



## **Ash dieback: Interim statement from Somerset Wildlife Trust**

**12<sup>th</sup> November 2012**

### **What is ash dieback?**

Along with oak, beech and birch, ash is a British native broadleaf species of tree. Its impressive size and distinctive appearance makes ash an iconic feature in many of Somerset's woodlands and hedgerows. The tree is identifiable by its smooth, silvery grey bark, velvety black buds and tooth-edged lance-shaped leaves, which are arranged in opposite pairs along a twig, with a single leaf at the end.

Ash dieback is a serious disease of ash trees, caused by the fungus *Chalarafraxinea*. It has already devastated ash woodlands in other parts of northern Europe, and has now been found in Britain. The fungus infects 60-90% of the trees in its path, causing leaf loss, bark lesions and crown dieback. Young ash trees are killed very rapidly by the disease. Older trees often resist the disease for longer periods but succumb with prolonged exposure. The disease is spread in the leaf litter, and the wind is believed to play a role in transmitting fungal spores.

The Forestry Commission has produced [a pictorial guide highlighting the symptoms](#).

### **Origins and Spread**

Ash dieback was first observed in Poland in 1992 and has since spread to 21 European countries. It reached Denmark in 2002 and has since affected 90-95% of Danish ash trees.

The disease was discovered in Britain in February 2012 when it was found in a consignment of infected trees sent from the Netherlands to a nursery in Buckinghamshire. Until recently, all other known cases were linked to plantations and nurseries but ash dieback has now been discovered in the natural environment, initially in nature reserves owned by the Woodland Trust, Norfolk Wildlife Trust and Sussex Wildlife Trust. Since then, the Forestry Commission has been undertaking a nationwide survey and has confirmed the disease has spread across much of the length and breadth of England. An up to date map of sites where the disease has been confirmed is available on the Forestry Commission website.

### **Is it in Somerset?**

At present, the Forestry Commission has not confirmed any cases of ash dieback in Somerset, but is nonetheless encouraging land owners and the public to be vigilant.

Somerset Wildlife Trust owns and looks after around 80 nature reserves across the county, including a number of woodlands. We have started to undertake inspections of ash trees on our sites, but so far have not found any trees exhibiting symptoms.

If you see any ash trees which you suspect of showing signs of ash dieback please contact the Forestry Commission straight away - if these trees are on Somerset Wildlife Trust nature reserves we

would appreciate it if you could contact us to report the sighting too by calling 01823 652400 or by email to [inquiries@somersetwildlife.org](mailto:inquiries@somersetwildlife.org). There is also an 'ashtag' app available for smartphone users which will allow you to geo-locate suspected diseased trees and report them directly to the Forestry Commission - the app can be downloaded at <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/mobileapp>.

### **What is Somerset Wildlife Trust doing about ash dieback?**

We are very concerned about the spread of ash dieback and its impact on the natural environment - ash is an ecologically important species, with many species of insects and lichens reliant upon or closely associated with it. Ash trees make up around 30% of England's woodland cover and the thousands of miles of hedgerows which knit our landscapes together, and in Somerset are a key feature of our lowland mixed woodlands. We are monitoring the situation on our reserves, and are working with partners such as the Forestry Commission, RSPB, National Trust and the AONBs locally to keep an eye on the situation across the county.

The wildlife impacts of ash dieback will vary across Somerset's woodlands. Along with the effects upon species such as brown hairstreak butterfly, which use ash trees as mating points, or bullfinch which feed upon ash seeds, the biggest ecological impacts of the dieback will be changes to woodland ground flora. Ash come into leaf late, drop their leaves early and has a thin canopy which allows plenty of light in to the woodland floor, enabling many species of spring flowers like bluebell and primrose to create dramatic colourful displays. When ash trees die, other species like sycamore and beech may colonise the space left behind, and with their dense canopy will quickly affect the delicate ground flora. In mixed native woodlands such as Thurlbear Wood near Taunton where ash accounts for only 20 to 25% of the trees, it will be easier to take remedial action to limit some of these effects: we plan to encourage or plant downy or silver birch to replace ash. Birch is fast growing and allows reasonable light to pass, and therefore will hold the space left behind by ash very well, until we know for certain what tree species will be most suitable as a long term replacement.

Except for new plantings, where ash dieback is found on our nature reserves we will not clear fell or burn trees in native woodlands, but will only remove trees which are posing a health and safety risk. As far as possible we want to leave trees in the ground to try and identify those ash specimens that have a natural resistance to the ash dieback disease. In Denmark, about 300 trees have been found which show good immunity to the disease, and they will be used to grow ash tree plants which may show a similar resistance. We intend to intend to try to identify similar resistance in local ash trees. We will work with the Forestry Commission and follow advice from Defra, the Government's department responsible for overseeing the national response to this crisis. At a national and level we will continue to

### **What can I do?**

Whilst we cannot prevent the spread of the disease, there are measures we can all take to minimise potential sources of infection.

1: **Keep it clean!** As the main transmission pathway of the disease appears to be in leaf litter it is essential that we all maintain good biosecurity - remember to enter and leave woodlands with clean boots, clothes, equipment and vehicles! Wash or remove leaf litter from your clothing, boots, bags or anything else you have taken out into the woods with you. Keeping yourself and your belongings free from leaf litter will limit potential transmission of the disease between the places you visit around the county. Keeping clean is especially important if you have been visiting woodlands in other counties or countries which have confirmed cases of ash dieback.

2: **Stay vigilant!** Familiarise yourself with the symptoms of the disease and if you spot trees which seem to be showing signs of ash dieback please report them to the Forestry Commission, and Somerset Wildlife Trust too if you are on one of our reserves.

3: **Support Somerset Wildlife Trust!** This terrible disease highlights to all of us how vulnerable our natural environment is, and how important it is that we take action to make wildlife more resilient in the future. By supporting Somerset Wildlife Trust you are playing your part in restoring, recreating and reconnecting wildlife habitats across our county, and helping us to develop and maintain a network of Living Landscapes.