

Helping Black Poplars at Bewdley

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Figure 1. Black Poplar at Bewdley in March 2022.

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I can not think of anywhere where I have spent more time than the riverside at Bewdley. More specifically a spot 1km upstream of the town bridge where there is a river flow measuring station which I looked after for many years and it is also the place where I have carried out an annual Club-tailed Dragonfly emergence project for the last 36 years. In the same field as the gauging station is a fabulous old Black Poplar *Populus nigra* ssp. *Betulifolia* (Figure 1), which stands like a sentinel overlooking the river, making sure Bewdley is not taken by surprise by Welsh floods. This tree is in the top four of the largest girths for the species in the county at 6.4 metres.

The Wyre Forest Study Group visited the tree in June 2015 and I refer you to an account of that day for more details about the Black Poplar (Averill 2016). As mentioned in that account, the Black Poplar is a scarce tree in the landscape because few trees manage to self-seed themselves not finding the bare wet ground that the short lived seed needs. Adding to the general problem of tree scarcity is that female trees are even less numerous than males.

The Bewdley tree is a male and in early March the whole tree takes on a reddish hue as the

flower buds develop before the leaves come out (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Black Poplar Male Catkins. Mike Averill

There are other smaller Black Poplar trees along this stretch of the Severn below the Severn Trent pipeline bridge but they have not reached the size of the Bewdley specimen and the largest of those was completely washed away from its location just above the old railway bridge quite recently. To get to the 6.4 metres girth size is very special on a large river with frequent floods and which has had a history of barges and trows passing through. Luckily if there was any rope work with trows



Figure 3. Location of newly planted tree.

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it would have been on the west bank rather than on this east side.

When Black Poplars get to the size of the one at Bewdley they tend to start losing big heavy branches and, seeing that a branch had recently dropped out, it occurred to me that we need to do something to keep a Black Poplar in the location for many more years. Just after our visit in 2015 I took a cutting from a fallen branch and grew this on to a decent sapling which I managed to plant 200m downstream of the parent tree. Fortunately, the field owner was happy for me to do this so it was with great pleasure that on 9th March 2022, I planted the tree, taking care to give it a good start by clearing the brambles and erecting a guard fence (Figure 3). As it happened, I was going to the site most of the summer and was able to keep watering the tree as this year we found ourselves in a drought. By the end of September the tree was already looking good and had obviously liked the spot (Figure 4). There is always a good feeling about planting a tree and this one was particularly nice as I felt that I was giving something back to the location that has occupied my time for so many years.

If you walk past the tree next summer, and it

happens to be a dry spell, there is a container to add some water from the river. How long before this tree will be displaying the characteristic curved branches that sweep downwards before turning up at the ends; well the parent tree is probably in the 200 to 300 years old stage so there is a while to go yet. Black Poplars need our help, after all they are said to be less numerous than giant Pandas!

Reference

Averill M. (2016). Black Poplars along the River Severn. *REVIEW* Vol 16, P9-10, WFSG, Bewdley.



Figure 4. The sapling in late September 2022.

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