Living Woods MAGAZINE

No.62 SPRING 2022

STORMY WEATHER
CLEARING UP THE DAMAGE

COPPICE WORK AS A CAREER

plus

MEET THE CHARCOAL MAKERS: THE WHITTLEWOOD CONCEPT

CONTENTS

Finally, it feels as though meetings and events are returning to normal after two years of disruption. The APF Show is back and there is a full list of woodfairs and shows scheduled to take place this year, which we hope readers will enjoy.

Meanwhile, the winter storms have taken down some 8 million trees and we talk to one owner about how she and her family will remedy the damage and make their wood safe again. She acknowledges that Storm Arwen was but a tiny blip in the history of her wood, and two further features reflect that sentiment.

The Whittlewood Concept foresters share their plans for sustainable forestry and Copping Suz tracks her journey from careworker to coppicer. With longer days on the horizon, explorer Tiger Cox's new book is packed full of great ideas for children to learn basic woodland skills. Enjoy spring!

Judith Millidge Editor
judith@livingwoodsmagazine.co.uk

COVER PHOTO
Coppicer Suz Williams strips a branch.

LivingWoodsMagazine.co.uk

Published by Living Woods Magazine Ltd, 19 Half Moon Lane, London, SE24 9JU

@Woodland News

LIVING ASH PROJECT

It is ten years since ash dieback was first identified in the UK and it is now widespread. The **Living Ash Project** is identifying trees with a high degree of tolerance, collecting graftwood from them, and planting them out in a national archive on the public forest estate.

The Future Trees Trust and Forest Research are working with Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew to screen trees and investigate techniques to successfully take cuttings of healthy ash. The aim is to try to avoid the need for grafting. The team is also working with Fera Science to investigate the chemical component of the trees and identify the molecules associated with tolerance. The project is funded by Defra with the aim of securing tolerant material for seed production purposes.

The first phase involved the screening and selection of common ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) for resistance to *Chalara fraxinea* (as it was then known). Almost 1,000 trees displaying a high level of tolerance to ash dieback were selected and grafted in January 2018. These were planted out on the public forest estate in December 2019 in the National Archive of Tolerant Ash and will be monitored over the coming years.

There are millions of ash trees in our countryside and the Living Ash Project wants to hear from the public. If you know of any ash trees, within a woodland setting, that look healthy but are surrounded by ash that are badly infected with ash dieback, please report these 'healthy' trees by visiting the **Report a Tree tab** on the **Living Ash website**.

FOREST LIVE RETURNS

It's official – going to a gig in a forest will help preserve the woodland for future generations. **Forest Live** returns after the hiatus of the last two years with a great line-up of acts.

Forest Live is a major outdoor live music series presented by Forestry England that takes place between 9 and 19 June in unique, natural woodland arenas around the country. Over 1.9 million people have attended a Forest Live gig in the last 20 years, enjoying great music and supporting the nation's forests.

Going to a concert helps Forestry England create beautiful places for people to enjoy, run important conservation projects and keep growing trees. Every year they plant some 8 million trees sustainably, caring for the nation's 1,500 woods and forests and welcoming 296 million visits annually.

Forest Live headline acts for 2022 are Keane; Madness; Noel Gallagher's High Flying Birds; Rag'n'Bone Man and Texas. For further information and tickets visit **www.forestryengland.uk/music**

Launching the Queen's Green Canopy RFS Junior Forester Award

The Royal Mint is giving 7,000 commemorative Platinum Jubilee coins to children who complete the special Jubilee edition of the Queen's Green Canopy Royal Forestry Society Junior Forester Award.

Junior foresters from Saltford C of E Primary School in Bristol joined in the launch of the new Platinum Jubilee 50p which includes a commemorative portrait of Her Majesty The Queen on horseback and is the first collectable UK 50p to celebrate a royal event.

RFS Learning and Outreach Manager Becky Wilkinson said: 'We are so pleased to offer the Jubilee edition of the Queen's Green Canopy RFS Junior Forester Award. We are delighted that 7,000 children who complete it will now also receive a commemorative coin from the Royal Mint.

'Planting a Tree is the ideal way to celebrate Her Majesty The Queen's Jubilee. It will leave a legacy that children will remember and treasure for ever.' The Queen's Green Canopy RFS Junior Forester Award inspires young people to learn about the benefit of trees and assist in woodland management in their local community. **Schools and Organisations across the UK can sign up to take part here.**

For those who are too old for this venture, note that the collectable 50p is available from £7. View the full Platinum Jubilee collection, including limited-edition coins, at the **Royal Mint.**

SURVEYING DAMAGE

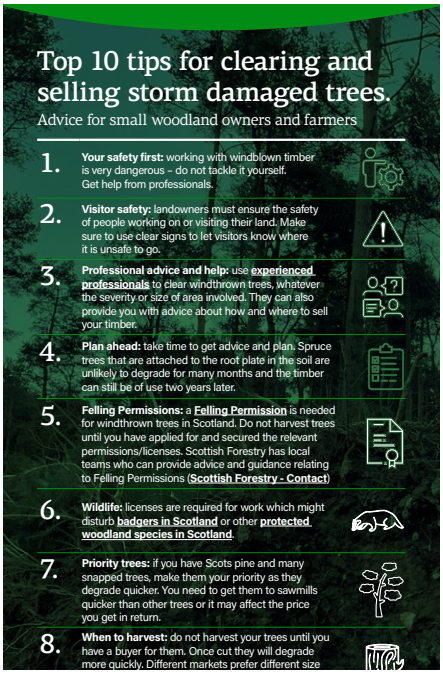
Many woodland owners were left wondering where to turn after their woodlands incurred damage in a series of deadly storms in the winter of 2021–22. The Forestry Commission and Forestry Scotland have issued limited guidance (see page 7 for links) about felling licences, but in the first instance it is critical to see how extensive the damage is. Perspective is everything, especially when it comes to assessing tree damage and the potential danger to life and limb.

