

# Life & times

**AMY-JANE BEER** WONDERS WHY WE DALLY OVER RESEARCH. OUR LANDSCAPE IS CRYING OUT FOR SYMPATHETIC MANAGEMENT, AND SPECIES AND ECOSYSTEMS FACE OBLIVION. ACTION IS WHAT'S NEEDED, SO WHY DON'T WE JUST GET ON WITH IT?

**R**ecently I've been thinking about land management. Partly this is because for the first time in my life, I own a bit of it. With our new home comes a garden, not large or fancy by any means, but ours, to cultivate, exploit, manage or neglect as we wish. My previous horticultural activities have been limited and unambitious: the watering of a few pots, growbags and baskets, a spot of indiscriminate pruning. Things will be different now – the new place is the perfect spot for a beautiful garden, full of wildlife and, we decided, some organic home produce.

We've not tried to do too much out there yet – best to wait and see what the garden has in store year round before we try to change anything. But a few tasks presented themselves early on – not least the need to do something about a flower bed full of ground-elder. The chorus of tutting and 'uh-ohs' of a few green-fingered visitors, and our neighbours' energetic attempts to eradicate the thing from their side of the hedge convinced me that this otherwise inoffensive-looking plant should go. So I set to, enthusiastically pulling it up by the handful. Within days it was back, as vigorous as ever. So, organic aspirations blown, I sprayed it with potent glyphosphate solution. The leaves shrivelled and died, only to be replaced a few weeks later by more.

Part of me was glad the weed killer didn't work – I already feel I've failed in reaching for a solution in a bottle. But at the same time, something about the ground-elder's resilience hardened my



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**"Today you can murder land for private profit. You can leave the corpse for all to see and nobody calls the cops."**

Paul Brooks, *The Pursuit of Wilderness* (1971)

resolve and I began consulting books, websites and gardening chatrooms, looking for an easy but environmentally friendly means to fix the blighter once and for all. It transpires there isn't one, so I settled on the hard graft option instead. We cleared the whole bed down to the rocks and sieved every shovelful of soil, in order to extract the all-pervading, knotted spaghetti of roots that was giving immortality to the pesky shoots above. It took the best part of three days. Then we sowed the bed with grass seed and vowed to mow it vigorously for a year to deprive any surviving ground-elder shoots of leaves and thereby their means of making food. Maybe it'll work. But

meanwhile we'll have a small patch of neat lawn, with the wildlife value of a snooker table. Not exactly the haven for nature I had in mind. Fortunately the rest of the front garden remains a rampant scramble, and the grassy bank opposite we can manage as a wild flower meadow, so the temporary loss of this small patch isn't disastrous. Nevertheless, I'm shocked by the ease with which I've been drawn into an all out war with nature. I've found myself discussing tactics, posting about it on Facebook and even assaulting the wretched stuff verbally – growling such inanities as 'Now you've had it' to a handful of roots, or 'I want you to die!' in my best Bond-baddie accent. This morning it was 'Gotcha, you scumbag!' as I terminated a tiny tender shoot, barely a centimetre tall, struggling up from an overlooked fragment of root, its unfurled infant leaves never to see the sun. Then I ate it, not because it's particularly tasty (though it is edible and fairly nutritious), but just to show it who was boss.

### Weeds and wild flowers

It occurs to me that I might be losing the plot a little. There are other 'weeds' in the garden that don't offend me at all. We've welcomed the knapweed, which the bees and butterflies adore, we've let the grasses, docks, speedwells, dandelions, creeping buttercup, crane's bill, comfrey and campion run amok, and I've even left some encroaching brambles and nettles be. Nettles and brambles are good, ground-elder is bad, right? I'm ashamed to say I didn't even bother to find out why it's supposed to be bad before I started attacking it. I just accepted that it should go.

Managing any sized patch of land is no picnic. It might be enjoyable, at least in part, and certainly rewarding. But it does take thinking about and it does take hard work. What if your responsibility

is not just a small garden but a whole estate, a farm, a nature reserve, a National Park or even the landscape of a nation?

