

# Native Black poplar (*Populus nigra ssp. betulifolia*)

*The native Black poplar was formerly a component of floodplain woodland but now occurs as isolated specimens in wet meadows, along hedgerows, beside farm ponds and near to rivers. It has not reproduced naturally for many centuries and its current distribution reflects the once common practise of striking cuttings around farms. It has been in decline for the last 200 years and is now rare. Most surviving trees have reached old age and mortality rates are high. Suffolk has a significant proportion of the British population, especially the rarer female trees.*

## 1 Current Status

### 1.1 National

There are an estimated 8000 native Black poplars in Britain, chiefly occurring south of a line from the Mersey to the Wash. Many of these are believed to be genetic clones so probably considerably less distinct genotypes exist. The tree has strongholds in Shropshire, Cheshire, Somerset, and the Vale of Aylesbury and East Anglia. The vast majority of the trees have reached maturity and there has been very little planting of new trees until recently. Female trees are particularly rare, with an estimated 400 nationally. Seed germination is restricted to the unvegetated banks and bars of low intervention river systems. Britain's well-managed rivers have lacked suitable habitats for centuries. Consequently, the current population reflects former planting preferences rather than any natural distribution pattern. Planting has been restricted to vegetative cuttings, and this is one reason why genetic diversity is low. Hybrid crosses of the European Black poplar (*Populus nigra ssp. typica*) and the American cottonwood (*Populus deltoides*) have been extensively planted in place of the native tree over the last 200 years. There has been much mis-identification of hybrids as natives and *vice versa*. (NP) A large number of street trees in Manchester and several other cities in the North-West have recently succumbed to disease, probably Poplar Scab (*Venturia populina*). This has reached epidemic proportions in these areas and most trees are expected to die. It is not clear at present whether the disease will affect other parts of the country, especially eastern areas where the drier climate and wider spacing between trees could limit its ability to spread. Forest Research are investigating the matter.

### 1.2 Local

Formerly more common in Suffolk, now approximately 430 mature trees survive at about 270 locations. Of these, approximately 80 are females occupying about 40 locations. Almost half of the female trees and locations occur within a triangle between Saxmundham, Framingham and Wickham Market. Suffolk Coastal District contains 75% of the female trees. Males have a more even distribution, occurring in about a third of all parishes. Many trees are in poor condition and mortality rates are high, with about a third of all the trees



recorded in the 1980s now deceased. There are known to be some young and medium aged trees but distinguishing them from hybrids can be difficult. Some young trees supplied from nurseries as native have turned out to be hybrids. Much of the new planting has not been recorded in terms of site or source.

### 1.3 Natural Areas

East Anglian Plain, Suffolk Coast and Heaths, Breckland.

### 1.4 Protection

Section 13 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, as amended, prohibits the unauthorised uprooting of any wild plant species. Black poplars are not on Schedule 8 of the Act (those protected from any picking, uprooting or destruction) and only benefit from the general protection mentioned above.

Some trees may be protected using Tree Preservation Orders under the Town and Country Planning (Trees) Regulations 1999. These are normally only served where it is known that a tree is under threat from felling. Some trees may lie within Conservation Areas associated with villages and flood meadows and would be afforded some protection. A Felling licence (Forestry Act 1967) may be required if a landowner wished to fell a number of trees.

Where a black poplar grows within a hedgerow the Hedgerows Regulations 1997 would afford some protection to the tree and hedge.

Current factors causing loss or decline

- Loss of both natural river systems and unstable floodplain sediments results in an absence of suitable habitat for natural regeneration.
- The lack of native male trees in close proximity to native females means there is very little opportunity for fertilisation.
- The presence of large numbers of hybrid trees means that seed from female trees is very likely to be hybridised.
- There are high losses of trees from natural factors such as old age, drought and windblow; the trees are often large isolated specimens.
- Removal of fallen trees which would otherwise survive in situ or regenerate from the stump.
- The widely dispersed population makes site based conservation more difficult.
- Widely available and commercially preferable hybrids have been planted in preference to native stock for the last 150 years.

