

BUCKTHORN FOR BRIMSTONES

a project of the Whitby Naturalists' Club

Alder buckthorn (*Frangula alnus*, below left), is one of the main food plants of the brimstone butterfly (*Gonepteryx rhamni*, right and below right). Its caterpillars eat the leaves. The flowers also attract bees and hoverflies throughout the summer, and berries provide food for birds in late summer to autumn. The Esk Valley is at the northern edge this tree's range, so brimstones are not resident in our area, but they breed as near as Dalby Forest, Langdale Forest and Newtondale, and are sometimes seen around Whitby and in the Esk Valley. As climate change results in species moving northward, availability of the larval foodplant will allow the brimstone to extend its breeding range.



The project's aim is to plant alder buckthorn to create corridors from existing buckthorn sites to our area and so to provide a number of sites around Whitby for possible future colonization. This will secure further larval food sites for the brimstone and should lead to expansion of their breeding range. The Cinder Track forms a natural coastal corridor, and Newton Dale to the Murk Esk at Goathland links the Esk Valley to a known breeding site north of Pickering. Brimstones are able to detect the presence of alder buckthorn from a considerable distance, and planting schemes in other parts of the country have had considerable success in expanding breeding colonies.



After consulting *Butterfly Conservation* and ecologists at *Scarborough Borough Council* and the *North York Moors National Park*, several sites around Whitby were identified where buckthorn could be planted, and the project was launched. In February, members of the Whitby Naturalists' Club were invited to plant alder buckthorn in their gardens; 27 members responded, offering to plant 137 whips.

Following confirmation of funding support from the Yorkshire Branch of *Butterfly Conservation*, the project gained momentum and various local organizations were approached with a view to increasing the range and number of planting sites. These will connect Ravenscar to Whitby along the Cinder Track; Whitby to Comondale



up the Esk Valley, and Grosmont to Goathland and beyond. Significant numbers will be planted at Ravenscar where a scarce tissue moth, which also uses alder buckthorn as a foodplant, was found. The response has been overwhelmingly positive. We now have groups of volunteers from numerous organisations helping us to plant a total of 300 alder buckthorn whips at over 40 sites by the end of March 2019.

We intend to create a map of sites where alder buckthorn has been planted under this project for future monitoring and we encourage everyone to report local sightings of brimstones to lepidoptera@whitbynaturalists.co.uk.

Thanks go to all who have got the project off to such a fantastic start including: *Airy Hill Primary School*, *Beyond Boundaries*, *Cinders Group*, *Forestry Commission*, *Goathland Primary School*, *National Trust*, *North York Moors National Park*, *Rail Trail Volunteers Group*, *Scarborough Borough Council*, *Whitby In Bloom*, members of *Whitby Naturalists' Club*, and the Yorkshire Branch of *Butterfly Conservation*.

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