Some woodland owners might employ drones to provide an overview of their woodland, but another fantastic free resource is to call on the volunteers of Civil Air Support. CAS is a charity whose members – all qualified pilots – are volunteers.

In the wake of this winter's storms, CAS has launched a national response to assist woodland owners and forestry services across the UK. David W. Brown, Civil Air Support's Deputy Operations Director, said: 'We have aircraft located throughout the UK and are able to undertake survey and photographic activities across extensive areas that are well beyond the capabilities of most UAVs [drones]. Our imagery is able to support a rapid and detailed assessment of damage, informing both remedial and longer-term actions. It is also able to reduce the workload and costs of owners and regulators alike, often covering multiple woodlands and large geographic areas in a single flight.'

If you have been affected by recent storm damage and believe that Civil Air Support may be able to help, please contact them. They are not an emergency organisation and can't always fly to assist, but can be contacted as follows:

www.civilairsupport.com
E-mail: admin@civilairsupport.com



With around 20% of Scotland's annual timber harvest blown over by Storm Arwen, Forestry Scotland and Confor have published a checklist infographic with the most important safety tips to consider when clearing storm-damaged trees.

STORMY WEATHER

The winter of 2021–22 will be remembered by woodland owners for the storms that caused the loss of some eight million trees. Woodland owner **JULIANNE HINCHLIFFE** surveys the damage to her wood and reflects on how to deal with it.

It wasn't that we were in the path of Storm Arwen, more that she came looking for us, delivering multiple fatal blows as she tore along our field fence, setting tree on neighbouring tree, pulling down their communities of smaller trees for company, in a swathe wide enough to take out trees higher up, even two on the top of the ridge. This was not a Leave No Trace visit.

We've had our broadleaved woodland since early 2018, bought as our stand against any developer's coin. Our plans were simple: discover, wander, marvel, remediate where needed, ponder where to have picnics, decide where to plant some favourite trees (rowan, hornbeam, spindle), have our friends get to know and love it alongside us. Which they have, helping with tasks, enjoying the bluebells, pointing out delights we hadn't spotted, and in the case of our friends' six-year-old, looking for wolves.

It is difficult terrain, dividing early along a sharp escarpment that leads steeply down to a field fence. On purchase, we found this slope filled with three massive fallen stems, cloaked in ivy sails befitting a schooner, a clearing job that lasted 18 months. Last year, dieback would take two ash at the foot of this slope, leaving us four further tonnes of wood to render and remove up the long, slippery, unforgiving hill, and a wood that resembled a lumber yard. Three friends toiled valiantly with us until the job was done. Then, with the spring light flooding in, we thought we could finally stop being a logging enterprise. How little we knew.

Post-Arwen, our friends cannot come as we found five areas of extreme danger, a lot in a small woodland. We lost our trees, but we lost also the presence of our friends. Our woodland, a place of beauty and welcome, became a place of threat.

> *Arwen was extraordinary, so an extraordinary solution seems appropriate.*

Enormous trees ripped from the ground, balanced in appalling last embraces with their compatriots, towering guts of root plates exposed, branches and crowns crushed and splayed in despair. And everywhere, more discovered every visit, saplings, young cherries (particularly cherries), branches from other trees, understorey, the spoils of Arwen, smashed, strewn all around. And in the high tops, lethal hang-ups fighting their random falls to earth. Wounds at every turn. Our trees' pain evident.

In total, Arwen took 20 major trees, 30 smaller stems as collateral damage, and showered the woodland floor with her leavings. One huge ash down along the field fence, the even larger one beneath it ripping out the fence posts with its root plate, both of them crushing two cherries under their weight.

Two other great ash fallen one around the other on a tricky slope, held up at 45 degrees by three trees straining to contain their terrifying burden.

Most heartbreakingly of all, our two beloved cherries, two magnificent trees so close they proved to share one root plate, falling together, decapitating a nearby oak, smashing three ash in succession, one bursting open under the shock, the other two desperate to hold up the chaotic whole.

On the top level of the wood, in a stray gust of sheer spite, a 50-foot branch blown from our largest tree, a 90-foot ash, the same gone from the next ash, both deposited across our picnic spot. Another agent of destruction clearly contributing here: open wounds testament to advanced dieback cannibalising both trees. Their ends at least will be swift, clean, and soon.

One consolation is knowing our tree surgeon. Along with his now-retired predecessor, he has been integral to our time in the wood. We have total faith in him, his skill and experience merging with our values and knowledge of our wood. Arwen presented him with five areas of exceptional challenge and complexity (and no small possibility of harm), and the fact that he has already unravelled three of these lethal Jenga puzzles, often using sheer ingenuity, is testament to his professionalism and dedication.

Sadly, our goodbye to the lumber yard turned out merely to be au revoir. The sheer tonnage of wood now to be moved out is numbing and that's without the terrain. Our tree surgeon suggested a bootcamp intensive to get it done. We are very private about our woodland's location and the idea of so many footsteps on our quiet ground is a big leap off the precipice. But we are embracing the detail as it is an innovative solution. Arwen was

The root plate of a huge ash pulled out boundary fence posts.

An aerial view of storm damage in Scotland in February 2021. Image courtesy of Civil Air Support, Europe's largest charitable air support organisation, which will undertake aerial surveys for woodland owners. (See news item on page 4.)

The crushed remains of what was a picturesque small hearth from an old hut in the Hinchliffe woodland, turned to rubble with the weight of a fallen tree.

extraordinary, so an extraordinary solution seems appropriate.

