GOATWALKLANDTRUST

AUTUMN NEWSLETTER 2025

After a glorious summer, our fields have now been mown as part of the process of creating a biodiverse wildflower meadow. As a result, they are not looking quite as lovely as they did a few months ago!



Contractors mowing the lower field on 29 September. Photo by Simon Briscoe.

However, our copse is now carpeted with flowering cyclamens and contains some very interesting fungi, like the highly poisonous Brown Roll-rim (both of which are shown below). You can see more pictures on our X and Facebook pages https://x.com/GWLT2015 and https://www.facebook.com/p/Goat-Walk-Land-Trust-100064812513725/

The hedgerows are full of berries, which we hope will attract and sustain plenty of migrant thrushes, like redwings and fieldfares, this winter.

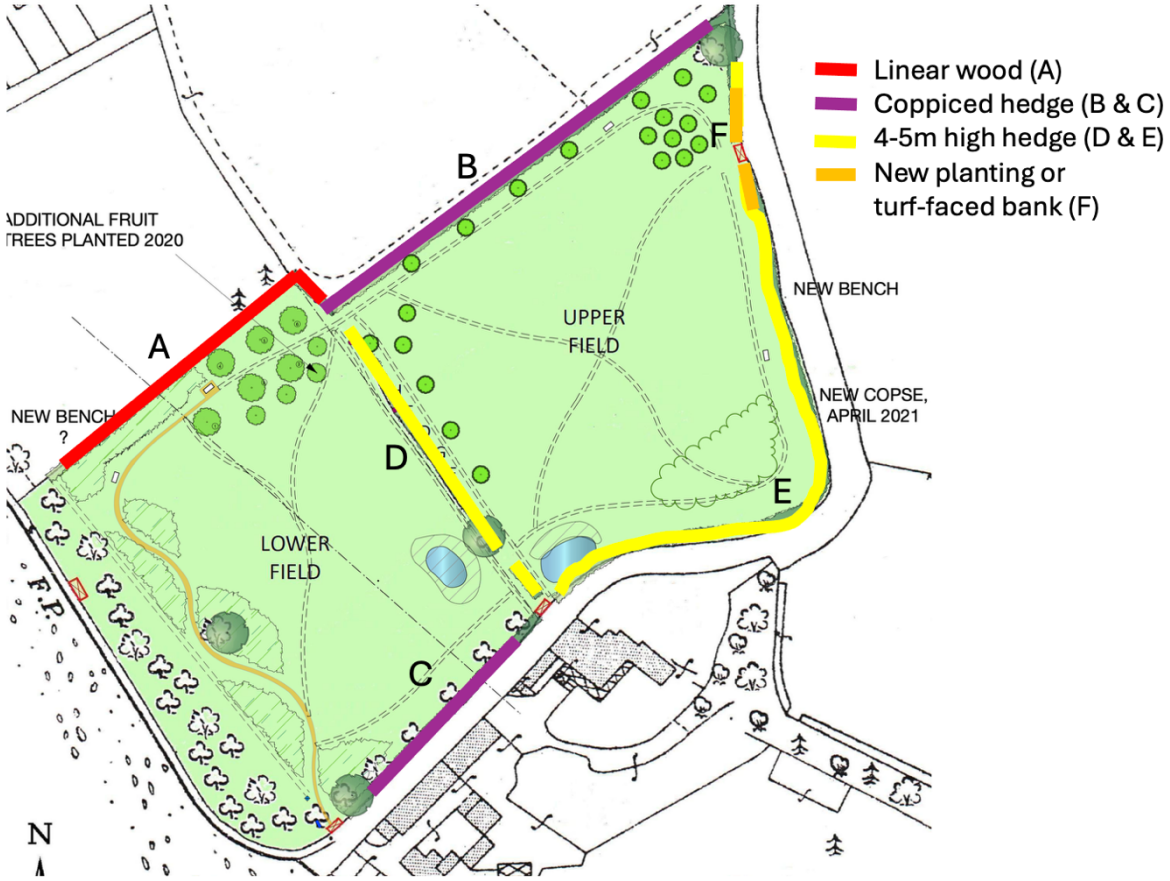


The carpet of cyclamens in our copse and the highly poisonous Brown Roll-rim fungus. Photos by John Bryant.