## 2 Current action

- The survey produced by Edgar Milne-Redhead and Peter Webb is being updated, confirming presence of trees, sexing them, checking authenticity and gathering ownership details. Suffolk County Council hold a central register.
- Dissemination of information to owners of trees on an ad hoc basis.
- Collections of cuttings from about 150 recorded trees have been established at clone-banks at Daws Hall Nature Reserve, Lamarsh, Sudbury, and at Thrandeston in the Waveney Valley.
- The Dedham Vale & Stour Valley Project has been growing rooted cuttings derived from some of the clone-bank collection. 500 new trees have been planted in the Stour valley. About 100 trees have been supplied for planting elsewhere in Suffolk. Wherever possible new trees are supplied from a parent tree close to the planting site.
- Young trees are also supplied by two commercial nurseries in conjunction with the Local Authorities.
- The locations and parentage of most of these new trees is recorded and will be passed on to SBRC.
- Activities are co-ordinated through the Suffolk Black Poplar Working Group (LAs, EN, EA, RDS).

*Future long term vision : Investigate the creation of at least one floodplain woodland incorporating native Black Poplar, ideally with conditions suitable for natural regeneration.*

### 3 Action plan targets

- 1 Ensure the existing range of the species is maintained at 2005 distribution.
- 2 Conserve diversity and broaden the age structure of the population by undertaking new tree planting of local stock in local sites in the Gipping Valley/Mid Suffolk, Waveney and Brecks annually.

#### Proposed action with key local partners

ACTION	KEY LOCAL PARTNERS (Lead partner – bold)	TIMETABLE				
		2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
<b>A. Policy and Legislation</b>						
Ensure LDFs, Community Strategies, HLS, and other relevant policy documents include Black Poplar statement.	<b>SCC Lead</b> , Districts, EA, RDS, FC.		*	*	*	*
<b>B. Site safeguard and management</b>						
Apply for funding to allow a new survey of all veteran trees in Suffolk, 2006/7.	<b>SCC Lead</b> , Districts, EA, RDS, FC.		*	*		
Maintain and update annually the register of all trees, historic site and new planting.	<b>Suffolk Biological Records Centre (SBRC) lead</b> , Suffolk County Council (SCC), Districts. ),	*	*	*	*	*
Ensure that all relevant organisations have a copy of the update Black Poplar layer. Encourage and promote to all relevant colleagues the Black Poplar layer and feedback to SBRC.	<b>SBRC lead</b> , Districts, EA, RDS, FWAG, EN, SWT.	*	*	*	*	*
Provide all known owners of existing trees with management advice on current veteran trees and encourage new planting via leaflets.	<b>SCC lead</b> , RDS, FWAG, Countryside Projects and Districts	*	*			
<b>C. Species management and protection</b>						
Set up one and maintain two clone-banks.	<b>CMP –DVSVP, Waveney, Gipping lead</b> , SCC and Districts.	*	*	*	*	*
Identify and plant 50 trees in two new areas annually. (Keep male trees within river catchments, and have Suffolk Catchment areas for females – could add map showing catchment boundaries).	<b>CMPs-GVP and Waveney Project lead</b> , RDS, FWAG Districts and SCC.	*	*	*	*	*
Co-ordinate a County tree warden event to encourage existing and encourage new tree wardens, in 2007.	<b>All Districts, lead.</b>		*	*		

<b>D. Advisory</b>						
Complete the production of the two leaflets on taking cuttings and pruning.	<b>SCC and Districts lead</b>	*	*	*		
Produce guidelines on propagating and planting new trees in appropriate locations	<b>DVSVP lead, and Districts.</b>	*	*	*		
Promote guidelines to all landowners in appropriate locations.	<b>SCC lead, DVSVP, Gipping Valley project, Waveney Valley project, Brecks and Coast and Heaths, FWAG, EA, RDS.</b>					
<b>E. Future research and monitoring</b>						
Annually review research findings from DNA & environmental studies and report to the working group	<b>SCC lead.</b>	*	*	*	*	*
<b>F. Communications and publicity</b>						
Ensure that news from the working group is distributed to tree wardens.	<b>Districts lead.</b>	*	*	*	*	*
Use the display at a minimum of three events per annum.	<b>SCC lead, Districts, BAP officer, CMPS.</b>	*	*	*	*	*

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