

## **The Wildwood and Ancient Semi-natural Woodland**

It is said that the ancient woodland that once covered the British Isles was so extensive and dense that a squirrel could travel from Land's End to John O'Groats without touching the ground. How and when the "The Wildwood", as it is now called, established itself was the subject of a talk given by local naturalist, Dave Taft, to the Malvern Local Group on 01 December. After the last ice age, successive tree species moved across the land bridge from Europe to the British Isles. Pollen records tell us that birch trees were the first to establish themselves, from around 8,000 BC, followed by scots pines, well able to survive in harsher climes, and then oak, hazel and elm, and, finally, lime trees.

Our squirrel's journey might, however, have been interrupted by naturally formed clearings. It is now thought that, even at its maximum, there were areas with large clearings caused by natural processes: storms, fires, the natural cycle of tree growth and death, and grazing by large herbivores including European Bison (Wisent), Aurochs, Elk, Boar, and Beavers. Although some clearings would have become re-wooded in time, new ones would also occur. Ancient woodland was not strictly a fixed vegetation, but part of a recurring cycle that included grassland (savannah), heath, and scrub.

The impact of settlement and farming began in Neolithic times, from about 6,000 BC, and by 2,500 BC, as the Bronze Age developed, as much as 50% of the Wildwood had been affected. After the Norman conquest, most of the woodlands were seized by the Crown and made subject to Forest Law, or became absorbed by manorial and ecclesiastical lands, with some remaining as Common Land. The woods were managed by various processes such as coppicing, pollarding and leaving standards, and creating clearings, rides and parkland.

The clearance of ancient woodland then proceeded apace. As the population grew, so did the demand for land for farming, and for the timber as fuel, or for charcoal making, or shipbuilding and construction. None of the ancient Wildwood remains in Britain now, but we continue to cherish our ancient semi-natural woodlands, all affected directly or indirectly by human actions, but many dating back to at least 1600. If any Wildwood still exists in Europe, it might be the woodland of Bialowieza on the Polish – Belarus border. This woodland is home to some of the few remaining wild European Bison, small numbers of which have been re-introduced into British woodlands.



**Bialowieza - is it a Wildwood?**



**European Bison in woodland in Bialowieza**



**European Bison in woodland in Kent**



**Large-leaved Lime (*Tilia platyphyllos*)**