The Trust's land is bounded on three sides by hedges and there is an additional hedge separating the upper and lower fields. These hedges have not been cut systematically since the Trust purchased the land, although the outer face of the hedge along Bowling Green Road is flail cut each year by a contractor working for Devon County Council. The Management Committee has therefore been developing a plan for managing these hedges in a way that will provide food and shelter for the widest range of wildlife species, while being mindful of our obligations as landowners. In particular, we need to protect the utility cables that run across our land and allow engineers from National Grid and BT/Openreach to access them.

The boundary hedges are typical elm-dominated Devon hedges, as described by the Devon Hedge Group (DHG), with a substantial earth bank at their core and, in the case of the hedge in the lower field that adjoins Bowling Green Road, a stone facing. Unfortunately, many of our elms are dying because of Dutch elm disease. In addition to English elm, the hedges contain all the woody species (hawthorn, hazel, holly, elder, ash and oak) and flowers (red campion, stitchwort, cow parsley and herb Robert) that DHG list as being characteristic of elm-dominated hedges. The hedge separating the two fields is slightly different, because it does not have an earth bank core and was extended with new planting after the Trust purchased the fields. However, it contains the same mix of species, plus some hornbeam, field maple and guelder rose.

Based on the Wildlife Trusts' advice on how to manage a hedgerow for wildlife, we have decided to cut each of the hedges along our boundaries in a slightly different way, as shown in this map:



Hedge A will be allowed to develop into a line of trees. This will require minimal action apart from maintaining access to the power and telegraph poles, and to the bases of the dead elm trees in case any need to be removed if they become unsafe.

The elms in hedge B have been severely affected by Dutch elm disease. To combat this, over the next 3 to 4 years we will cut some of these back to near ground level each year to allow the cut stumps to regrow (a process known as coppicing). This process will be repeated when the new growth becomes vulnerable to attack by the beetle that carries the fungus that causes Dutch elm disease.

The elms and sycamores in hedge C were coppiced in September, when the bird nesting season had finished, to protect the utility lines that run along this hedge. They will be coppiced again when the new growth starts to interfere with those lines.

The hedge between the two fields (D in the map) will be reduced in height to around 4 metres in October to protect the utility lines that run along it. This should also make it particularly attractive to breeding song thrushes and bullfinches, both of which occur on our land. We'll repeat this process every 3 to 5 years.

The long hedge between the upper field and Bowling Green Road (E on the map) will also be reduced to around 4 metres and reduced in width. Ideally, we'd like to do this with a tractor-mounted circular saw, because this leaves a much cleaner cut and reduces the chance of infection. However, so far, we've been unable to find a contractor with a saw of this kind. If you know of anyone who has one, please let us know. We'll also retain 11 or 12 mature trees in this hedge and remove the branches from the Turkey oak in the north corner of the upper field that overhang Bowling Green Road.

Finally, we will have the brambles and dead elms on either side of the top entrance to the upper field removed (F on the map) and manage this as a turf-faced bank. Banks of this kind are used as an alternative to a hedge on some parts of Dartmoor. If it proves difficult to maintain this, we will plant a new hedge.

We've already implemented some of this plan to protect the utility lines and prevent a repetition of the damaged that was caused in 2024. That work will also provide a good idea of how the other hedges will look when they're managed in the way we propose. However, before we do any more, we would like to ensure that all our members are comfortable with this new approach. We will therefore set aside some time at our next Annual General Meeting on 10 February to discuss it.

In the meantime, the first task is to cut back the brambles that are threatening to overwhelm the trees that were planted along our hedgerows. We're extremely grateful to our brilliant volunteers, who have begun work on this by participating in our monthly mid-week working parties. You can see the benefits below:



Before and after the bramble clearance along the newly coppiced hedge between the lower field and Bowling Green Road. Photos by Simon Briscoe and Kathryn James

The next working parties will be on 6 November and 10 December, with a special work party on Saturday 22 November to improve access to the inside of the wall between our copse and the Goat Walk, so that we can check on the condition of the wall.

John Harwood Chair, GWLT Management Committee