?

Ernest Croley

P.S. It has since been announced that the John Innes Institute in Norwich has now identified the DNA of the Chalara fungus which will enable them to move on to working out means of combating the disease.

The primrose path

The primrose (*Primula Vulgaris*) is the prima rosa, “the first flower of the year” and is one of the earlier spring flowers, considered almost everywhere as a token that spring has arrived. For several centuries, primroses were picked almost by the bucketful as gifts for parents and to decorate churches, etc, and also picked by local people as a sort of cash crop being made up into bunches and then sent to the larger cities for sale. Nowadays, picking of wildflowers is frowned upon but the harvest of primroses in previous years does not seem to have had any detrimental effect provided the roots of the plants were not damaged or disturbed.



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The native primrose is a clump forming, low growing plant and its flowers can be quite varied in the colour and size, ranging from a deep yellow to a pale cream. Any which are white may be garden escapes of a Mediterranean species but there is a pink and yellow form found in a few locations, even quite wild sites particularly in West Wales, which may be due to genetic variation. It can hybridise with oxlips and cowslips.

It seems to prefer open woodland and shaded hedgerows with moist, fairly rich soil avoiding sandy, chalky areas and it has disappeared from some places which have dried out; other places have however been colonised which are quite dry such as the more open hedge banks and motorway verges. The colony in the Wood is in a very damp area around the base of the large willow which blew over last year. Its normal range extends across western and southern Europe to parts of North Africa and south western Asia.

Primrose Day is celebrated each year on 19th April, the flower being a particular favourite of Benjamin Disraeli. Queen Victoria regularly sent him bunches of primroses from Windsor and Osborne.

Friends of the Wood

The annual subscription is a minimum of £5-00 each and the 2013/14 subscription **becomes due on 1st April**. The wood produces no income itself and we therefore have to raise all the money needed to pay for insurance, maintenance, etc.

Your subscriptions are therefore very valuable to us, not only in themselves but also because they show a commitment from the local community which is a great help when we approach funding organisations for any grants available to enable the Trust to carry out its work. Please treat this newsletter as the usual request for payment and an early response would be greatly appreciated. Payment can be made with the slip at the end of this Newsletter either to Ernest Croley or Michael Bourne whose details are given below; cheques should be made payable to Sadlers Wells Community Woodland.

Gift Aid is a valuable source of income and we would appreciate subscriptions being gift aided if you are able to do so and have not already done it. The amount of Gift Aid on a single subscription is only small but the total amount we get each year is significant.

And finally

If anyone has any comments or queries regarding this Newsletter or the wood generally, please write or e-mail our Clerk, Michael Bourne. We would appreciate response from members to let us know whether we are heading in the right direction.

As mentioned in previous newsletters, if you see anything unusual or interesting in the wood, please let us know by telephone or e-mail as we would like to make a record.

Also, if there is anyone who does not receive Newsletters by e-mail but would like to do so, please let me know by e-mail at the address below. It would save us postage or delivery. An e-mail address would also be helpful for any other communications.

Contact us:

Ernest Croley; Tel 01829-260344
2 The Square, Bunbury, Cheshire CW6 9PW
E-mail ernest.croley@homecall.co.uk

Michael Bourne; Tel 01829-260944
Long Acre, Wyche Lane, Bunbury, Cheshire CW6 9PS
E-mail mjbourne249@tiscali.co.uk

Newsletter Editor Mike Bourne

Website address www.sadlerswellswood.co.uk

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