Our priority is to leave in situ everything possible, as long as we can navigate the wood safely. Then the hidden world will come out and colonise what we leave, life will spring from ground that has not seen daylight for unmanaged decades, whole new worlds will come into being.

We will give it a helping hand. Not by mass replanting, but with seven new trees: four silver birch for grace and beauty, two rowan for hardiness and magic, and a black walnut just for the sake of it.

Of the nine trees we planted in March 2020, all but one are thriving. The tiny oak sapling I found cowering under uncontrollable rose and bramble, continues to grow and reward our expectation.

There are practicalities to deal with: planking, woodcarvers, furniture makers, firewood distribution, log piles, habitat creation, dead hedges, ponds, picnics, and of course, looking for wolves.

For now, we plough on with danger spot number four, and soon the bluebells, dog's mercury and archangel will come. In the story of our woodland Arwen is but a paragraph.

We are one chapter in a story whose conclusion is long into a future we will not see. That apparently is the definition of wisdom. I hope so.

RESOURCES

Booklets from the Forestry Commission

Common sense risk management of trees

Felling permission for windblow in Scotland

Forestry Scotland are setting up a working group to assist small woodland owners. Details here.

Civil Air Support surveys www.civilairsupport.com (see News pages)

FIRED UP

Forester **DAVE FAULKNER** and his brother Jon have worked the woods for some 30 years. They founded the Whittlewood Concept, a group of foresters working in and around Whittlewood Forest in south Northamptonshire.

Whittlewood is an ancient woodland, the remains of what was once a royal hunting forest. Our ultimate aim is to restore the extensive hazel coppice that is prevalent in so many local woods, to get it back into a rotation, and make the timber a viable product. This will increase biodiversity in the woodland and protect it for the future. We have a small team working on many products produced from the understorey, and we try to utilise every piece of material we come across, leaving no footprint and without causing damage to the woodland environment.

There has always been a strong market for good-quality hazel. Much of what we have produced in the past has gone to hedge-layers for stakes and binders, although the work involved in coppicing derelict stools was never worth it for this one product alone.

Over the years we have produced bean sticks and pea sticks, hedging products, thatching spars, woven panels and faggots/fascines. Any straight oversize material gets sold in pole lengths or made into temporary stakes.

One very wet November day, we sat in the truck, sheltering from the elements, and talked about using the excess material from the work, the smaller logs and brash, and decided to look at charcoal-making.

Charcoal

We researched traditional methods of charcoal-making, and found most ring kilns to be labour-intensive, polluting and damaging to the environment. Traditional kilns damage the ground through heat transfer, and moving heavy machinery through the woods causes compaction damage to the soil and tree roots. Most kilns are static or can only be sited on a road.

The gases produced contribute to the pollution of our planet, so we looked at other sustainable methods of producing charcoal and came across retort kilns. We decided that the ideal kiln would need to be light in weight, portable, with minimal pollution to the atmosphere and with only marginal heat transfer to the soil. We couldn't find one like this, so we made our own!

The retort

The Whittlewood Retort sits on a lightweight, towable quad trailer, so it can be moved to the source of the feedstock material. It causes minimal damage to the forest floor either during transport or when it is fired. It is a clean-burning and user-friendly kiln with a quick conversion time, so the end product is lightweight and easy to extract. Whittlewood

The Whittlewood Concept team includes David Field and Matt the apprentice (above), as well as Bohus, a graduate of Europe's oldest forestry college, Jozef Dekret-Matjovie in Slovakia. The retort (below) is small and portable.

charcoal is a hot, clean-burning coal, which we successfully sell to a many loyal customers and local stockists.

We have gained worldwide interest, not only in our kilns but in our biochar products and their application, culminating in an interview with Radio 4's *39 Ways to Save The Planet*. (**Available here on BBC iPlayer.**)

Firing the Whittlewood Retort

Typically, we use seasoned logs, cut and split to 40 cm lengths. Having emptied the kiln and cleaned the pipes, the kiln is then stacked with the new logs and the fuel (soft wood and brash material) is prepared.

Timetable

6.45 am	Light
7.15 am	Shut down at 400°
7.50 am	Starts gassing at 480°
8.15 am	Flaring at 500°
10.15 am	Peak of burn is 650°
11.45 am	Slowly down, tailing off 520°

It should only burn for another hour or so, and from there the cooling process can start for charcoal or quenching for biochar.

The beauty of this relatively small portable retort is that it can be set to burn in the coupe we are working. It provides a warm spot to rest or brew a kettle, and the charcoal is ready by the time we have finished the day's cut.

Biochar

After producing easy-to-light, hot and virtually smokeless charcoal, we stumbled across biochar and its many uses in soil enrichment. Biochar can be used to enhance trees, crops, vegetables, allotments and amenity planting. It is a form of carbon capture and once used as a soil enhancer, the carbon remains locked in the ground for generations.

Biochar has many uses: we quickly became advocates of this valuable material and started to produce our own. It is simply another product that can be produced from a retort. Once a burn is complete, the contents are tipped into water to be 'quenched', and the char is then cooled in sealed containers with very little air. Soaking the char makes the charcoal pieces expand so that their surface area increases. This means that the biochar is able to absorb more nutrients once it is mixed with earth or compost.

We use local, native plants in one form or another in our biochar. We hot-compost green waste and make our own compost teas, which we mix with the char to supercharge the biochar.

All our char is derived from coppicing operations carried out within a mile of each other, from trees grown on the same local soils.

Biochar was the final piece of the jigsaw in our sustainable concept – a complete circle within a very small area. Any organic material can be burned to produce biochar, once the optimum temperature has been reached. No material is wasted and nearly all is used in carbon sequestration in some form or another.

