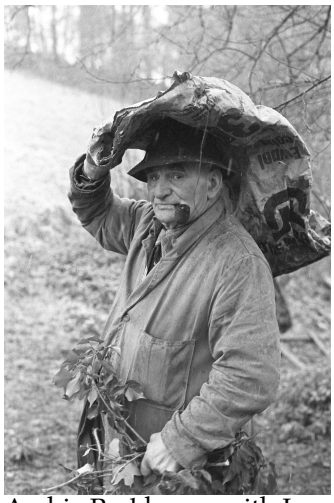
LICHEN CONSERVATION & IVY
A British Lichen Society Position Statement

Ivy Good or Bad? Ivy growing on trees can elicit very different reactions. To many, it is a rich resource for wildlife and should on no account be cut or disturbed. In contrast, those interested in the lichens and bryophytes growing on trees consider rampant Ivy a serious threat to rare and declining species. Ivy can also be problematic on rocks and even on the ground, invading open grasslands and similar habitats, displacing smaller species. Debates can be charged, but with understanding on both sides, they need not be.

The Past. Well into the last century, Ivy was frequently cut from tree trunks as a matter of course. Some of the reasons offered for this, such as the assertion that Ivy directly damages trees, proved to be unfounded. So, was this a completely pointless activity? Heavy Ivy growth in tree crowns does indeed increase the risk of winter windthrow, especially on Ash, and can reduce the vigour of older trees, so cutting was not as mindless as it may have appeared. There are also other practical issues[1 & 2]. Historically, Ivy was cut as fodder to feed animals in the winter. In traditionally grazed woods, Ivy was heavily browsed in winter by both stock and deer. This kept trees and rocks largely clear of Ivy. Similar browsing would have occurred in the wild wood. Cutting and browsing of Ivy was normal practice in the old, unmechanised countryside. Today, very little Ivy is cut, and browsing has declined in traditionally grazed woods. In many areas this has led to a large increase in Ivy cover on trees.


Archie Parkhouse with Ivy for sheep, Devon 1975.


Holly Blue, an attractive common butterfly that feeds on Ivy in autumn

Benefits. Ivy on trees offers cover and food for wildlife. The nectar, pollen and berries provide an essential food source for insects and birds during autumn and winter when there is little else available. It also provides shelter for insects, birds, bats and other small mammals. Ivy is vital to many insects before they go into hibernation. It is an important food plant for some butterfly and moth larvae such as Holly Blue, Small Dusty Wave, Angle Shades and Swallow-tailed Moth[3]. However, very few rare or declining species are dependent on Ivy. Occasionally old Ivy can even be host to some uncommon lichens

Negative Impacts. Unconstrained Ivy can completely cover the lower trunks of trees, leaving no habitat for epiphytic lichens. The dense growth of the leaves and the smaller stems strongly shade the bark and eventually exclude all lichen growth. This only becomes a major conservation issue when something constraining Ivy growth is removed in habitats rich in rare lichens. In these circumstances, large scale losses of rare and declining lichens can occur. The main observed causes of Ivy expansion into formerly lichen-rich habitats are not a cessation of Ivy cutting, but the removal of grazing from woods or parkland, affecting lichen-rich trees and rocks. The transition of hedge cutting from manual to machine has probably also curtailed the tradition of cutting Ivy for fodder and led to increases in Ivy cover on hedgerow trees.


The last fragments of a once large colony of the severely threatened Grey Tree Lungwort, *Lobaria scrobiculata*, overwhelmed by Ivy after the parkland tree was fenced off from grazing. Florence Court, Fermanagh, 2011.

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Florence Court, Fermanagh, 2011. Left, a Poplar, fenced off from grazing, which formerly supported a strong colony of Grey Tree Lungwort, *Lobaria scrobiculata*, in the 1980s. This was nearly lost by 2011 to mass Ivy growth. Centre, a tree within the grazed park with both crown Ivy and a lichen-rich trunk. Right, a strong colony of *Lobaria scrobiculata* within the grazed park in 2011 on a tree without Ivy.

Balance and Priorities. The vehemence with which negative opinions on Ivy cutting are sometimes voiced is surprising in light of how little cutting now occurs in the countryside. The impression is given of people passionately fighting a war that is already won. This can hinder reasonable discussion of the few cases where Ivy is a serious conservation issue, as well as of any general conflicts between biodiversity conservation and uncontrolled Ivy growth. Both sides need to recognise the need for balance. No lichenologist should argue for the elimination of all tree-growing Ivy growing on trees from any site; equally, the "opposition" should accept that there are localised problems with Ivy overgrowth.

