

A walk on the wild side

Cholderton Estate

A future for British Farming?

We often read of the drastic decline of wildlife in the UK and indeed around the world. Are we content to allow this remorseless process of environmental degradation to continue, unchecked, until the very mechanisms that permit the tenuous existence of life on this planet are themselves overturned?

Having heard Sean Rickard yet again, espousing his creed of increasing agricultural intensification; yet ignoring every environmental consideration; it is evident that we are dealing with an industry where most practitioners appear incapable of understanding the vital role that agriculture can make to ameliorate global warming. Agri chemicals applied so liberally over the countryside have affects far beyond the crop that they are helping to grow. The industry has been experimenting with the environment on a gigantic scale. Our water, air, soil, wildlife and ourselves have been contaminated by a sophisticated cocktail of potentially lethal chemicals.

As the inherent fertility of soils, previously enriched by mixed farming practice, has diminished, so has the reliance on agri chemicals increased. Yet, the pursuit of excessive yields has been promoted under the dictat of efficiency. But, if we really want to judge the efficiency of these high intensive agricultural systems, then a price should be put on the environmental damage that they cause.

It is evident that we need to be adapting the soil, by organic addition, to become a net carbon accumulator. This is best achieved by a mixed organic farming system. It must be more efficient for every farm to generate its own fertility by utilising a system of leguminous rich pasture rotation. This will form the patch work quilt landscape that, by its diversity, allows wildlife to thrive and minimises or negates the need to purchase expensive global warming inputs. This also fits the traditional view of the British countryside and is one that, I believe, because of its sustainability, may receive support in some future agricultural subsidy mechanism. Mixed farming, rather than being emblematic of the past, is in reality a beacon to a more sustainable future where farming will be seen to provide food instead of industrial commodities and concurrently help the UK meet its carbon emission targets whilst also restoring valuable wildlife habitats.

What can any individual do to address the issues posed by the loss of wildlife? The situation is not hopeless. Any farm can take action. It is purely a matter of a basic recognition and appreciation of a range of birds, mammals and insects. These can be the 'canaries in the mine' and their presence or absence a mark of progress or regression. To take a small example; we all know of steep north facing banks; too steep to cultivate and which now appear to be a prairie of dead grass. They will however carry a wealth of seed from plants that can no longer be seen to grow there. By initiating a sheep grazing regime over the winter; to remove the coarse grasses and open up the sward; many plants like Sorrell, Salad Burnet, Birds Foot Trefoil, Red Fescue, Scabious and Cowslip will appear. It is best to leave these to flower and seed over the summer and just winter graze. Soon, a barren hillside can be made into a shimmering rainbow of colour, of flowers, butterflies and bees. Birds may return, Larks, Meadow Pippits, Yellowhammer and Corn Bunting. Plant a few Junipers of local provenance, a shrub so nearly lost from this area, but valuable for the birds that nest in it and the rare moths that feed upon it.

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Here I have allowed a few Hawthorns to grow away, sown Cowslip seed around the shaded area they have created and now have good numbers of the Duke of Burgundy Fritillary, a butterfly whose larvae feed on Cowslips but is declining so fast that extinction threatens.

Take a large barren arable field; does the view really need to look so bleak? Plant a mixed species hedgerow across the middle with 4 meter wild flower strips on either side. Within a few years this will be rich with autumnal fruits and the Fieldfares and Redwings that come to feed upon them. The thorns will be decorated with gleaming Yellowhammers and the summer flowers redolent with bumble bees. But, more than this, you will be providing connectivity. It is vital that suitable areas are created through which wildlife can pass to reinforce populations in one area and colonise another. Isolated nature reserves are no guarantee for the future of any species that they were established to protect.

Are your woods bare underneath the trees and the overgrown hazel? Buy a wood burner, log the hazel on a regular cycle. You will see the woodland floor burst into a floristic display and hear a chorus of birdsong such that you would never have thought possible. Walk and see the white nodding flowers of Anemone, the purple of Bugle, the delicate white panicles of Woodruff and the mauve bloom of violet. With these will come the gliding fawn velvet, Silver Washed Fritillary with a streak of argentine on its underwings.

Somewhere, in a field corner, is there a circular depression with gently sloping sides that marks the ghost of a long lost dew pond? Install a butyl liner, cover with soil and let the pond fill with the winter's rain. Plant the sides with Reed Mace, Water Forget-me-not, Loosestrife and Lillies. Soon, skimming dragon flies will colour the air with green, yellow and blues as they soar and tussle over their new kingdom. In February, the quiet croaking of toads will remind you of a spring to come. Duck will nest in the rough grass surrounding the pond and you may be favoured by the occasional visit of a migrating wader like Greenshank or Snipe. Lapwings nesting in the surrounding fields will take their chicks to feed on the pond margins as the water level retreats over the summer. Just leave a wide margin of uncut grass around its edges to give shelter for the young of birds, toads and frogs.

Farmers can do so much to help the environment. They do, after all control it. Think about more than crops; ask yourself what you can do to embellish your land, to return life to the barren fields and help mitigate global warming. Embrace the beauty of nature.

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