The circle of life

The Whittlewood Concept is a vision that could be implemented by anybody, anywhere in the world to use local materials in their soil type sustainably.

We all know that there are so many pressures on our flora and fauna, our water, our soil and the climate. What we are trying to do is take as many localised elements of that natural process and use them sustainably them in as many ways as we can.

It can be seen as a complete cycle that utilises natural resources, adding benefits to both flora and fauna and preserving them for future generations. The very act of coppicing is a means of carbon capture, and if some of the material becomes biochar, it returns that material back into the ground to nourish the soil.

Maximum utilisation of local resources is the key, whether it be a village community maintaining public spaces through to farming in general. Everything can be used in a positive way, reducing waste, handling and pollution.

Website:
The Whittlewood Concept

Whittlewood Charcoal
5-litre bags £6
20-litre bags £16

Biochar
10-litre bags £22.50

25% off if you quote LIVING WOODS when ordering.

Call: 01280 422101

Email:
whittlewoodconcept@gmail.com

STAG BEETLES

LAURA BOWER of the People's Trust for Endangered Species (PTES) explains what woodland owners can do to protect the magnificent stag beetle. Join the **Great Stag Hunt** survey!

Stag beetles are one of our most recognisable and best-loved beetles. With their distinctive antler-like jaws and haphazard flight, stag beetles conjure up the nostalgia of sultry summer evenings past. But despite their familiarity, stag beetles have undergone a huge decline and contraction across their European range; they have even gone extinct in two countries.

Stag beetles in the UK are usually found in urban and suburban areas, in gardens, parks and cemeteries. As woodlands and wood pastures were replaced with more human-centric habitats, such as farms and orchards, then eventually towns and cities with gardens, stag beetles adapted to suburban refuges. The warmer microclimate and the availability of old trees as well as fence posts and sleepers seems to suit them.

Elsewhere in Europe, stag beetles occur mainly in woodlands. Stag beetles are a thermophilus (warmth-loving) species preferring natural open stands, mainly oak and oak-hornbeam forests. They prefer areas with southern exposure and a warm microclimate.

Despite their large size and characteristic appearance, spotting a stag beetle is made more difficult because they have such a short adult season and are mainly active at dusk. But if you know where to look and the conditions are right (still, warm evenings are ideal), you may spot a male flying around trying to find a mate, or a female most likely walking along the ground.

How you can help stag beetles

So, are our stag beetles really confined to parks and gardens? Or is it because we are only looking for them in these areas? Are they still inhabiting the more open woodlands with sunny glades and plenty of dead wood? Woodland owners can help us answer these questions.

If you own or manage a woodland, we'd like you to keep a particular eye out for stag beetles on warm, sunny evenings from the end of May to the end of July. And report any sightings via our **Great Stag Hunt survey.**

Stag beetles rely on dead and decaying wood for the majority of their life cycle. The larvae live underground and feed on decaying wood for several years. The best way to help stag beetles is by keeping dead trees, tree stumps and fallen wood in place in your woodland.

For more information about stag beetles and their habitat, visit our website, **www.stagbeetles.ptes.org**.

STAG BEETLE ID

Stag beetles are most often confused with their smaller cousin, the lesser stag beetle. The two main differences are:

- lesser stag beetles are quite small, around 2-3 cm long, whereas stag beetles are 5-8 cm
- stag beetles are shiny and often have chestnut brown wing cases, whereas lesser stag beetles are matt black all over.

Coppicing with Suz

In 2018 Londoner **SUZ WILLIAMS** gave up her career as a care worker to follow her dream – training to work as a coppicer. Awarded an apprenticeship, she has worked with some of the finest coppice workers in the UK and is passionate about sharing her skills and love of woodlands.

Three years ago, if someone had told me they were a coppice worker, I would have had the same response that most people give me today – 'a coppice what?'

Coppicing is a traditional method of managing a woodland by cutting back trees to ground level to encourage regrowth. Trees put out new shoots from the stump or stool and after several years, the growth is harvested and the cycle begins again. Not all tree species can be coppiced, but in southern Britain, hazel, sweet chestnut, hornbeam, ash, willow and field maple have been cut this way for thousands of years. Traditional foresters used to say that 'the wood that pays is the wood that stays', but these days, the industry is a shadow of its former self and so are many coppiced woodlands.

My personal journey into the world of coppicing began in 2018 when I was chosen to take part in the Small Woods Association and Bill Hogarth Memorial Trust apprenticeship scheme, funded by the **Ernest Cook Trust**. The idea is to get more people into the industry and enthusiastic folk like myself are paired with active coppice businesses so that they can learn the tricks of the trade.

My apprenticeship started off with a fourth-generation coppice worker in south Oxfordshire, a highly skilled and knowledgeable person. However, within a few months he sadly informed me that he had to go and get another job. It just wasn't bringing in enough cash.

Eighty years ago he could have survived very easily on a coppice worker's wage. In those days, the cost of living was lower, timber imports were rare and people required sticks for all kind of daily activities.

Products such as beans poles and pea sticks would have been supplied alongside a wide range of other household goods, such as clothes pegs, cotton reels, washing line

ABOVE LEFT: cut hazel poles.

ABOVE: a copppiced hazel stool. When coppicing hazel it's best to cut as low to the ground as possible. The idea is to create new roots as well as new shoots.

When cut too high (top) only shoots will grow and they will be a little bent at the bottom. The cut sticks left in the middle of the stool will also die off and become rotten.

