

Case study: Buckthorn for Brimstones Initiative

Name of project or group

Buckthorn for Brimstones Initiative (a partnership initiative between SRWT and NESST).
Case study by Paul Selby, March 2022

Introduction

Following a successful pilot initiative locally in Nether Edge in March 2021, we went Sheffield wide in Autumn 2021, asking people to purchase and plant Purging Buckthorn whips in their gardens and other land they owned. Buckthorn is the larval host plant of the Brimstone butterfly. Increasing the number of larval host plants will increase the population of the Brimstone butterfly.



Photo credit: Paul Hobson/The Wildlife Trusts

What actions did you or your group want to take and why?

We advertised the initiative in the last week of September 2021 via a number of channels. Through mailing lists, on local BBC radio, through a lunchtime Nature Natters session, and via word of mouth. Those interested in purchasing whips at £3 a whip were asked to fill in Google Form with their contact details and number of whips they wanted to buy. Orders were collated over a five week period, enabling a single bulk purchase of whips at a large discount. In late November the whips were delivered to a central location and heeled in to the soil temporarily. Those who made the orders were then contacted and asked via Eventbrite to pick a collection time/date from a small number of time slots. The inspiration for the initiative came from Julian Dowding who did an identical initiative in East Suffolk from 1998 to 2001. His actions to plant 2000 Buckthorn whips over 3 years caused the Brimstone to go from very rare in East Suffolk in 1998 to exploding in population size by 2010. My motivation for replicating what Julian has done is because it is an example of very small steps causing a massive and noticeable impact. Practical conservation in action.



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What resources or support did you need/use?

NESST has a 420 member email distribution list. SRWT has advertising/marketing expertise and hundreds of members. Other than around 50 hours of my time during the September to December period, and around 20 hours of SRWT time to organise the heeling in and collection of the whips.

How did you empower or involve others?

This initiative wasn't really about empowerment or involvement. It was more about persuasion that it could work and encouraging people to plant whips in their gardens and allow them to grow.

How did it make you feel?

Extremely proud. I know that in 5 to 10 years time, whenever I see a Brimstone butterfly in Sheffield, it will almost certainly be because of me. (I've lived in Sheffield for 18 years and only seen two in that time, despite keenly looking out for them).

What changes have there been as a result of your actions? 543 Buckthorn whips were planted by over 200 people across Sheffield and Rotherham, mainly in South West Sheffield. This will provide a massive boost in the larval host plant for the Brimstone butterfly in the next 5 to 10 years, and we anticipate the Brimstone population exploding in that period.

Have you had any memorable nature encounters while doing this?

Not specifically with nature. But 50 Buckthorn whips were purchased by Brincliffe Edge Woods and planted there. The general public passing by those of us planting the whips were really interested in what we were doing and enthused by it.

How have the actions been shared or inspired others?

I've publicised the initiative on UK Butterflies, which is the main UK internet forum for butterfly enthusiasts. I've also written and published an article in Argus, the twice yearly publication of Butterfly Conservation Yorkshire Branch.

What's next?

We will be monitoring the number of sightings of the Brimstone butterfly over the next 5 to 10 years, in the anticipation that they will significantly increase. We may also carry out further phases of the initiative, particularly in the NESST area of Nether Edge, Sharrow, Sharrow Vale and Carter Knowle. There are over 300 green and brownfield spaces in our area, at least half of which could potentially have Buckthorn whips planting on them. This is something we may explore in 2023.