

Gracedieu Wood on south bank of River Suir, Co Waterford  
Photo: Jeremy Casey

# Gracedieu Wood

Jeremy Casey begins a new series on the Native Woodland Trust's nature reserves. *No 1: Gracedieu Wood*

**S**itting down to write this to you, our valued members, on Valentine's Day, I felt inspired by the thought of writing love letters. Not to you (no offence), but to our beloved nature reserves. The ones that we look after, grow and expand with your support.

This idea spawned a brand new series for the magazine. I will take you on visits to our wonderful woodland reserves across the country – one in each issue. I begin this series with **Gracedieu Wood** in County Waterford.

## Past

It was in February 2012, thirteen years ago, that **Waterford City & County**

**Council** entrusted a seven-acre site to the Native Woodland Trust to develop for nature. The site sits just west of Waterford city, in **Gracedieu**. It was bounded by the then newly constructed N25 to the south and the mighty River Suir to the north.

Standing within **Gracedieu Wood** today, it's surreal to imagine that this young native woodland was once a bare field; a storage area for excavated topsoil as part of the road development works.

Deep soil, fed by the fertile floodplain of the River Suir, has meant that the trees we have planted each year for over a decade now have grown tall; and some of the first saplings are now bearing fruit of their own.

Protected from grazing pressure, mature trees line the riverbank, while remnant hedgerows have been



Narrow-gauge railway running parallel with the Waterford Greenway. Photo: Jeremy Casey

Jeremy, left, in Gracedieu with members of 36<sup>th</sup> Tramore Bay Scouts. Photo: Aaron Gallagher



encouraged to spill into the site, littering the floor with marvellous wild seedlings and saplings throughout.

The young woodland is thriving; it is rich in species and in age diversity, with a messy canopy above and a shrub layer developing nicely below. It forms an important wild buffer along our small stretch of the **River Suir**, which is a **Special Area of Conservation (SAC)** for habitats including salt meadows and alluvial woodlands, and for creatures



including the **Otter**, which leaves behind occasional evidence on visits to Gracedieu Wood.

## Present

Tree planting started here in 2012, with a humble vision to collect seed from the vicinity, grow young trees and plant them out with local volunteers and community groups, including a scout troop.

Thirteen years later, I'm happy to report that this vision is alive and well. In fact, in the last year alone we've planted new trees with help from the **36<sup>th</sup> Tramore Bay Scouts, Comeragh Mountaineering Club, Waterford Lions Club** and the **Waterford Sustainable Living Initiative**.

Of course, it's not all tree planting. We return regularly with volunteers to nurture the younger trees and remove tree guards from the older ones. We do our best to maintain our little nature trail, and we're down each year in Biodiversity Week and Heritage Week to celebrate the wonders of this little woodland in the form of guided nature walks for families.

## Setting forth

On a frosty morning in February this year, a visitor could travel the **Waterford Greenway** from the Bilberry car park until passing under the **N25 bridge**. Three handsome young **Scots Pines** mark the start of the reserve, and the **nature trail** soon becomes visible across the narrow-gauge railway, where its old turf-transporting locomotive passes occasionally.

The trail leads straight into the oldest part of the new woodland. With our considered approach to tree planting in terms of species and location, and with plenty of room left besides for natural regeneration, the woodland is a lovely



Gracedieu Wood site in 2012, top, and as it appears today. *Photos: Jim Lawlor, Jeremy Casey*

natural mess today. Without distinct rows of trees, we have tried our best to ensure that the woodland is indistinguishable from one that would have occurred naturally.

With a lack of recognisable patterns, the eyes are free to wander, to locate signs of life or woodland oddities. Like the striking **Yellow Brain** fungus or the **Jelly Ear** fungus, almost transparent in the sunlight and sharing a bounty of decaying wood with clusters of **Velvet Shanks**.

Or perhaps the mesmerising, minute red styles of the **Hazel** flowers, from which hazelnuts will eventually emerge in September.

Suddenly, light floods in as you reach a small clearing. With a view of the river

before you that extends to **Grannagh Castle**, the clearing is a natural viewpoint for birdwatchers.

