

Winter storms and roadside trees

The wet and blustery weather of late winter can bring trees down across the countryside, leaving gardeners and larger landowners to clear up the mess. Much loved though they are, trees associated with roadsides can present a risk to the public in high winds. Although the impact of storms are unpredictable, regular inspections and management help ensure that the risks to people from falling branches and trees are kept as low as possible.

Over the winter period our forestry team inspection the trees adjoining highways that run through Estate land. Trees are graded as being of high, medium or low risk, with this risk dependent on both the intensity of traffic, and features that might make the trees likely to fall over or drop branches.

Trees deemed to present a significant risk are then managed. Inspections look at the amount of deadwood in the crown, general tree health/dieback, the presence of fungal fruiting bodies on or at the base of the tree, the lifting of the root plate or the presence of hanging branches, scarring and rot. Old age, erosion, squirrel damage and tree disease can also all create different problems and necessitate specialist management. Dependent on the tree in question, limbs will be removed, crowns reduced or even the entire tree felled if it is considered to be high risk.

To assess the roadside frontages across the whole Estate, entails significant work and takes around six weeks. Management work is timetabled in advance as far as possible to avoid the bird nesting season. The potential presence of bats, all of which are European protected species, provide an additional constraint. Estate staff or contractors are trained to assess trees for their wildlife interest, with protocols in place, sometimes guided by ecologists when necessary, to ensure disturbance is avoided. The soft felling of a tree, whereby the tree is taken down in sections and left in situ for a period of time is one means of allowing wildlife to move on.

Forestry in the UK faces many challenges. Ash dieback (*Chalara* spp.) is already in East Devon and over the coming years will undoubtedly impact greatly on the health of our ash trees which are amongst our most common tree species. Evidence from the continent where the impacts of this disease have already been felt, indicate that we can expect a high proportion of our ash trees to die over the coming years. This will greatly increase the workload of those doing annual tree inspections. In preparation for these impacts of the Estate is already undertaking a count and plotting of our all roadside ash. Dutch Elm disease has been around for many decades, and continues to kill trees once they reach a certain size. You will often see dead elms along roadside verges. The fungus *Phytophthora ramorum* which affects larch trees, amongst others, is also a great problem. This has devastated plantations of this species across the UK although most plantations are not close to roads.

Managing trees is expensive work, and the costs of work on a single tree can on occasion cost thousands of pounds. The removal of hanging limbs needs specialist climbing training, and traffic often needs to be routed safely which means getting the permission of the Highways Authority should traffic lights be necessary.

A risk management approach is taken when managing trees. The formation of deadwood in trees is natural, and creates valuable wildlife habitat. Any that is spotted during tree inspections but does not present a significant danger to the public is usually left in place. Retaining standing deadwood across the Estate is an important part of our forestry and wildlife management plan.