Cutting it almost flush to the ground (lower image) means the tree will expand its root ball and this is how we end up with trees that last for thousands of years.

props and tent pegs, to name a few. Today, however, with the increase of imported products and the widespread use of plastic, the humble coppice worker has a serious question to face.

Rather than being a curse, my status as a suddenly orphaned apprentice meant that I spent the next two years being passed round Britain's wonderful community of coppice workers. So it was refreshing to hear a wide variety of answers to the eternal question, 'how does one make a living from selling sticks in a globalised, plastic era?'

An endangered craft?

If coppicing was just about making money, then one might be forgiven for thinking that it should just accept its fate as an obsolete industry. However, the wonderful thing about coppicing is that it provides much more than just an income for coppice workers. A thriving, coppiced woodland provides a lasting source of firewood and coppice products, biodiverse habitats for wildlife, and therapeutic work for humans.

People have been coppicing trees for so long now that many woodland wildlife species have become used to the sudden explosion of light in a freshly cut coupe (a section of cut woodland). In fact, some, such as the High Brown Fritillary butterfly, are becoming as extinct as a Grade 1 coppice because they depend on wild violet leaves to lay their eggs – and the wild violet grows best in coppiced woodland.

Conservation groups across the country are doing their best to keep coppicing alive, but surely it would be better to have a thriving industry of people running low-impact, sustainable businesses that can keep their own children alive as well as the butterflies?

The reality is that coppicing has largely been forgotten by the public and so very few people are aware that buying a cheap imported hurdle panel from B&Q, or bamboo canes from across the world could be affecting local businesses. Neither are

they aware that old, coppiced woodlands should be restored to encourage healthy growth and the production of useful timber. Woodland owners may not realise the potential they have for keeping a coppice alive for future generations.

Using coppiced wood

One of the encouraging ways that coppiced wood is being diversified is within the furniture industry. Makers such as Sebastian Cox are actively looking for ways to improve the status of coppicing by turning coppiced wood into modern tables and chairs that are full of character. Oak and willow are used by other woodworkers to create beautiful rustic garden furniture. Sweet chestnut, which is so prolific in Kent and Sussex, is often used for the structural parts of timber-framed buildings. Recently, I was asked to make some hazel ribs for a prototype back brace! The use of the humble stick has many possibilities.

My own answer to the question of how to make an income from coppicing is to diversify. As well as selling bean poles and pea sticks, I have learnt basketry and spoon carving. I also run woodland-based workshops that are designed to give participants the opportunity to soak up a few hours of woodland goodness, as well as learning a new skill.

Getting people into the relaxing environment of the woods seems more important now than ever and the woodland environment helps with so many aspects of both physical and mental health. The wonderful part is that healthy woodlands require management every now and then, too. Isn't it great when both parties can benefit?

Having a woodland as your office must be beneficial because, if nothing else, coppice workers are some of the most chilled-out people I've ever met.

I see good things for the future of coppicing. As we all become more aware of the necessity to use local, sustainable products and the need to support local businesses, a resurgence of the industry is possible. All it needs is a bit more exposure, so that when I tell people what I do for a living they know exactly what I mean.

Above: Suz gets to work with a billhook, stripping small branches from a hazel pole.

Below: Having recently learnt the rudiments of basket-making using willow, Suz set up basket club to to invite local people to spend some time in the woods, meet their neighbours and have a go at simple weaving projects.

LINKS

Find out more about Suz and the workshops she runs on **www.thecoppiceco.com** or follow her on Instagram **@coppicing_suz**.
Suz blogs at **coppicingsuz.wordpress.com**

Visit **www.coppice-products.co.uk** to find your nearest coppice worker who can supply you with bean poles and pea sticks this spring.

The National Coppice Federation promotes coppicing and best practice: **ncfed.org.uk**

TWITTER

Ornithologist **NICK GARDNER** sings the praises of one of the hardiest migrant species of songbird.

It's time to introduce my selection for 'bird of the season'. I'm assured that the season in question is Spring, but at the time of writing, complete with blanket and hot chocolate, it certainly doesn't feel like it. Hopefully by the time you read this, the daffodils are well on their way and the frost has receded from my eyebrows.

Rather than just blurt it out in the opening paragraph, I'll let some of you have a guess at this season's species by giving a few clues first. (No skipping ahead or looking at the large, obvious photo!) This small, inquisitive songbird is one of the first migrants to arrive on our shores every March. Even though they may travel over 3,000 miles, the populations that breed in the UK have it remarkably easy compared to some members of this species. That's because some individuals have been recorded flying nearly 9,000 miles on migration – each way! Satellite-tagged birds have been tracked from their Alaskan breeding grounds to their winter retreats in sub-Saharan Africa, making this the longest migration of any songbird.

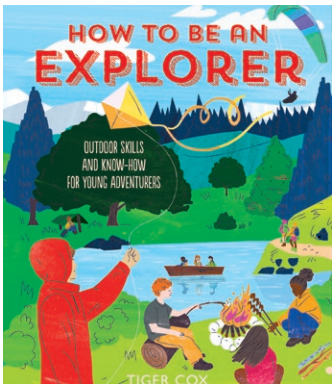
Well done to those of you who just shouted 'Northern Wheatear' at your screen. That's right, *Oenanthe oenanthe* is my pick for Spring 2022. The wheatear really is one of my favourite birds: I love their pastel colours, their charismatic alertness, even their name. The word 'wheatear' might sound like it has something to do with this bird's hearing or diet, but it's much more fun than that. Sometime in the 17th century, the English name arose from the old English words *hwit*, meaning white, and *ærs*, meaning arse. Amusing, but appropriate, because one of the first field marks visible on a distant wheatear is its bright white rump. As with many species, sexes are distinct. Males are mostly pale blue-grey, with a buff throat and black eye mask and wings. Females are (as usual) more subtle but just as beautiful, showing off warmer reddish-brown tones. The males' song starts with a short whistle, and is followed by a rising series of slightly mechanical 'clicky' notes.

