

New England Woodland Managers Report 2022 – Patrick Letschka

We started the year in a site opposite chestnut grove at the north end of the woods, clearing brambles and sycamore shoots. We coppiced some neglected hazel stools as we went. Everywhere we looked, revealed that the ash trees were in trouble. It's possible that this area may have been a meadow in the past as all the ash trees seemed to be around the same age. Nothing was outstandingly large or old. Later on, the whole glade exploded in bluebells, it was such a rich reward.

In February a large dead ash tree collapsed leaving a dangerous hanging branch over a pathway. It was a sign that we had to do something about the many dead and dying ash trees which were now beginning to collapse and drop branches in all areas of the woods.



A sub-committee was formed of four people Steve, Paddy, Helen and Patrick to meet and talk about a plan to keep the woods open. Protecting wildlife was high on the agenda so we agreed to limit any tree felling to months between November 2022 and March 2023. This avoided the bats and birds mating and nesting season. We also needed to make sure the contracted professional arborists, who would deal with larger trees, would be sensitive to our woodland habitat.

Meanwhile the Monday volunteers kept to our annual plan of maintaining pathways and clearing glades. This year we were occasionally assisted by an art student from the university of Brighton called Hannah who was studying for a BA degree in 3D Design and Craft. She left us with a beautiful seating area, carved into a fallen tree, deep in the woods out of sight. Clearing the glades allowed an unusual and spectacular show of foxgloves as well as a large range of favourites wildflowers.



The deer seem to visit us in slightly fewer numbers than before, perhaps due in part to the repaired fence where our woods join a neglected woods in the south east corner. This is speculative but sightings seem to have been less this year. Squirrels have been exceptionally active in attacking and stripping bark from trees, which is fatal - often targeting really healthy beech trees.



We had another hot summer this year which meant we had a variety of visitors. I really enjoyed coming across an improvised camp built by young people learning and experiencing what a natural habitat can offer away from adults and computer screens.

As the autumn began, and just before the leaves began to drop, the ash trees revealed how sick they really were. In September we walked four of our most popular paths and recorded the ash trees nearest to the paths with over-hanging dead branches. Every ash tree was recorded on a spreadsheet showing how much of the canopy was alive and how many had dead or dying branches which posed a threat to walkers. It was agreed that those trees which directly threatened the paths needed to be felled as soon as possible. These trees were marked with coloured paint and we made a note of those that needed to be monitored next year as their crown looked healthy. It was incredibly gratifying to hear that the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew are taking the same approach as us in the Loder Valley Nature Reserve at Wakehurst and that their alternative would be to permanently close the Nature Reserve to the public.



In December, a highly professional company of arborists started felling. They have been absolutely brilliant in their sensitivity and care despite the devastation left by the fallen trees. The work will continue until March 2023 and probably for many years to come.

As always, my heartfelt thanks go to the 12 volunteers who turn up on Monday mornings and are just absolutely wonderful, enthusiastic and hardworking.