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## **FORAGING ON RESERVES**

London Wildlife Trust manages nearly 40 nature reserves across London to conserve habitats and species and engage people with nature. Our reserves support a wide variety of species, including a number of edible plants and fungi. In recent years, picking wild plants and fungi for cooking and herbal medicine has regained popularity in Britain, and London now has a growing number of foragers. Small-scale foraging is rarely an issue when carried out responsibly, and can have a positive role in connecting people with nature. However, picking wild plants and fungi in an unsustainable manner can damage wildlife and compromise the conservation goals of the Trust, as well as potentially breaking the law. We advise people to consider the impact of their own actions as sites in London are well used and if every person who visits a site picks plants it would have an accumulative detrimental impact.

### **I. Policy**

- London Wildlife Trust manages nature reserves for the benefit of wildlife and for people to have beneficial contact with the natural world;
- We recognise the interest in foraging for wild plants and fungi and its positive role in engaging people and informing them about the natural world;
- The picking and uprooting of plants and fungi without prior permission from the landowner is illegal; however, this does not apply to the foraging (picking) of fruit, nuts, seeds, and leaves of a plant, nor the fruiting body of a fungus.
- Although we generally permit foraging on our reserves for low-level personal use, we place the nature conservation objectives of the Trust first and will not permit any foraging activities that cause damage to wildlife or are unsustainable;
- Visitors to our reserves are obliged to respect the legislation to protect damage to and/or theft of plants from land under our ownership and/or management; we – or the landowner - will seek to prosecute for breaches of this legislation;
- Collecting plants and parts of plants for commercial purpose on private land constitutes theft; this applies to a number of nature reserves the Trust manages, as well as those it owns.
- We encourage foragers to follow precautionary guidelines set out below (Section 4), and adopt best practice when seeking to forage on our reserves and elsewhere in London;
- We may implement restrictions that limit or prevent foraging on our reserves on a site-by-site basis if it is deemed to be compromising the conservation objectives of the Trust;
- We do not permit foraging for commercial gain on our reserves, and will actively prevent efforts to promote such activity on land under our responsibility;
- The Trust runs or facilitates organised forays and wild food related activities on our reserves with the intention of educating people about wildlife. However, we will only allow limited

collection of plants or fungi during these events, in accordance to the above guidelines. All such events are required to proactively accord to and promote this policy.

- The collection of wood from our reserves is prohibited without prior permission.

The Trust will review this policy and amend it following any changes to legislation, planning guidance or scientific evidence, as appropriate.

## 2. Context

The development of agriculture around 10,000 years ago marked a transition from nomadic hunter-gathering societies to sedentary societies that relied instead on domesticated animals and crops for sustenance. Although foraging for food is no longer a necessity with modern agriculture, it is still practised recreationally by a number of people and in recent years has grown significantly in popularity. Richard Mabey's *Food for free* (1972) spawned a growing library of foraging manuals, as well as television programmes, magazine articles, and other media that promote the collection of wild ingredients as a free and tastier alternative to supermarket-bought food, and champion the health benefits of locally grown and sourced food. In a world where we are dependent on the food industry, foraging is an appealing pastime that can have a positive role in engaging people with nature.

The Trust's reserves support a variety of species of plant and fungi, some of which are edible or produce edible flowers, fruits, seeds, nuts, leaves and/or roots. These wild ingredients have a number of culinary and medicinal uses and are often collected for use in food, drink, and herbal remedies. Plants that are popularly collected by foragers include wild garlic, dandelion, stinging nettle, elder, sloes, and blackberries. Fungi are also popular among foragers and there are a number of groups in the London area dedicated to wild mushroom picking. Other plant materials are also collected for uses other than in cooking and herbal medicine, such as firewood, mistletoe and holly at Christmas.

