

Media Release: 21/11/23

LIFE in the Ravines: planting for the future

It is no easy feat, hefting heavy gear across rugged terrain, with young, tender saplings in tow. But that's exactly the task of our amazing woodland restoration teams as they set about tree planting in the autumn and winter seasons. Cutting back and clearing space for new growth and the young trees, a high level of mental and physical stamina is required to carry out the task - come rain, shine, or even snow!

The five-year LIFE in the Ravines project is an exciting partnership, centred within the *Tilio-Acerion*, ravine woodlands of the Peak District Dales Special Area of Conservation (SAC).

This project received funding from the European Union's LIFE Programme, to restore these ravine woodlands and mitigate the effects of ash dieback. Led by Natural England, the project partnership comprises of Chatsworth Estate, Derbyshire Wildlife Trust, Staffordshire Wildlife Trust and the National Trust.

The project is also working with the Peak District National Park, Derbyshire Dales District Council, the Forestry Commission and the Woodland Trust.

So far, the project has planted over 31,000 trees across the Peak District Dales SAC, restoring ravine woodlands in areas including the iconic five dales of the Derbyshire Dales National Nature Reserve, such as the well-visited Lathkill.

A large part of the project involves replacing trees lost to... ash dieback, a disease caused by *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus*, which is a type of fungus. A fast spreader, it releases spores which can travel for miles spreading the disease across countries. Since the disease first appeared in Europe over 30 years ago, it spread to the UK where our only native ash species was unprepared and unprotected.

In Europe and the UK, thousands of ash trees have been and continue to be infected, usually resulting in their eventual death. In our case, in 2016 the disease had been initially detected in low levels within the Peak District Dales SAC woodlands. Yet, by 2020 an estimated 99% of ash trees in these areas were in fact infected.

A Day in the Ravine Woodlands

On foggy mornings at base, our restoration team prepares before heading into the woods. Working in remote parts of the Peak District Dales requires a lot of planning and packing! All the risk assessments, hazard maps, cutting and planting equipment is organised and packed up in trucks, ready for the day.

Getting to site to begin work often means a tough trek, with almost no footpaths to use and multiple obstacles to climb over. The team can walk over 20 minutes to get to their work location, carrying everything they need - which is a lot! Imagine carrying food, drinks, extra layers, a spare coat (when it's pouring!) a helmet, first aid kits and shelters. Adding to the load are heavy planting hammers, chainsaws, cutting supplies, and hundreds of saplings. The walk is a tiring start to the day, before even reaching the site. Nonetheless, when the destination is reached, the team unloads the heavy gear, and gets to work.

"The most difficult part of planting in these woods is lugging the tools and materials up and down incredibly steep and slippery slopes. We're working on terrain that most people probably wouldn't even consider walking through" – **Martin, Woodland Restoration Worker**

In the Peak District Dales, these woodlands are on steep, craggy, limestone slopes. Moving around the site is challenging enough without the difficulties of restoration work itself. The team climbs up and down these steep ravines all day, whether planting, cutting, or moving materials.

"I love the challenge of working on the slopes, especially in winter. When you're out with the team - and you can see that everyone's working their hardest, despite the tough conditions - there's no feeling like that sense of achievement at the end of the day." - **Mark, Woodland Restoration Supervisor**

In the autumn and winter, our team focuses on clearing some infected ash trees, to make room for healthy planted saplings to grow. This means chainsaw cutting is required on these tricky slopes. Ash trees are chosen for thinning out according to, size, condition, and how much planting space can be gained. Selected ash trees of all sizes are retained, particularly mature specimens, to maintain the structural diversity of the woodland. All cut material is stacked as brash piles, while felled stems are left secure on the woodland floor to provide a deadwood habitat that is invaluable to wildlife.

The key to restoring our ravine woodlands is to replant a variety of suitable trees. The team carefully choose which species to plant and where, so they have the highest chance of surviving. Trees suitable for ravine woodland conditions are selected with a focus on the foundation species, which are most suited to the ecological conditions. Apart from ash, these are small leaved lime, large leaved lime, and wych elm.

When the site has been thinned and before planting begins, stakes are knocked into the ground to hold the protective tree tubes in place, which prevent grazing by livestock and deer. As you can imagine, driving a stake and planting trees into rocky



limestone is challenging work. The team have even created bespoke tools to speed up the process.

In addition to access issues, difficult terrain and challenging site work, cold and wet weather conditions can make it hard to stay warm - especially on ravines facing north.

After a full day of restoration work is done, the team heads back to base, where equipment is cleaned and prepared for the next day.

It's a tough and exhausting job, but our restoration team love's spending time in these secret woodlands of the National Park. Here are some quotes about what they love most about the job.

"Through our planting season, we're quite likely to hear the chip and wail of peregrine falcons, then if lucky, we'll see one or two birds. Their calls will always make me look up and scan the crags for them. It's exciting every time this happens."
- Andrew, Woodland Restoration Worker

" When we plant saplings near mature trees, it's cool to think they will one day be the same size and age as those mature trees. Especially when we plant lime." - Owen, Woodland Restoration Contracts Supervisor

"My favourite thing about the landscape is seeing how it changes over the seasons, like when the ash trees lose their leaves early, the birch leaves turn gold, and then the woodland flowers like snowdrops and wood anemones come out in spring. There's also a sense of stillness in the secluded places where we work." - Helen, Woodland Restoration Worker

The LIFE in the Ravines partnership is committed to the restoration and recovery of these woodlands, and the species that thrive within them. Projects such as this demonstrate the importance of managing sites carefully, with the right tree planted in the right place.

