

Richmond upon Thames

Habitat Action Plan

Native Black Poplar



Specimen of native black poplar
collected from Richmond Park in 1929
© Royal Botanic Gardens Kew

1. Aims

- To contribute to the conservation of native black poplar in the UK through protection, maintenance and promotion of the population in the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames (LBRuT).
- To undertake research in order to further understand the genetic diversity of the native Black Poplar population within LBRuT.
- To raise awareness and increase knowledge of the native black poplar.

2. Introduction

The native black poplar (*Populus nigra* ssp. *betulifolia*) was formerly a component of floodplain woodland but now occurs as isolated specimens in wet meadows, along hedgerows, beside ponds, near to rivers and in amenity plantings. It has not reproduced naturally for many centuries and its current distribution reflects the once common practice of striking cuttings for use mainly around farms. It has been in decline for the last 200 years and is now one of the rarest trees in the UK. There are so few native black poplars left that it is unlikely that they will pollinate each other, instead the large numbers of introduced cultivated trees will pollinate them. Consequently, due to this and to the loss of the specific habitat conditions required for germination, there are rarely any new truly native black poplars. Our surviving trees are an even aged population: most have reached old age and mortality rates are high for a variety of reasons.



3. Current Status

3.1. Current Status - National

There are an estimated 7000 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 Cheshire, the Vale of Aylesbury, East Anglia and Greater London. The genus is dioecious (either male or female) and female trees are particularly rare, with an estimated 600 nationally (Forestry Commission, 2004). Britain's intensively managed rivers have lacked suitable habitats for centuries and consequently, the current population reflects former planting preferences rather than any natural distribution pattern.

Planting has been restricted to vegetative cuttings, and this is the main reason why genetic diversity is low. In addition, there was very little planting of new trees until the late 1990s. 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 misidentification of hybrids as natives and *vice versa*. A large number of street trees in Manchester have recently succumbed to a disease called poplar scab (*Venturia populina*); 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.

3.2. Current Status – Local

The number of native black poplars in LBRuT is the highest of all London boroughs, with 10 female and 11 male of unique clones identified (Jamie Simpson, personal communication). The Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew has a selection of trees grown from cuttings taken from across the country and Richmond Park has veteran females as well as new plantings. The population on the Thames at Barnes is the most important due to its many veteran females of unique clones which because of their location and spacing, are likely to be the relic of a natural population. There are a number of veteran and mature trees scattered across other areas of LBRuT. In c. 2001 an ongoing propagation programme was initiated by the Royal Parks using cuttings taken from within Richmond Park. These trees have been planted within the park and distributed via local organisations for planting along the Thames and in Local Authority parks. There are concerns that cuttings are sourced from too small a selection of parent trees (of common genetic material). At present not enough planting is being undertaken to maintain the population and genetic diversity within LBRuT.

4. Specific factors affecting the species

4.1 Habitat Loss and Degradation

Loss of both natural river systems and unstable floodplain sediments results in an absence of suitable habitat for natural regeneration. The widely dispersed population makes site-based conservation more difficult. An additional problem is the removal of fallen trees that would otherwise survive in situ or regenerate from the stump.

4.2 Premature Death

This may result from the introduction of pests and diseases due to human or climatic factors, removal due to risk management concerns or poisoning of stumps preventing natural regeneration

4.3 Reproductive Problems and Degradation of Gene Pool

Widely available and commercially preferable hybrids have been planted in preference to native stock for the last 150 years. This, combined with the lack of native male trees in close proximity to native females, means that many new trees are hybrids rather than true native black poplars. The majority of the natural population are at the end of their lifespans with few mature or semi mature trees for continuity.



4.4 Public Ignorance

Lack of identification skills and general ignorance of the importance of individual specimens.

5. Current action

5.1. Legal Status

Section 13 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, as amended, prohibits the unauthorised uprooting of any wild plant species. Native 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 wishes to fell a number of trees. Where a native Black Poplar grows within a hedgerow, the Hedgerows Regulations Act 1997 would afford some protection to the tree and hedge.

5.2. Mechanisms targeting the species

5.2.1 Propagation of trees

RBG Wakehurst Place has undertaken hand pollination at Richmond Park resulting in 26 trees being grown and identified by genetic testing as native black poplars. These will be given back to Richmond Park. Royal Parks propagation programme has been distributing trees. The RBG Kew has also undertaken propagation of all of the Barnes population unique clones and planted them within the gardens or the towpath

5.2.2 Collection and dissemination of information

Conservation information will be disseminated to owners of trees on an ad hoc basis by Jamie Simpson (clones and trees planted within gardens or on the towpath).

