Nature Loves a Wood Pile

Over the last few decades it has been fashionable to make our woodlands, parks and gardens neat and tidy. Grass has been cut short, weeds cleaned up and dead wood removed.

In recent years, however, we have begun to understand the need to create and preserve valuable habitat and reverse the serious decline in essential species that our habits have encouraged. In short, we realised the value of wild spaces.

We, in the Friends of Ballard Water Meadow love dead wood. Now, that might seem a bit odd to some but fallen and dead timbers provide a habitat for a huge number of creatures. It has been said that dead trees actually provide a home for more
species than a living tree.

In the Woods

In Woar Copse we leave fallen trees where they are, as per traditional woodland management. As you can see in the image below, dead wood is gradually assimilated into the woodland floor, returning carbon and nutrients to be used by new generations of trees. As the wood decomposes it is home to a huge number of invertebrates, fungi, mosses and goodness knows what. Many species will use the wood as a shelter. Larger animals will rummage around in the crevasses to feast on the creatures already there.

Decaying wood is an astonishing habitat in its own right.

For this reason, we, and other conservation groups, are actively encouraging areas of dead wood. Sometimes it is not possible to leave fallen timber where it has landed and, in those cases the wood is cut up and removed, to be piled up to form log piles elsewhere.

On the path through Woar Copse, we have also had great success laying cut branches alongside the path. This has a double advantage: not only does it create a wood pile habitat but it also protects the wild woodland from excess trampling by encouraging walkers to stay to the path.
In the Garden

Every householder who wants to take action to help the natural world can create a woodpile of their own in their garden. All you need is to gather any fallen branches or other wood debris (not treated or painted wood) and pile it in a cool, shady corner where it is unlikely to be disturbed. A roughly triangle shaped pile is ideal.

If you don’t have any wood to hand, then why not ask your neighbours if they have any? If that doesn’t work you could be creative and buy a bag of firewood from a local garden centre or you could ask a local tree surgeon for his offcuts.

The wood is, of course, going to rot down so it is important to keep topping up the pile every couple of years.
After a while you will start to get birds taking an interest in the pile and you will find that beetles, frogs, woodlice, centipedes and other creatures will appear. If you are really lucky, the slugs and snails in your woodpile will attract a hedgehog. The increasingly rare stag beetle might even make an appearance too.

Next time you see an old pile of rotting wood, we hope you will appreciate its true value: even better, we hope you will be inspired to create your own woodpile!

Find out more about woodpiles from the RSPB website and, if you want to discover more ways to make your garden wildlife friendly, the Wildlife Trusts can help.

Nature loves a wood pile, which is why we dot them around our woodland in New Milton.