

## Vallis Vale Residents' Walk April 2024

### Woodland Management Update

- Over 500 trees have been felled this winter within the SSSI, along the railway line and on paths further west. Felling has now been paused until after the bird nesting season is over.
- There are c. 12 trees still marked for removal, but these could not be felled due to the presence of nesting birds either in the trees, or nearby.
- There is some tidying up to do and some fences and kissing gates to be replaced and repaired.
- **We thank everyone for their patience during this very long, wet, and difficult winter and felling season.**

### Woodland Management Background

- We have a Woodland Management Plan (WMP) that has been approved by both Natural England and the Forestry Commission. The plan gives us a 10-year felling licence to manage the woodlands.
- The aims of the WMP are to:
  - Enhance and retain the biodiversity and environmental value of the woodland.
  - Manage the threat that ash die back (ADB) infected trees have on the users of the site on the Rights of Way, unauthorised paths (we have a responsibility to trespassers as well as legitimate users of the site), roads and buildings.
  - Manage by coppicing the Old Down Wood area of the site to prevent the old sweet chestnut coppice stools from breaking apart and dying.
  - Clear encroaching scrub and trees from the historic and geological features on site.
- Regular tree surveys are carried out by a suitably qualified arborist. Trees posing a threat - mostly ADB trees - are marked for felling.
- Prior to any felling an ecological assessment is carried out to assess the tree/s and any sensitive areas or features that may be impacted by the felling process. This informs whether any further species surveys are required e.g. bat surveys, prior to work commencing.
- During felling works an Ecological Clerk of Works (ECoW) oversees the works to ensure that there are no ecological issues and to guide the tree felling gang as to the best place to place arisings and brash (where practical).
- If felling takes place during bird nesting season, the ECoW oversees works to ensure there is no impact on nesting birds – with works ceasing if it is determined that there are.
- The ECoW advises us on what bird and bat boxes are required to help mitigate the loss of the trees and these are erected.
- Felling is carried out by hand with the use of tractor and hand winches to ensure the trees fall where they should, as well as for safety reasons. It is important to note that ADB trees are renowned for being unpredictable and hazardous to fell and so we rely upon the expertise of the tree fellers to carry out this work as safely as possible. Each tree is assessed on an individual basis and the felling process duly planned.

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- A small number of non-ash trees may need to be felled if they are posing a threat to users of the site or if it is unavoidable that they will be damaged during felling process. Most trees felled for this purpose will regrow by coppice regrowth.
- We retain brash and stack to avoid impacting important ground flora and as protection of natural regeneration from deer browsing. It is stacked in as small a footprint as is practical. If there is too much, we can chip but these must be taken off site to avoid enriching the soils (we have not needed to do this yet).
- Large diameter wood is either left in habitat piles or taken off site for firewood if it can be accessed from the footpaths or old railway tracks, or, if retaining the wood will impede ongoing management works.
- High stump 'Monoliths' are created where safe access for mobile working platforms is possible and where it's safe to do so.
- We have kept the paths open to the public throughout the works to try and ensure that the amenity of the site is still available to the public. This methodology may not be used again due to H&S issues around people accessing the felling area, despite sentries and signage being used.
- We are conducting ongoing bat monitoring of the Mells Valley SAC cave and are about to begin static monitoring across the SSSI.
- Restocking will primarily be through natural regeneration. In autumn we will be putting tree shelters on naturally regenerating tree species e.g. field maple, oak, birch, sycamore throughout the woodlands to ensure there are replacement trees coming through to a ratio of at least 1:1.
- We will also be deer-fencing small enclosures where ground conditions allow to encourage natural regeneration. - *where.*
- If insufficient natural regeneration occurs, then we will plant trees grown from source seed or from local provenance.
- A thermal drone survey will be carried out in 2025 to understand the threat that deer browsing is posing to the site's regeneration by browsing.

## LANDSLIDES

### Rights of Way Update

A meeting has been held with Somerset Council's (SCC) Public Rights of Way (PRoW) Officer, the Environment Agency (EA), Natural England (NE) and the Wild Trout Trust (WTT) to look at the necessary repairs of the PRoW associated with the Egford Brook. We will be working in partnership with all parties to get the necessary permits to use green repairs for the severely eroded riverbank and stoning of the footpaths. The timescales for works to take place due to the permitting process is likely to be Spring 2025. During the repair process the paths will be temporarily closed in two stages so that access to at least part of the PRoW is always possible. *Somerset Council -*

- The footbridge over the confluence of the Egford Brook and Mells River has had temporary repairs carried out to make it safe with a programme of full replacement scheduled for 2025.
- The 'sleeper bridge' that crosses the Mells River has been condemned for all users and so access to it will be blocked. Discussions are ongoing internally and with NE regarding as to whether this bridge gets replaced or not. The other footbridge crossing the Mells River has



## Heidelberg Materials

been surveyed and we are awaiting the results. Whatever the results are, this bridge will be repaired or replaced, as it lies on a PRow.

- There is a labyrinth of unauthorised paths within the site, some of these paths are 'desire lines' and shortcuts which we will aim to block off to protect the ground flora. Some have been made to bypass eroded areas of path which will remain until the paths are repaired and then the alternatives blocked again to protect the ground flora. There has been a request to keep the unauthorised path that travels from the lime kiln and along the opposite side of the Mells River and Egford Brook from the existing PRow and we will be discussing this internally and with NE and the EA.
- The permissive path that follows the old railway line from the footbridge over the Mells River along to the De La Beche Unconformity will remain open as a Permissive Path.

Alex + Andy.