This planting season, we celebrate the dedication of our teams who carry out this challenging, yet highly rewarding work. Their efforts are ensuring the beauty of our woodlands are preserved for future generations to come.

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For comment and media opportunities, contact:

Katie Brownbill, Communications and Engagement Officer, LIFE in the Ravines
Katie.Brownbill@naturalengland.org.uk

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Images and Video: Single use only





Photos by Natural England: Working on site

.....Additional Notes for Editor.....

LIFE in the Ravines – The Project

This £5m partnership project, led by Natural England, is restoring 876ha of ravine woodland within the Peak District Dales Special Area of Conservation (SAC). This is 16% of the UK’s ravine woodland, a European Priority Habitat. All the project sites are now heavily infected with ash dieback caused by the fungus *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus*, which usually leads to tree death. Without intervention, in some areas the whole woodland would be lost. LIFE in the Ravines will replant trees historically found in the woods such as *Tilia cordata* (small leaved lime), *Tilia platyphyllos* (large leaved lime) and *Ulmus glabra* (wych elm), alongside others such as *Populus tremula* (aspen) and *Salix* (willow). The woods are too far from seed sources for these species to rely on natural regeneration. The project will also seek to retain ash in the woods.

Project Partners

Project partners are the Derbyshire Wildlife Trust, Staffordshire Wildlife Trust, the National Trust and the Chatsworth Estate.

The project will also work with the Peak District National Park, Derbyshire Dales District Council, the Forestry Commission, and the Woodland Trust.

EU LIFE Funding

The EU’s LIFE fund had agreed to support this £5 million project prior to the UK’s exit from the EU. EU LIFE has given £3.6 million funding. The rest of the funding has come from project partners and supporters.

About Natural England

Natural England is the government’s adviser for the natural environment in England, helping to protect England’s nature and landscapes for people to enjoy and for the services they provide.

Within England, Natural England is responsible for:

- Promoting nature conservation and protecting biodiversity



- Conserving and enhancing the landscape
- Securing the provision and improvement of facilities for the study, understanding and enjoyment of the natural environment
- Promoting access to the countryside and open spaces and encouraging open-air recreation
- Contributing in other ways to social and economic well-being through management of the natural environment
- Find out more on Natural England's website and follow us on Twitter: @NaturalEngland
- Natural England leads several other ambitious conservation projects that have benefitted from LIFE funding. These include Dynamic Dunescapes, working to restore sand dunes across the UK; and LIFE Recreation ReMEDIES, saving seagrass and other delicate underwater habitats around our coasts.

About Derbyshire Wildlife Trust

Derbyshire Wildlife Trust, a Registered Charity, is the only organisation working to protect all wildlife across the county. We are one of 47 in The Wildlife Trusts Partnership, a nationwide network of local trusts. We manage 47 nature reserves throughout Derbyshire, advise local authorities and landowners on nature conservation issues and run a range of conservation and education projects. We are committed to The Wildlife Trusts' strategy of creating Living Landscapes – robust, connected landscapes that address the challenges facing our wildlife and countryside. Find out more at www.derbyshirewildlifetrust.org.uk

About Staffordshire Wildlife Trust

Staffordshire Wildlife Trust, a registered charity, is the leading nature conservation body in the County of Staffordshire. It protects and enhances our wildlife and wild places and promotes involvement, enjoyment and understanding of the natural world. With the support of over 17,000 members, it manages 31 sites covering over 4,000 acres including sites of international, European and national importance. As part of The Wildlife Trusts, the Trust is the local face of the largest organisation in the UK concerned with the conservation of all forms of wildlife.

About Chatsworth Estate

Chatsworth is home to the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire and is located in the Peak District National Park. The house, many of its contents and much of the surrounding landscape are leased to a registered charity, the Chatsworth House Trust. The Duke and Duchess pay rent to the charity to live at Chatsworth and work with the charity and others to welcome Chatsworth's visitors. Every penny of visitor



admission goes directly to the Chatsworth House Trust, which is dedicated to the long-term preservation of Chatsworth House, the collections, garden, woodlands and park for the long-term benefit of the public. The charity promotes the study and appreciation of Chatsworth as a place of historic, architectural, and artistic interest and of natural beauty, and encourages the use and enjoyment of Chatsworth by visitors for education and recreation.

About the National Trust

The National Trust is a conservation charity founded in 1895 by three people, Octavia Hill, Sir Robert Hunter and Hardwicke Rawnsley who saw the importance of the nation's heritage and open spaces and wanted to preserve them for everyone to enjoy. The Trust has committed to achieving carbon net zero emissions by 2030 and establish 20 million trees to help tackle climate change, creating green corridors for people and nature near towns and cities, running a year-long campaign to connect people with nature and continuing investment in arts and heritage. Ensuring everyone who visits feels welcome, and more people can access its places continues to be another key aspect of the charity's work. Entirely independent of Government, the National Trust looks after more than 250,000 hectares of countryside, 780 miles of coastline and hundreds of special places across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The National Trust receives more than 26.9 million visits each year to the places it cares for that have an entry fee, and an estimated 100 million visits to the outdoor places looked after by the charity. Together with 5.9 million members and more than 65,000 volunteers, they help to support the conservation charity in its work to care for nature, beauty, history. For everyone, for ever.

.....Additional Information.....

To find out more about LIFE in the Ravines:

- WWW.LIFEintheRavines/Storymap
- www.LIFEintheRavines.co.uk
- Twitter / Instagram / Facebook: @lifeinravines
- lifeintheravines@naturalengland.org.uk