Although we are only acquainted with one species of wheatear in the UK, there are over 30 members of the *Oenanthe* genus, many of which are adapted to live in very arid environments throughout Europe, Africa and Asia. Indeed, the only other wheatear I've encountered was the appropriately-named Desert Wheatear, nesting on a rocky outcrop in the middle of the viciously beautiful Gobi Desert. Clearly, this group of birds are a hardy lot. For me though, none are as impressive as our very own Northern Wheatear. On migration they can be found in a variety of habitats from open woodlands to coastal rocklands, so be on the lookout (and listen) for them from early March. If you're on the coast in the east or south-east of England, it could well be that any individuals you encounter might still be en route to their destination further north-west, maybe even as far as Greenland or eastern Canada. For an animal weighing less than a AA battery, I'd say that puts them in contention for bird of the year, never mind season.

How to be an Explorer

Paragliding instructor **TIGER COX** has drawn on his love of the great outdoors to write a book for children. It's packed full of practical 'how-to' guides to introduce children to a wide array of outdoor skills, as well as inspirational stories about real explorers.

In a world when we are often cautious about letting children exercise their curiosity and make their own mistakes, this book is a breath of fresh air. It encourages children to explore the world around them and gives them the tools to do it safely. Tiger explains how he came to write it.



HOW TO BE AN EXPLORER

TIGER COX
Hardback
128 pages, illustrated
Button Books
RRP £16.99, available online and from all good bookshops.

Every 13-year-old dreams of waking up and not having to go to school that day, or the next day, or potentially ever again. Rarely does such a fantasy come true, but for me it did. What would have been a transition into Year 9 became a transition onto a home-built sailing boat. I don't think it would have been my first choice, to explore the world by sea, in such close proximity to my parents. Ask most kids what they would do without school and their answers might revolve around friends, pizza, and a heavy amount of screen time. Not so much parents, rice, and near constant seasickness. Luckily, I didn't have too much say in the matter and we set out to sea in June 2011.

Sea and shore

Our boat, *Bumblebee*, was a 32ft Wharram catamaran, built mostly from wood. She had two masts to complement her two hulls, weighed three tonnes, and was a real labour of love on my parents' part. When my father built his first boat, he acquired a felling licence and made the mast out of a tree from Abbot's Wood. That mast had promptly snapped under the stresses of sailing, so I took great comfort in the fact that *Bumblebee's* masts were aluminium.

We sailed down the west coast of Europe to Africa, stopping and exploring many places along the way. Then we set off across the Atlantic Ocean to the Caribbean, a near-three-week voyage in itself.

In a remote bay, off the Caribbean island of St Vincent, we made a discovery. On that island, the jungle grows right down to beaches of black sand, and often there is a shallow coral reef close to shore. So we anchored our sailing boat at a safe distance and rowed our smaller inflatable dinghy towards the nearest land.

As we got closer, we could see the shapes of buildings hidden among the leaves, but not a person in sight. When we reached the beach, we tied our dinghy above the high tide mark and followed an overgrown path into the jungle. There, to our surprise, we found the abandoned buildings of an old hotel.

All around us, isolated guest rooms were being reclaimed by nature, branches sprouting from their windows as if the guests had turned into trees. A deserted restaurant still had tables ready for diners, but the only customers now were lizards and giant land crabs scuttling across the floor. It is remarkable how quickly plants and trees will take over man's hardest efforts.

As we reached the highest point above

USING A KNIFE

Being able to use a knife safely and respectfully is a core skill for any outdoor explorer. Owning and using a knife is a big responsibility and you need to talk it though with a trusted adult to know when you are ready to begin. Here are four different techniques to get you started and some important safety tips to learn.

KNIFE SAFETY

- Make sure the area within an arm's reach around you is clear of other people.
- Always think about the direction of your cut. NEVER cut towards your own or someone else's body.
- Don't walk around holding your knife with the blade exposed.
- Don't rush what you are doing.
- Always have a first-aid kit handy and know what to do if an accident happens (see page 36)

HAMMER GRIP WITH SHOULDER POWER

Hold the knife with your whole hand like a hammer with the blade facing away from you. Use the power from your shoulder to cut towards the ground. You can sharpen sticks into a point this way.

FINGER GRIP WITH BATON POWER

Hold the knife like a hammer grip but move your fingertips up either side. Use a wooden baton to hammer on the back of the knife. You can split larger pieces of wood lengthways with this technique.

THUMB GRIP WITH THUMB POWER

Hold the knife like a hammer grip but move your thumb into the back of the blade. Hold the stick in your other hand and use both thumbs to push the blade in. You can carve notches with this technique.

Teaching children to thrive outdoors is really important. Making a stick den is both fun and practical.

the bay, we came across a house that had taken many blows from storms and hurricanes over the years, and half of the roof was missing. We crept from room to room, passing by a row of empty bookshelves. Books were scattered across the floor, most of them water damaged and unreadable. Just one hard-cover book was in reasonable condition. I grabbed it and hurried to join my parents on the wobbly balcony. A great view of the Caribbean Sea stretched out before us; I wasn't looking though, I had begun reading.

Planting the seed

That book sparked a great curiosity in my mind, and led me to the realization that young people do not need to 'become' explorers, we just need to 'be' the explorers we already are. To find out what that book was about, you'll have to read my book, which was inspired by it.

