



Suffolk Biodiversity Partnership

SUFFOLK ORCHARD SURVEY

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally managed orchards are important for wildlife because they provide vital habitat for invertebrates, birds and small mammals, for example stag beetles, song thrush and pipistrelle bats. Orchards are also important culturally, providing an insight into the history of an area and feature a huge number of traditional varieties of apples, pears and cherries. These may be soon lost if we do not find out what was grown in the past, is still present and can be protected for the future.

In July 2007, the UK Biodiversity Partnership recognised the importance of “Traditional Orchards” by designating them as a Priority Habitat in England because of their value to biodiversity as well as their diverse traditional crops.

UK Orchard surveys

Several Traditional Orchard surveys have been set up across the UK by county Biodiversity Partnerships, and Suffolk’s own survey is about to start. Every county has its own locally traditional orchard form and Suffolk has several very different traditions. These include tall standard cherry trees in parkland settings in south Suffolk, ancient cobnut coppices, and numerous small farmhouse orchards, many less than half a hectare, with a rich mix of crop trees. Many of Suffolk’s orchards lie in the central-claylands plateau. There are few large commercial orchards, but small farm orchard sites are now known to be more frequent in this county than was once thought.

The orchards supporting the greatest number of species are a rich mix of ancient tree dependant species; an apple tree may be only 50 years old yet have the rot holes, decay and habitats of a centuries old veteran oak, with epiphytes, saprophytes and wood borers. The associated habitats such as grassland, scrub, deadwood, ponds and hedges that have been more or less abandoned for decades and have escaped the chemical spraying routines that made orchards virtually sterile when they were in production, make up the habitat as a whole.

Suffolk orchard survey

The Suffolk survey will use a map prepared by the Suffolk Biological Records Office from the 2nd edition OS maps (1903-1920’s. This has revealed 6,000 historical sites across the county, some very small. In the few parishes looked at so far, about one sixth of these old sites appear to still have recognisable orchard trees. Some are now part of gardens, others are more or less abandoned, and some could be sensitively restored. If we add in the more recent sites planted since the 1920’s, but still in existence, the number of orchards in Suffolk may be as high as 1,300 especially in the claylands of High Suffolk.

We are asking for your help to undertake this extensive and important survey of Suffolk’s orchards.

As tree warden for Barking I have been asked to investigate all known ancient sites and will be contacting landowners of all known sites for permission to carry out an initial survey. The results of these surveys will be studied to decide whether to investigate the site more extensively and, if so, to arrange for orchard experts and specialist botanists and zoologists to visit the site with the owner’s permission for more detailed surveying of particular groups such as fungi, mosses and beetles.

A report will be compiled detailing the results of the survey, including an updated map of Suffolk’s traditional orchard sites.

If you are a resident of Barking and believe that you may have remnants of ancient orchard on your land please contact me as some sites are certain to be missing from the map.

We are hopeful that grants will soon be available to assist with the care and maintenance needed on these special sites.

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