



West Berkshire Countryside Society

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Volunteers Handbook

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Section 1 - Tool Usage

We want you to enjoy working on our tasks and we also want the experience to be accident free, both for you and for your colleagues. There are a small number of points to remember dependent upon the tools which you are using.

As a general rule when using tools with wooden handles such as billhooks and slashers, gloves should not be worn. Your grip on the handle can be lost more easily if you are wearing gloves. Using your bare hands gives you a much more positive contact with the handle and reduces the possibility of the tool flying from your hand.

Slashers

There are a variety of blade shapes on slashers but they are all basically a curved cutting blade on the end of a long wooden handle. They are especially useful for clearing brush, bracken, brambles etc. When using a slasher let the weight of the tool do the work, you will soon tire if you put great effort into the swing of the tool and you will increase the risk of losing your grip on the handle. Keep at least two tool lengths away from anyone working in the near vicinity.

Sickles

Sickles are rather similar to slashers but with a very much shorter handle. They are useful for close plant cutting.

Scythes

The scythe is an enormously useful tool for cutting large areas of grass and reeds. When using the scythe let the weight of the tool do the work, you will soon tire if you put great effort into the swing of the tool and you will increase the risk of losing

your grip on the handle. Keep at least two tool lengths away from anyone working in the near vicinity. A tool length is the overall length of the tool plus your arm. Successful and safe use of the scythe depends on correct handling and great awareness of other nearby volunteers. If you have not used a scythe before do seek advice from another volunteer or the task leader

Billhooks

Each UK County seems to have its own billhook design and they have been made that way for centuries, but there are two basic versions, one with a single sided blade and one with a double-edged blade. When using the double-edged blade version always wear a hard hat, it is so very easy to swing the billhook like an axe and hit your head at the top of the swing. Billhooks are useful for cleaning twig growth from poles and for cutting trunks prior to layering. Keep at least two lengths away from your nearest neighbour, a length being the total length of your arm and the billhook combined.

Loppers

The key point to remember with loppers is that if you are struggling to cut a branch, with a pair, you are probably trying to cut a branch which is too thick and which should be sawn. As a general rule of thumb the size of the lopper handle should be the maximum size of any branch which you cut with them.

Shears

Like loppers if you are struggling to make a cut, use loppers or a saw dependent upon the size of the item which needs cutting.

Saws

Bow saws come in several sizes; the choice of size is dependent upon the size of the object you are planning to cut. Always wear a glove on the hand which is holding the object being sawn.

There are two types of blades fitted to bow saws. One is for use when sawing green timber and the other is for use when sawing dry and seasoned timber. If you are not sure if you have the right blade, ask. Pruning saws (the folding type) are particularly useful in confined places but remember they cut on the pull stroke not on the forward push stroke.

General tool issues

If you are not using your tools temporarily then leave them laying flat on the ground so that they are visible and away from the immediate working area. Don't hang saws from tree branches and don't "stab" billhooks into logs of wood.

If a tool seems to be damaged or a tool blade seems to be blunt, please report the item.

Section 2 – Personal Protection Equipment

Hard Hats

Always wear a hard hat if you are cutting branches above your head height and if you are felling a tree of any size. You are also recommended to wear a hard hat if you are in the vicinity of tree felling. Hard hats are available at all our tasks. You are also advised to wear a hard hat if you are working near a bonfire.

Protective eye goggles

Do protect your eyes from twigs, thorns and brambles. Remember it is so easy for a bramble which you or someone near you is pulling out of a hedge to spring to one side and catch your face. Safety goggles are always available at our tasks.

Gloves

Earlier in this booklet we have described situations where you should not wear gloves but aside from these it is good practice to protect your hands from cuts and scratches by wearing gloves. We provide a range of gloves at our tasks for dry work, wet work and particularly thorny situations such as hedge laying. You may prefer to provide your own gloves.

Protective wear for chain saw and brush cutter work.

Only volunteers who have been trained and assessed through an NPTC level course are able to use chain saws and brush cutters at our tasks. All necessary safety clothing and equipment required for these two functions are supplied by the Society specifically to these volunteers.

Section 3 – Safety Risks

Risks Assessment

Before we carry out any conservation work at a site a full risk assessment is carried out and documented. This assessment document will detail general risks associated with the type of work being carried out plus those associated with the tools to be used at the task. In additional risks specifically associated with the site will be detailed. The risk assessment document will be available at the task.

Tree felling

Any volunteer felling a tree which has the capacity to cause physical injury to anyone caught in the path of it during the felling will have a colleague working with them to ensure that other people in the area are at a safe distance from the fall path. Ideally you should be at least two of the tree lengths from it.

Chain saw work

Keep at least 2 tree lengths away from a volunteer felling a tree with a chain saw. Keep 5 metres away from any volunteer using a chain saw to saw up a felled tree and do not attempt to clear away any of the sawn wood until the chain saw user has stopped cutting, has turned off the chain saw and is clearly aware of your intentions.

Brush Cutter work

Much the same care must be taken as with chain saw work but the distance you should be away from the user is 15 metres. This is because of the brush cutter's ability to "throw" debris a considerable distance.

Slasher and billhook work

As mentioned earlier always make sure you are two lengths away from anyone using a slasher or a billhook. A length is the length of an arm plus the full length of the tool.

Health hazards

In some circumstances, and you will be made aware of these, you need to be mindful of the possibility of tick bites which might give rise to Lyme disease and of water borne Weil's disease. Both issues are easily dealt with providing that you

have an awareness of their possibility and take appropriate medical action if you suspect either. Because of the conditions in which we are often working please make sure that your tetanus cover is up to date.

Bonfires

We occasionally have a bonfire at a task but solely for disposing of the arisings from our activities, coppicing, hedge laying, brash removal, etc. Each fire is managed by a “Fire Master” who controls the size and build of the fire. The Fire Master’s word is law in terms of who loads the fire and how it is loaded. We operate this system to ensure the safety of all volunteers.

Winch

On occasions we use our winch to help remove a tree root or to assist the felling of a tree safely. The winch is only operated by trained volunteers and all other volunteers should stand clear of the winch operation as directed by the winch user.

Section 4 – First Aid

At every one of our tasks we have at least one qualified emergency first aid volunteer and a first aid kit. The task cannot take place unless there is a least one such person present. Please be aware that the first aid kits do not carry medicines such as aspirin, antihistamine cream etc.

For your personal health and welfare please make sure that you work within your limits and capacities, you must feel free to work at a pace which suits you and your fitness level. Please inform the task leader of any health issues which you feel they should be aware of.

Section 5 – The Role of the Task Leader

Each task event will be led by a task leader. The task leader has the responsibility of ensuring a safe working environment and that the work being carried out is in accordance with the land owner's or land agent's requirements and that it is within the capabilities of the volunteer group. All our task leaders have been through a training course and are formally qualified as leaders.

The task leader's role is also to liaise with the land owner/agent to agree what work should be carried out and when, and to convey this information to the diary and tool planner. We also ask most of our hosts if they would be willing to donate to our funds to assist with the purchase of tools and training.

Joining West Berkshire Countryside Society

We hope that if you enjoy your first few tasks that you might consider joining WBCS. You will find an enrolment form on our web site

www.westberkscountryside.org.uk