A guide to recognising veteran trees.

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There are no hard and fast rules to recognising a veteran tree, but any 'tree that is of interest biologically, culturally or aesthetically because of its age, size or condition' can be considered veteran. Sometimes veteran trees are instantly recognisable, but others can be less obvious.

More simply: a veteran tree can be a tree of any age tree that shows veteran features. It is these features that hold so much value for nature conservation. The more of these features a tree displays, the better the indication of veteran status.

All ancient trees are veteran, not all veteran trees are ancient.

Veteran trees are often in the ancient stage of their life, as the passage of time will inscribe these (often) injury induced features on them, but they can also be developed in non-ancient individuals that have survived various traumas. These traumas bring about features normally associated with ancientness, such as rot holes, dead wood or a split trunk. In this way, veteran trees have a subtly different definition to ancient trees, which are purely classified on their size and age. Veteran trees will always and inevitably contain a certain amount of decayed wood, as almost all the possible features involve damage or decay in some way. Wood decay is a natural process and not usually a sign of poor health. Decay actually increases the wildlife value veteran trees.

Tree species age at different rates so the age and size at which individuals begin to veteranise can depend on species. For example, oak trees can live hundreds of years before they develop these features but fruit trees age faster, developing dead heartwood from about 40 years old. Veteran trees have often reached the stage where they are no longer growing vigorously. The exception here is veteran pollard trees, whose vigor is maintained through the practice of pollarding.

Veteran trees are most commonly found in open situations such as wood pasture, parkland and in hedgerows. They can be found in dense woodland, but they are less tolerant to this habitat, suffering light competition as their crowns retrench. Discovering old open grown veteran trees in dense woodland is often a signal that the woodland has more recently grown up around it.

For the purposes of this survey, a veteran tree is any tree that displays one of more of the features in the top category, or two or more of the features in the second category. A tree does not have to display all of these features to be counted as a veteran. Veteran trees should be alive, although dead trees are of high conservation value.

These veteran features all tend to be more valuable when they occur further down the trunk, as it is often a signal that they are more integral to the tree and will often persist for longer. For example, woodpecker holes, cavities, fungal fruiting bodies and snags further down the tree point to deadwood within the trunk, which can make a more valuable veteran tree that only contains small diameter deadwood in the crown.

One or more of these features

- Large girth for its species
- Hollow trunk or limbs
- Rot holes
- Cavities at the base of the trunk
- A lower, more squat shape than at the middle aged stage due to crown retrenchment. This can often be assessed by stags-horn dead limbs indicating it once had a larger canopy

Or two or more of these features

- Branch cavities
- Branch snag/stump
- Woodpecker hole
- Lightning strike scar
- Loose bark with crevices
- Exposed wood caused by bark loss or damage
- Sap run from wounded tissue
- Split in the trunk
- Fungal fruiting bodies
- Water pooling, often in rotting holes
- Deadwood in the canopy
- Epiphytic plants and lichens