How Much Ivy? In terms of conflict with other biodiversity interests, there is, unfortunately, no information on how much Ivy is required for the biodiversity benefits of Ivy on trees; presumably it is not needed on every tree. Equally, Ivy should be present to some degree, even within pasture woodlands. Random sampling of two lichen-rich pasture woodlands in the New Forest anciently grazed by pony, cattle and deer gives an indication of the sort of densities of Ivy that are compatible with maintaining lichen-rich woodlands[4]. The relevant study found 10 to 18 trees per ha with crown Ivy (4 to 12% of the number of canopy trees). Even on these trees the lowest 2m of trunk, a rich area for lichens, were kept clear of Ivy leaves by browsing.

A lichen-rich old New Forest Beech with both rare lichens low down and crown Ivy above.

Large-scale coverage of trunks by Ivy is unlikely to be a natural feature; in the wild wood, winter browsing by aurochs and red deer would have had a similar effect on Ivy as the browsing seen today in the New Forest. Equally, the complete absence of Ivy on trees, once widespread but now a rarity, was also a product of human management, undesirable and likely to be difficult to achieve nowadays.

Recommendation. The New Forest data, suggested that, ideally, **no more than 15% of trees in lichen-rich sites should support crown Ivy** and that, if at all possible, the lower sections of these trunks should be browsed clear of Ivy.

Where is Ivy Control Needed? Ivy should only be actively controlled where there is a significant lichen or bryophyte interest that is being threatened by Ivy overgrowth. This should certainly include international and nationally important sites for lichens[5], but even in the case of sites of local importance for lichens, some Ivy control may be appropriate. Priority sites are likely to be lichen-rich sites where changes in land use have relatively recently removed a previous check on Ivy growth.

What Actions Should be Taken? The best action, where possible, is to reverse the land use change that has caused Ivy to increase in the first place. This is especially the case where browsing has been reduced, encouraging Ivy growth. Hand control of Ivy in large sites is completely impractical nowadays but restoring reasonable levels of browsing in habitats such as pasture woodland, parkland and coastal slopes can control or reverse Ivy invasion. This action will usually benefit not only lichens but also many species within the habitat which were threatened by shade. If the Ivy invasion is not well established, this may be all that is needed; browsing will open up the habitat, while some Ivy will escape above the browsing, maintaining the valuable crown Ivy habitat. When restoring grazing, care should be taken not to fence out important marginal veteran trees, i.e. place them outside the reach of the grazing animals when putting in new fence lines.

Just as scrub clearance may be a necessary part of the restoration of a long-neglected chalk grassland, some Ivy cutting may be advisable where important lichen sites have been heavily invaded. Ideally, this should be done when the factors causing the increase in Ivy cover have been reversed, so that the cutting has a chance of being effective in the long term. The following general protocol is suggested for controlling Ivy in lichen-rich woodlands, parkland trees and similar habitats:

- Ideally action should be informed by a lichen survey, so the most problematic areas can be located. Many important lichen sites lack modern or existing data on the rare lichens so nay site with frequent veteran or old trees, but no detailed lichen data may need assessing.
- Within delimited lichen-rich areas with heavy lichen growth, most Ivy stems should be cut.
- Ivy should be cut near the base of tree trunks or rocks, with the stems above not pulled off; it will die off slowly and cause less disturbance and damage to pre-existing biodiversity. Pulling off can dislodge larger leafy lichens and bryophyte mats.
- Any long-established and large diameter Ivy climbing up trunks should be left untouched.
- Within these areas, all or most small diameter Ivy on trunks should be cut, with the aim of killing off most of the crown Ivy in the stand.
- The aim should be to retain a scatter of trees with crown Ivy within the stand, preferably leaving less than 15% of the older trees with crown Ivy or the potential for crown Ivy to develop in the near future. In very high quality hot spots precautionary lower threshold may be justified.
- Revisiting and monitoring is advised. In grazed woods the effectiveness of grazing suppression can be assessed, and grazing pressure adjusted and any on any new invasion on important trees dealt with while young. In ungrazed woods widespread repeat cutting will likely be needed in a few years.

The General Countryside. In some areas, such as south west Ireland, every tree can be so densely covered in Ivy that not even common trunk-inhabiting lichens survive and more local but widespread species can be come locally threatened. Although Ivy control is not a high priority outside areas of areas with high lichen interest, but in instances where every tree becomes covered, there is a case for some Ivy control, but not elimination, in order to retain habitat for lichens and as suitable habitat for potential future colonisation by lichens.

References

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Lichen and Lichens: left, Ivy partly browsed by stock from the adjacent field on a veteran wood edge Oak, Melbury, Dorest. The dark patch is the Notable lichen *Porina coralloidea*. Right, the Near Threatened lichen *Roccella phycopsis* (the brown area between the Ivy stems) threatened by Ivy, coastal slope, Duty Point, north Devon.

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