Castlemorton Environmental Group Native Black Poplar Project

Winter 2025-26 Report

Black poplar is Britain's rarest native timber tree and a distinctive feature of Castlemorton Common and the surrounding landscape. Native black poplar fell out of favour for planting when faster growing American and hybrid poplars were introduced. As a result, many of our trees are veterans and are being lost as they become overmature and die.



Typical old tree with arched branches

Our project launched in January 2025 to encourage planting of native black poplar in Castlemorton. The Malvern Hills Trust has its conservation well in hand on their land, so our initial focus was the Parish excluding their commons. This was widened to include the neighbouring Parishes. This report summarises activities between October 2025 and March 2026 – the main period for propagating and planting black poplar.

<u>Conservation of native black poplar</u>



A Castlemorton pollard with characteristic burred trunk

Black poplar is a conservation priority in the Local Nature Recovery Strategy for Worcestershire. This is a strategy required by the Environment Act 2021 and adopted by Worcestershire County Council to guide the restoration of habitats and species. Native black poplar also supports a good range of insects and provides nest sites for birds.

Poplars are easily propagated by cuttings and truncheons: these are 1.5 metre lengths of black poplar planted directly in the ground. Most of our black poplars are thought to have originated this way. Historically male trees were more favoured; less than 10% of British trees are female. In 2025 we sent samples from 15 trees from across Worcestershire for DNA analysis by Forest Research. Nearly all were found to be genetically the same - this means they are likely to be cuttings from the descendants of same ancestral tree. We refer to these as a clone. Because most of our local trees are the same clone, the population is less resilient to future shocks such as disease and climate change.



Planted truncheon in leaf

Our two priorities for planting were:

- Encourage planting on suitable sites to maintain black poplar as a feature of the landscape.
- Increase resilience by introducing more genetic diversity into the local population and by planting a mix of male and females.

Activity Report:

1 Promotion and collaboration

- A talk was prepared and given to Avon Meadows Group on the history and conservation of Native Black Poplar.
- Promoted the project through the Southern Malvern Hills Biodiversity Collaboration Group.
- Networked with other groups interested in native black poplars including Worcestershire Wildlife Trust's Severn Treescapes and Malvern Hills Trust.
- Contributed to the draft black poplar account in the Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

2 Sourcing and swapping cuttings

- Cuttings and truncheons were taken from the two Worcestershire trees (one male and one female) known to be different to the Castlemorton clone.
- We shared these with other projects (Malvern Hills Trust and the Wildlife Trusts for Worcestershire and Herefordshire).
- Cuttings/truncheons have also been swapped with neighbouring projects.
- Volunteer gardeners are growing on cuttings for use in future years.

3 Site visits

- Site visits were made to 9 sites to identify whether existing trees were native black poplar and/or advise on the suitability of the site for planting.
- 7 of the sites visited received cuttings/truncheons for planting.

4 Planting

- 53 black poplars were planted at 15 locations.
- Castlemorton Environmental Group volunteers assisted with planting at 6 sites – a total of 23 black poplars. The rest were given to the land manager or conservation group for them to plant on their site.
- 3 sites were joint projects with Worcestershire Wildlife Trust.
- 7 sites were in the Malvern Hills National Landscape (AONB).
- 13 were 'new' sites for the project, while 2 were replacements on sites that had failed last year.
- 12 sites were in the southern Malvern Parishes – Castlemorton, Birtsmorton, Welland and the Hanleys.
- 3 sites were further afield in Pershore, Bredon and Eldersfield.
- 3 of the sites are managed by local community groups.
- 5 different clones were used in this planting season.
- Overall, 14 females were planted – about 25% of the total.





Volunteers planting cuttings and truncheons

Future plans

- Continue propagation and planting next year: there is a need for a long term approach to replace losses and to establish a better population structure (with different generations of younger trees planted).
- Increase genetic diversity by sourcing a wider range of clones and investigate sourcing DNA tested plants raised from seed.
- Maintain networks and partnerships with other projects.
- Find ways of increasing interest among farmers and estates in planting black poplar – most sites have been small landowners and conservation groups.
- Identify black poplar leads in neighbouring Parishes and host a local network meeting to plan and co-ordinate future activities.

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Castlemorton Environmental Group March 2026