A mature **Ash** tree sits with you atop the bank, its toes touching the water. Its aerial roots belie its age, as well as the hydrological forces at work below. Devoted to its perch, this seemingly healthy tree (no sign of ash dieback) has the support of its peers. Expansive **Hazel** coppices, as well as a wise old **Hawthorn** tree, all help to secure the bank against erosion.

The path takes us back again into the woodland and past a couple of natural depressions that fill with water in the winter, much to the delight of the **Alder** and **willow** trees that surround them. **Frogs**, too, take advantage of the



Common Blue on Bird's-foot-trefoil in Gracedieu. *Photo: Jeremy Casey*



Pale Brittlestem mushroom in Gracedieu. *Photo: Jeremy Casey*





Naturally 'messy' look of our woodland path through Gracedieu. *Photo: Jeremy Casey*

conditions, leaving behind their spawn – a hopeful investment in future generations.

The path ends shortly afterwards, terminating at the railway tracks and the Greenway. Come spring, this is one of the most biodiverse parts of the reserve. As woodland gives way to dry grassy verges, wildflowers bask in plentiful sunlight. They make fabulous displays, attracting a multitude of insects and guiding walkers back home. The blooms include **Bluebell, Red Campion, Ox-eye Daisy** and **Foxglove**, to name but a few. And there are winged beauties like **Common Blue, Orange Tip** and **Small White** butterflies.

## Future

Taking “the long way round” in our approach to native woodland regeneration has so many benefits for nature. Rather than imposing our will on the land, albeit with good intentions, we can work smarter with it, to support its natural regeneration or rewilding. And by committing to the site in this way, there is vast potential for a long-term volunteer programme that can span decades.

Now that trees have grown in pretty much all of the spots that suit them in Gracedieu, our focus is shifting to collecting, growing and planting rarer species and smaller species of shrub to

help develop our understorey. We are sourcing these from old and ancient woodlands in and around Waterford county, with help from our wonderful volunteers. Conserving Irish woodland DNA by infusing it into this young woodland site. To grow in perpetuity. ■

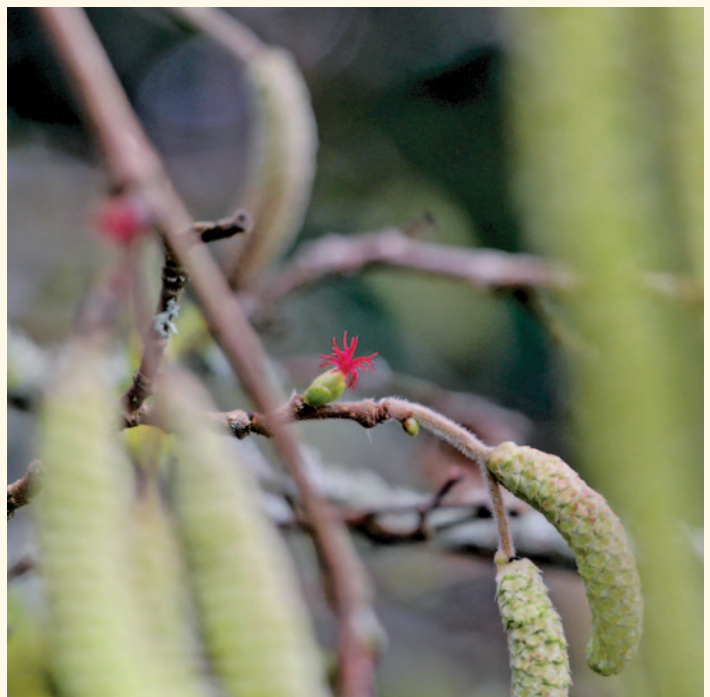


Velvet Shanks. *Photo: Jeremy Casey*

➤ If you live in one of counties Carlow, Donegal, Wicklow, Meath, Offaly, Roscommon, Waterford or Westmeath, do consider joining a local branch and lending your hand to our important mission. To find out more, feel free to contact me, Jeremy Casey, at [Jeremy.casey@nativewoodlandtrust.ie](mailto:Jeremy.casey@nativewoodlandtrust.ie).



Tree planting with 36<sup>th</sup> Tramore Bay Scouts. *Photo: Jeremy Casey*



Hazel tree flower with red style in spring. *Photo: Jeremy Casey*