

Why we need to remove trees from peatland

The Somerset Levels are a wonderful place full of precious peat - and it's in need of our help, so it can help us! The peat may be hidden out of site below the ground, but its one of our biggest hopes to battle the climate crisis in our local area.

Prior to drainage, the landscape between the Wedmore ridge and the Polden Hills would have been a landscape of bog surrounded by fen and wet woodland, transitioning to drier habitats on higher ground. This mosaic of habitats is centred around a very open space dominated by species such as sphagnum moss, cotton grass and sundew. The waterlogged, acidic conditions are not conducive to tree growth. So in short, a healthy peat bog only contains a scattering of scrub and tree cover.



Sundew and Sphagnum moss (Sian Russell)



Cotton Grass (Louise Treneman)

The fact some areas of the Somerset Levels now has areas of dense trees is a sign of a struggling peatland. Drainage ditches allow the surface to dry out and tree seeds to take hold, which as they grow act as a water pump removing yet more water from the peat.

Why does this matter? Trees are great for removing carbon from the atmosphere, aren't they?!

In fact, on a peat bog, trees have the opposite effect. 1 metre depth of healthy peat holds 3 times the carbon of a tropical rainforest over the same area, so the carbon trees take in is vastly outweighed by the release they cause by drying out the peatland!

This is why tree and scrub mulching forms such a key part of our peat restoration plans. Removing the trees is also essential to allow key species to thrive, such as peat forming sphagnum mosses, that do not grow well in shaded areas. Tree removal also helps ground nesting birds, removing perches or cover for predators.