## 3. Issues

Foraging has rarely been a problem on most of our reserves until recently; picking a few blackberries or mushrooms for personal consumption is usually sustainable. However, if foraging is not carried out responsibly and sustainably it can have an adverse effect on wildlife. Local populations can be depleted if a large number of people forage at a particular site and/or if individuals take large quantities of plants and fungi during their foraging trips (for commercial or personal use) thus leading to a collective over-foraging. The number of individuals involved and the quantity of foraged plant materials can rarely be predicted as each individual site or area will have differing levels of plant materials that could be foraged from one year to the next. Nevertheless, there are now active social media-led foraging communities (often numbering thousands) which can quickly generate focus on any given site at any time, and often without consideration of permissions let alone impacts. Unfortunately, foraging has become a growing problem at a few of the Trust's reserves in recent years, although the actual extent of activity across all our reserves is not known.

Over-foraging can have negative consequences for wildlife, particularly for rare species, by reducing numbers to a point where species cannot reproduce or sustain local populations. This is exacerbated in London's ecosystems as populations tend to exist in small, fragmented habitats, and are relatively vulnerable to extinction. Heavy foraging of locally rare species can potentially wipe out local populations. Furthermore, the increasing popularity of wild ingredients has spurred on foragers to collect larger quantities of plants and fungi to use for commercial gain (e.g. to use or sell in restaurants, micro-breweries, etc.), which is unsustainable.

As well as directly affecting the species of plants and fungi that are picked, foraging can have indirect effects on other wildlife. Animals often rely on the plants and fungi that foragers collect and the fruits, seeds and nuts they produce and some insects rely on fungi to complete their lifecycle. Moreover, repeated disruption to habitats by large numbers of foragers can alter ecosystems and

disturb wildlife. Some species have important ecological functions and over-foraging could have negative impacts on the ecosystem. For example, fungi often form symbiotic associations with trees and are important for nutrient recycling in the ecosystem. In addition, trampling of plants by foragers to get to patches of edible plants can damage other vegetation and can also disrupt ground-nesting birds if they breed in the area. Furthermore, upturning logs in search of edible fungi can disrupt important habitats that support saproxylic species such as stag beetles.

Although foraging may be enjoyable, it is not without risks. Foraging without sufficient knowledge in species identification is dangerous as it is often difficult to distinguish poisonous species of plant or fungus from edible ones. Following the record amount of wild mushrooms that were gathered in 2014, there was also a noticeable number of poisoning cases reported by Public Health England. This is a concern as the Trust wants to ensure the safety of all visitors to our reserves.

#### 4. Foraging guidelines

We want all members of the public, including foragers, to be able to use and enjoy our nature reserves alongside the wildlife they support. However, the wildlife conservation goals of our reserves are a priority and we ask visitors wishing to pick plants and fungi to respect the guidelines set out below:

- Only take small amounts of fruit, nuts, leaves or flowers of plants for personal use and from plentiful populations so that there is enough for wildlife and other foragers. Do not pick, uproot or remove any whole plants (roots and all); follow the *BSBI Code of Conduct* (see 6. References and useful links);
- When foraging for fungi, avoid picking all fungi (fruiting bodies) within a cluster, and follow *The Wild Mushroom Picker's Code of Conduct* set out by the British Mycological Society (see 6. References and useful links);
- Only pick plants or fungi for consumption if you are absolutely certain you can identify it correctly, as some can be inedible, poisonous or even fatally toxic. **London Wildlife Trust takes no responsibility for any illness caused by the consumption of foraged fungi, plants or plant material (fruits, nuts, flowers, roots, etc.) obtained from our nature reserves or land that we undertake activities on.**
- Avoid picking anything for consumption from reserves in heavily urbanised areas. These often have polluted soils due to historic land use, road runoff and/or dog use, and so plants and fungi growing in these reserves may not be safe to eat.
- Leave rare or endangered species untouched;
- Do not take anything from reserves with the intention of using it for commercial gain;
- If you wish to organise a foray you will require prior permission from the Trust;
- Keep habitat disturbance to a minimum and respect areas of our reserves that are not open for public access;
- Respect the laws regarding protected species, collecting for commercial gain, and land ownership (see 5. Legislation);
- Do not remove wood, break off branches from live trees or cut down trees;
- Be aware of how a site may be used by other foragers and of the cumulative effects of multiple foragers on ecosystems;

- If you have any concerns that a reserve is not being used sustainably, please contact London Wildlife Trust.