When I was writing my own book years later, I drew on my experiences growing up to craft the kind of content I would have liked to read back then. Not just during our year of sailing, but before that. I have always found myself at home outdoors. It wasn't so much that I couldn't stand being indoors or in a classroom, I didn't have any conditions or learning difficulties that made being indoors difficult, I just found that my practical mind had more freedom to create things outside, especially in woodlands.

I grew up at the eastern end of the South Downs National Park, near Lewes, where the rolling hills are mostly barren of trees. That only made going to the woods even more exciting. I was introduced to Friston Forest at a young age. I was shown how to read a map and build a sense of direction, which left me without fear of venturing into the unknown.

Perhaps more importantly, my parents weren't breathing down my neck all the time saying 'be careful'. I think they had used all that kind of energy up on my four older sisters.

Well-meaning parents can be the biggest barrier to kids feeling comfortable in the natural world. I am not a parent, so who am I to give parenting advice, but if I was, I would try very hard to not project my fears onto my children. The more time I spend helping them to acquire skills, and the ethos behind the use of those skills, the safer they are going to be. If I didn't help them learn anything (and that might mean learning some things myself first!), then all I'd be left with are words of fear.

It may sound depressing, but this cycle of ignorance around nature, outdoor skills, and what is truly risky, is actually getting worse from generation to generation. It is up to us, the responsible adults, to flip this spiral upside down. Now is not the time to lament the amount of time we are all spending looking down at screens. Now is the time to find some balance in our lives and those of young people, perhaps with a book about outdoors skill or with a few hours spent under the canopy of a forest. Or better still, take an outdoor skills book into the forest with you!

I think I have just the thing . . .

SYMBOLS IN TREES

Usually the earliest flowering tree in Britain, the blackthorn has a thorny reputation. **CLARE GIBSON** muses upon the blackthorn's place in folklore and symbolism.

The blackthorn's Latin name *Prunus spinosa* reveals two of this tree's key characteristics: its membership of the *Prunus* family of fruit trees, and its thorniness (*spinosa*). The common English name, blackthorn, points to its dark, near-black bark, as well as to those notable thorns, while an alternative name, sloe, is also that of its fruit.

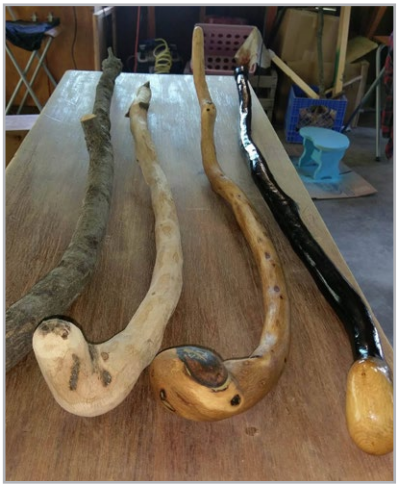
The blackthorn blooms in early spring, before most other flowering trees, and even before it comes into leaf itself. Indeed, so early does it produce its masses of small blooms that the sudden onset of a spell of wintry weather that coincides with its flowering when the natural world is on the cusp of spring was traditionally called a 'blackthorn winter'. The delightful sight of its profusion of creamy white flowers contrasts sharply with its dark, twisted branches, underscoring the blackthorn's starkly oppposing symbolic associations.

Much of the blackthorn's symbolism is negative. *Spinosa* can also be translated as 'difficult'. This may explain why 'difficulty' is the blackthorn's meaning in the Victorian language of flowers, but there are other reasons, too. Its multitude of long, viciously sharp thorns, for example, makes trying to breach blackthorn thickets or hedges a perilously painful business – potentially dangerous, too, because the thorns can easily break off under the skin, causing sepsis. It is possible that the brothers Grimm had the blackthorn in mind when they described the hedge of thorns that grew up around Little Briar Rose's castle in their fairy tale 'Dornröschen' ('Little Briar Rose', popularly known as 'Sleeping Beauty'),

'which every year became higher, and at last grew close up round the castle and all over it, so that there was nothing of it to be seen, not even the flag upon the roof . . . from time to time kings' sons came and tried to get through the thorny hedge into the castle. But they found it impossible, for the thorns held fast together, as if they had hands, and the youths were caught in them, could not get loose again, and died a miserable death.'

The blackthorn is equated with Straif, the 14th letter in the Ogham alphabet, or Celtic tree alphabet, and some believe that that this Old Irish name is related to 'strife'. In Ireland, its hardness resulted in blackthorn wood being favoured for making shilleaghs – cudgels used for fighting – the tree's root being used for the knob.

That it is thought unlucky to bring flowering sprigs of blackthorn into the house is partly due to the folk belief that Christ's crown of thorns was made from blackthorn, but also on account of its supposed link with witches and Satan (who was said to mark his followers with a blackthorn thorn). It was believed that witches carried blackthorn rods or wands, and would point these at anyone whom they wished to harm, with pregnant women being thought at risk of miscarriage if so targeted. Witches supposedly also made fearsome weapons by driving thorns into the ends of blackthorn rods. Its wood burns well, and this was reputedly used for the pyres of those convicted of witchcraft who had been sentenced to death by burning. One such was Major Weir, a Scottish Presbyterian who always carried a black staff whose handle was carved with the heads of hybrid beasts. Weir was burned to death in Edinburgh in 1670, his staff – which had apparently been given to him by Satan and had a demonic life of its own – being hurled into the flames to be incinerated with its owner.



A collection of blackthorn shilleaghs at various stages of completion. (WikiCommons)

It is possible that Major Weir's black staff was made from blackthorn (and 'blackthorn' may also refer to a walking stick). Far less sinisterly, a blackthorn staff is a symbol of office of the mayor of Sandwich, in Kent, a new one being made for each incoming dignitary. The original choice of blackthorn was, it seems, because it was believed that it would repel evil spells, so protecting its virtuous holder.

