

# **Plan for Managing Native Black Poplars in NW Herefordshire**



David Griffith – Lyonshall Tree Warden

Tony Norman – Pembridge Tree Warden

## **Introduction**

*Populus nigra*, the Native Black Poplar, is Britain's rarest native tree, which largely due to human interference is no longer able to propagate itself. Without co-ordinated management there is a real risk that it could become extinct.

Herefordshire has one of the best populations of these trees, however there are currently only 239 trees recorded in the county. Many of these are veteran or ancient trees and a relatively high number are pollards.

Black Poplars are dioecious – that is, there are male and female trees. Female trees are very scarce, as they have thinned out or cut down historically due to large amounts of fluffy seeds produced which were deemed a nuisance.

All the trees we have now were planted rather than naturally occurring.

## **Actions required to safeguard the future of *Populus nigra***

1. Identify and Record existing BPs in NW Herefordshire
2. Care of existing trees – advice and possible tree surgery
3. Propagation and planting of new trees

## Identification and Recording

Accurate identification of true Native Black Poplars is an essential first step, however this may not be straightforward as there are a number of hybrid forms that can be difficult to distinguish from the native tree. We suggest the following steps to ensure accurate identification and recording:

1. Existing trees in the parish are identified by someone with training and experience in differentiating the native tree from the various hybrids
2. Trees so identified as native BPs are then verified by an expert
3. The details of these trees are then recorded – see Appendix A
4. The details of the tree are entered on the Woodland Trust’s “Ancient Tree Hunt” website – this will ensure the record is seen and checked by the county verifier for ancient and veteran trees, who also collates the county database of Black Poplars.  
It will also allow accurate mapping of the tree and uploading of photographs.
5. A local record of the tree is created as a simple computer file which is shared with the Parish Council thus ensuring information is not lost in the long run, and is available to future Tree Wardens or other interested persons – see Appendix B
6. A regular check of trees, ideally annually and updating of the record to include any changes e.g. lost trees.

## Care of existing trees

As many of our older trees are pollards there is a risk of overgrowth and collapse of the tree if not re-pollarded at intervals – there are a number of examples of trees succumbing to this fate. This operation in itself can cause the tree to die if not undertaken by an experienced tree surgeon – again there are examples of trees being badly pollarded e.g. by contractors to power companies, which have died as a result.

The new growth which occurs following successful re-pollarding is the perfect source of material for truncheons.

Mature maiden trees have a propensity to lose a bough in strong winds, which can cause concern if the tree is in a publically accessible location. In these circumstances, a crown reduction of the tree can preserve the tree and reduce risk of injury. There is a well publicised local example of the above scenario which nearly caused the loss of an historic veteran tree due to 'Health and Safety' concerns, fortunately a compromise of crown reduction preserved the tree.

We suggest a simple written management plan for each identified tree to be included in the local record – see Appendix B

## **Propagation of new trees**

*Populus niger* is fairly easy to propagate (but see below for siting of new trees), there are two methods which can be successfully used

1. Cutting and planting of truncheons – these are six foot lengths of two to four inch diameter young growth, cut and planted in-situ in late winter. Use a crowbar to make a two foot hole, taper the end of the truncheon and knock in with a lump hammer
2. Cutting young thin shoots in summer, eighteen to twenty four inches in length and planting in a pot or garden bed to root, for planting out later.

It is essential that truncheons and cuttings are taken from trees which have been identified as above and are on the Herefordshire list of true Native Black Poplars. Ideally cuttings should be taken from local trees to preserve any local genetics. The provenance of new plantings should be recorded, and once established as a viable tree it should be added to the local record. The county record currently includes trees once over ten years of age.

Siting of trees – *P. Niger* will thrive if planted in optimum conditions, but will probably fail in the wrong situation. An old name for this species is 'Water Poplar', which is a good clue. A wet place with a good depth of soil is ideal, a dry place will likely result in a failed tree. They are not a woodland species and will not tolerate shade or being overgrown by other trees.

## **Current situation in NW Herefordshire**

A small group of Tree Wardens and volunteers have been identifying true Native Black Poplars, ensuring they are recorded on the County database, and trialling propagation methods.

To ensure the trees we have identified for propagation are true native trees, we organised a visit by the BSBI National Recorder for Black Poplars who confirmed our identifications.

We now have an identified stock of trees for propagation, including rare female trees.

We have also identified veteran pollards that require re-pollarding to a) preserve them, and b) provide a source of material for future propagation.

As a first step, we intend to propagate trees on twenty farms in the Curl Brook catchment in February / March 2018. This work will be carried out by volunteers.

Our vision is to see the planting of 1000 new Black Poplars across the County of Herefordshire over the next twenty years. This will require oversight and administration by a larger organisation e.g. Herefordshire Wildlife Trust working in collaboration with the Herefordshire Tree Warden Network

## Appendix A - Details to be recorded for each Tree

- a. Date of record / update
- b. Grid Reference – a 10 figure GR will locate the tree to within 1 metre – most smart phones are capable of this.
- c. Form of tree – is it a Maiden or Pollard
- d. Girth of tree – this is measured at 1m 50 above the high side of the tree base
- e. Accessibility – Is there public access, or if private is permission required to view.
- f. Condition – is the trunk hollow or hollowing, is the crown overgrown, is there deadwood in the crown that is a risk if in a public place etc.
- g. Record these details on the Ancient Tree inventory and note the tree's ATI number
- h. Actions required – e.g. re-pollarding

## Appendix B - Suggested format for Local Black Poplar Records

To be shared with parish Council

Date	Grid Ref ATI number	Form	Girth	Accessibility	Condition	Actions required
22/22/22	SO1234567890  367498	Pollard	3m 23	Public	Hollowing trunk, overgrown branches endangering integrity of trunk	Re-pollarding
33/33/33	SO0987654321  374621	Maiden	1m 19	Private	Young healthy tree	None

## References

1. The Black Poplar: Ecology, History and Conservation

Fiona Cooper. Windgather Press; 2006. **ISBN-10:** 1905119054

2. Black Poplar: The Most Endangered Native Timber Tree in Britain

Forestry Commission -

[https://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/RIN239.pdf/\\$FILE/RIN239.pdf](https://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/RIN239.pdf/$FILE/RIN239.pdf)

3. Ancient Tree Inventory - <http://www.ancient-tree-hunt.org.uk/>