## 5. Legislation

Legislation around the foraging of plants is uncertain and not easy to interpret. All wild plants and fungi are afforded a level of protection under the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 (as amended), which makes it illegal to uproot, destroy or sell any wild plant or fungus without the land-owner's permission. However, the fundamental law governing foraging is the common law right to collect the 'four 'f's – fruit, flowers, fungi and foliage'. There are two caveats; that the material can be picked in small quantities for personal use, not commercial gain, and that it is growing wild (i.e. not farmed or purposely grown). This law is enshrined in the Theft Act 1968 (see below).

Plants and fungi listed under Schedule 8 of the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) are given more protection due to their conservation status and it is illegal to take or damage any part of these species, despite land ownership. Ten plant and fungi species listed on Schedule 8 are present in London; whilst most are inedible they could be threatened by foraging.

Under the Theft Act 1968, collecting for commercial purpose on private land constitutes theft. This applies to reserves which the Trust manages on behalf of private landowners, such as Walthamstow Wetlands, The Warren, West Kent Golf Course, and Woodberry Wetlands, as well as those for which we are the freeholder, such as Saltbox Hill. However, collecting for personal use – notwithstanding other legal constraints - is legal as long as you have the permission of the landowner (including that of access).

On public land collecting plants and fungi is usually legal, but there are sometimes local byelaws in place that prohibit picking (e.g. fungi in Epping Forest). The Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) also makes it illegal to damage any plants or fungi on a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) that contribute to its notification as an SSSI. It also appears that on land opened up for access under the Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2002 (very little of which lies in London) the harvesting of any wild plant parts is forbidden.

## 6. References and useful links

Mabey, R. (1972). *Food for Free*. HarperCollins: London.

Whild, S. and Rumsey, F. (2017). *BSBI Code of Conduct; for picking, collecting, photographing and enjoying wild plants*, Botanical Society of Britain & Ireland.  
<https://bsbi.org/download/8415/>

British Mycological Society, *The Wild Mushroom Picker's Code of Conduct*:  
[www.britmycolsoc.org.uk/mycology/conservation/code-conduct/](http://www.britmycolsoc.org.uk/mycology/conservation/code-conduct/)

Forestry Commission, New Forest  
[www.forestry.gov.uk/newforestfungi](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/newforestfungi)

Woodland Trust, foraging guidelines  
[www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/visiting-woods/things-to-do/foraging/foraging-guidelines/](http://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/visiting-woods/things-to-do/foraging/foraging-guidelines/)

## 7. Related Policies

*Nature Reserves Management* (2011, rev 2015)

## 8. FAQs

**Do I need permission to forage on your reserves?**

- No, individuals do not need permission for personal use.

- Yes, if you are planning to run an organised foray with a number of people you must contact us first. You will be required to follow the guidelines above so that your foraging activities do not negatively impact the wildlife our reserves support.

***Can I forage on your reserves to make produce I intend to sell?***

- No. We do not permit any commercial use of plants or fungi foraged from our reserves.

***If I see someone taking rare species or large quantities of plants or fungi who should I contact?***

- Please contact London Wildlife Trust on 020 7261 0447 or [enquiries@wildlondon.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@wildlondon.org.uk) to report any issues regarding irresponsible behaviour on our reserves.

***Are there any London Wildlife Trust sites that I cannot forage on?***

- Some London Wildlife Trust reserves are on post-industrial land and it is therefore inadvisable to forage on such sites due to heavy metals being present in the soil. For more information please contact the Reserves Manager.