The blackthorn's ambivalent symbolism also extends to its purplish-black sloes. Although fruits generally represent fertility, prosperity and sweetness, sloes are far too astringent and bitter to eat as they are. Yet when steeped in sugar-sweetened gin, they produce the distinctively flavoured sloe gin, a welcome symbol of winter warmth for many, including me.

APF IS BACK!

After two years of cancelled and rescheduled events, APF will return on 22–24 September 2022 at the Ragley Estate, Alcester, Warwickshire. Organiser **IAN MILLWARD** reveals all.

The two largest arboricultural shows in the UK are joining forces to deliver one incredible event and it promises to be its biggest show yet. APF and the Arboricultural Association's Arb Show, will come together to provide the ultimate one-stop shop for the forestry, arboricultural, woodland and fencing industries. Some 320 exhibitors and around 25,000 visitors are expected over the three-day event.

Arb Show partnership

CEO of the Arb Association, John Parker, said, 'This is fantastic news for arborists. The ARB Show has been a highlight of the event calendar for more than 20 years, and after two years of virtual events we are delighted to be able to announce this collaboration with APF 2022, bringing the show to a greater audience than ever before.'

APF stands out from other events because so much of the machinery and equipment can be seen working under realistic conditions around a 2 km demo circuit. Visitors will be able to see over £60 million of equipment on show.

With the Arb Show on board, there will be an increased focus on the arboricultural sector. The Arb Worker Zone will focus on practical demos and technical workshops, with a daily schedule of talks by industry experts on topical issues from safety and training to plant health issues in the Arb Workshop.

APF has always sought to reflect everything that happens in a modern working woodland and demonstrate the many uses of timber and timber products. From large harvesting machines to simple handsaws, the event showcases the huge variety of tools and equipment available to manage woodlands of all sizes.

Traditional woodland craft skills will be on show in the woodland crafts area. Visitors will be able to watch, learn and chat to craftspeople making Sussex trugs, oak swill baskets, coracles and hazel hurdles. They will be able to watch pole lathe turning, willow weaving, clog making, charcoal burning, Windsor chair making and much more. The British Horse Loggers Association will be demonstrating the use of heavy horses to extract timber and visitors will be able to have a go at handling one of these magnificent animals.

Competitions

APF 2022 is more than just a trade fair: it incorporates many other events, activities and competitions, including the World 25 m pole climbing championships sponsored by Husqvarna, and the European Chainsaw Carving Championships sponsored by A. W.. Jenkinson and Tilhill, as well as the UK Open Fencing Competition sponsored by McVeigh Parker, the UK Open Tree Climbing Championships and the world log to leg pole-lathe turning championships.

The show seeks to have an important training and educational remit and there will be plenty of opportunities to catch up on safety and training requirements, learn about the latest training courses and where to find them, and review the latest plant health news. Need to refresh your memory about how to sharpen your saw? Experts will be on hand to help. Tubex will be giving demonstrations on how they can recycle used tree shelters and there will be examples of biomass production and heating systems on show.

Advance tickets and camping are available to book now at www.apfexhibition.co.uk.
Email: info@apfexhibition.co.uk. Tel: 01428 723545

EVENTS ROUND-UP 2022

MAY

WEIRD AND WONDERFUL WOOD
14–15 May 2022
Stowmarket, Suffolk

WOOD FESTIVAL
20–22 May 2022
Braziers Park, Oxfordshire

JUNE

ROYAL BATH & WEST SHOW
2–4 June 2022
Shepton Mallet, Somerset

DEVON COUNTY SHOW
30 June–2 July 2022
Clyst St Mary, Exeter, Devon

ROYAL HIGHLAND SHOW
23–26 June 2022
Edinburgh, Scotland

JULY

TIMBER FESTIVAL
1–3 July 2022
Feanedock, National Forest

KENT COUNTY SHOW
8–10 July 2022
Maidstone, Kent

GREAT YORKSHIRE SHOW
12–15 July 2022
Great Yorkshire Showground, Harrogate

STRUMPSHAW TREE FAIR
16–17 July 2022,
Strumpshaw, Norfolk

ROYAL WELSH SHOW
18–21 July 2022
Builth Wells, Wales

NEW FOREST AND HAMPSHIRE COUNTY SHOW
26–28 July 2022
Brockenhurst, Hampshire

THE BUSHCRAFT SHOW
29–31 July 2022
Stanford Hall, Lutterworth, Leics

AUGUST

SOUTH DOWNS SHOW
13–14 August 2022
Queen Elizabeth Country Park,
Petersfield, Hampshire

WILDERNESS GATHERING
18–21 August 2022
West Knoyle, Wiltshire

THE OAK FAIR
27–28 August 2022
Sturminster Newton, Dorset

SEPTEMBER

APF & ARB SHOW
22–24 September 2022,
Ragley Estate, Warwickshire

BELMONT WOODFEST & COUNTRY FAIR
10–11 September 2022
Faversham, Kent

SURREY HILLS WOOD FAIR
10–11 September 2022
Cranleigh, Guildford

BENTLEY WOODFAIR & COUNTRY SHOW
16-18 September 2022
Lewes, East Suusex

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With grateful thanks to everyone who contributed to this issue of Living Woods Magazine.

Laura Bower
PTES

Tiger Cox
Tigercox.com

Dave Faulkner
The Whittlewood Concept

Nick Gardner
@birdynick

Clare Gibson
@MrsSymbols

Julianne Hinchliffe

Ian Millward
APF Exhibition

Suz Williams
The Coppice Co.

John Cameron, Ruth Feltham, Simon Feltham, Angus Hanton, Antony Mason, and the Woodlands editorial team.