6. Actions

Please note that the partners identified in the tables are those that have been invited to be involved in the process of forming the plan. It is not an exclusive list and new partners are both welcome and needed. The leads identified are responsible for coordinating the actions - but are not necessarily 'implementers' themselves.

Generic actions (across all Richmond SAPs/HAPs)			
Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
GA01 – Promote available grant schemes (information available on SWLEN website) to encourage appropriate habitat management.	Ongoing	SWLEN	DEFRA, FC, TRP, LTWGS
GA02 – Update Richmond biodiversity leaflets and reprint/put on RBP/SWLEN website.	2019	SWLEN, Working groups	LA
GA03 – Distribute and promote Richmond biodiversity leaflets and relevant online advice to all LBRuT planners and key developers.	2019	LA, SWLEN, Working groups	GLA, NE, WLO



GA04 – Contribute to database of species records in London.	Annual	SWLEN, Working groups	GIGL, WWT, TRP, LNHS
GA05 – Encourage planning applications to preserve/enhance wildlife corridors within their scheme. Promote encouragement of species which have not been found during surveys, if within their range, as well as maintaining species already found to be present.	Ongoing	LA	Working groups
GA06 – Promote and support a co-ordinated programme of guided walks, attracting a total of at least 500 people per annum across all HAPs and SAPs	Annual	SWLEN, LA	LA, BCT, LWT, WWT, TRP
GA07 – Promote and support a programme of events, talks and articles, posts and blogs in the local press and online	Annual	SWLEN	LBG, LWT, WWT, Local Media
GA08 – Prepare a connectivity strategy and map of LBRuT identifying key habitats, known features (e.g. bat roosts), good/poor connectivity, light pollution etc.	2019	Working Groups	LA, TLS
GA09 – Ensure that all planning applications are accompanied with appropriate information as requested by the LBRuT validation checklist.	Ongoing	LA	Working groups
GA10 – Require mitigation for increased urban surfaces in any development: green roof, green wall etc. to offset increased urbanisation.	Ongoing	LA	Working groups

Specific actions for black poplar			
Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
BPT01 – Resurvey and map the population of native black poplars in LBRuT to update new trees and gender identification.	2019	JS/LA	TRP, SWLEN
BPT02 – Complete the identification of native black poplar clones (esp. the older specimens) in LBRuT.	2019	JS/LA	TRP, SWLEN
BPT03 – Implement a propagation programme for unique clones of native black poplars from within LBRuT.	2019-2022	JS/LA	FOBC, HRP, SWLEN
BPT04 – Implement a replanting programme for new native black poplars.	2020-2022	LA	JS/TCV, SWLEN
BPT05 – Continue to manage existing black poplar propagation stock in LBRuT.	Annual	FoBC/TRP/JS	LA, SWLEN



BPT06 – Incorporate all LBRuT black poplar data on to LA tree management software system.	2019	LA	JS
BPT07 – The use of Tree Preservation Orders to protect existing veteran and mature trees and unique clones where deemed appropriate by the local authority.	2019	LA	JS, SWLEN
BPT08 – Produce an educational leaflet on native black poplars and their importance.	2019-2022	JS/SWLEN	TRP, LA, HRP
BPT09 – Organise a celebratory event tied to another relevant habitat event.	2019-2022	LA	TCV, TRP

7. Relevant Action Plans

7.1. Local Plans

Broadleaved Woodland HAP; Ancient and Veteran Trees HAP; Tidal Thames HAP.

7.2. London Plans

Black Poplar SAP; Tidal Thames HAP; Grazing Marsh and Floodplain Grassland.

7.3. National Plans

Wet woodland; Rivers & Streams.

8. References

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Cottrell, J. (2004). *Conservation of Black Poplar (Populus nigra L.)*. Forestry Commission Information Note (FCIN57).

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Mabey, R. (1996). *The native Black Poplar: a species in the ghetto*. British Wildlife.

Spencer, J. (1994). *The native Black Poplar in Britain: an action plan for its conservation*. English Nature.

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9. Abbreviations

BCT: Bat Conservation Trust
DEFRA: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
FC: Forestry Commission
FoBC: Friends of Barnes Common
GA: Generic actions
GIGL: Greenspace Information for Greater London
GLA: Greater London Authority
HRP: Historical Royal Palaces
JS: Jamie Simpson
LA: Local Authority (LBRuT)
LBG: London Bat Group
LNHS: London Natural History Society

LTWGS: London Tree and Woodland Grant Scheme
LWT: London Wildlife Trust
NE: Natural England
RBG: Royal Botanic Gardens
RBP: Richmond Biodiversity Partnership
SWLEN: South West London Environment Network
TCV: The Conservation Volunteers
TLS: Thames Landscape Strategy
TRP: The Royal Parks
WLO: Wildlife Liaison Officer (Metropolitan Police)
WWT: Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust

10. Contact

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