### Paradise lost?

I've recently got back from a trip to the French Alps, where we often go for holidays. This year we took mountain bikes and spent a few days at a ski resort where they let you ride the lifts with your bike in order to enjoy the thrills and spills of hurtling downhill without the inconvenient expenditure of time and effort involved in pedalling up. From the lifts and the lofty mountain tops we were treated to extensive views of a spectacularly trashed landscape. The topography of the mountains has scarcely changed in a million years, but their faces have been obliterated. In spite of the bright smiles of the family enjoying 'La nature des montagnes' on the local tourism posters, the essential wildness of the place is utterly gone. I'm not having a dig at the French here, or even at the mountain sports industry – as a skier and now mountain biker I'm as culpable for that as anyone. I know these sports sit uncomfortably with environmental concerns. It's just easier to forget that when the wasteland is covered in a blanket of pretty white snow.

I've been brought up short by 'abuses' of landscape in plenty of other countries, the UK included – recreation, agriculture, development, they all leave their mark on vast areas. Somehow it's worse when the damage is to a habitat we instinctively classify as properly wild. This includes not only mountains, but also remote islands denuded of endemic species, vast acreages of rain forest felled, glaciers and ice shelves disappearing drip by drip. These places are the last bastions of true wilderness. What on Earth are we going to do when we've ruined even them?

If managing my postage stamp of a patch is complicated, how can we ever hope to do the same for the wildernesses of the whole planet, and all their associated wildlife? Advice, as I discovered, is always forthcoming, but it might not be right. I'm as guilty as the next person of mouthing off without knowing all the facts; 'That

Ground-elder is a low-growing member of the umbellifer family, also known as goutweed.



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farmer should do this; 'The National Trust shouldn't do that. 'Defra should do the other'. There are just so many facts to know – so many factors to consider.

It's easy to get stuck on a course of action that might not be the best one. It takes a bit of soul-searching to unravel the motivations for any management decision. Three months ago if someone had asked me 'Why are you killing the ground-elder?', the truthful answer would have been 'Because a few people said I should'. One month ago it would have been 'Because I've started so I'd better finish'. Neither of them terribly good reasons. Now I've done a bit of research I can say 'Because I want a garden with a diverse range of native plants in order to benefit other wildlife. Ground-elder isn't native, it's highly invasive and its dense root system excludes many more beneficial plants.' But I acted before checking. I was just a bit too keen to make my mark, another common management pitfall I suspect.

My point is that it's easy to forget how much research matters. Research is what your support for PTES pays for. It takes a long time, and it costs a lot of money. Some of it will be too late to save certain populations, habitats or even species. But rushing in headlong to act without finding out as much as possible might be an expensive way of achieving virtually nothing. We have to get the balance right between research and practical action.

I hope I'm learning. And I hope that in a year or two that my garden will become a place where wildlife will be welcomed, appreciated, understood and given a bit of space to breathe and grow. With the probable exception of ground-elder.

## Find out more...

### Recommended books

*The wildlife-friendly garden* by Michael Chinery, Collins

### Online

[www.rhs.org.uk/Advice/profiles0505/groundelder.asp](http://www.rhs.org.uk/Advice/profiles0505/groundelder.asp) The official line on how to manage this persistent weed and keep your sanity!

[www.wildlifegardener.co.uk](http://www.wildlifegardener.co.uk) Friendly advice on everything from wildlife and the law to tips on attracting your favourite mammals to visit your garden, plus an 'Ask the Experts' section.

[www.naturenet.net](http://www.naturenet.net) A useful site dedicated to all aspects of conservation management in the UK, including a careers section advising on how to get a job looking after our countryside.



# Diary

## October...

**10 DEER OF THE NEW FOREST, LYNDHURST** £60/65 Join us for a unique opportunity to view deer in the New Forest. Expert leader Martin Noble will be able to answer any questions you may have on these amazing creatures.

**17 DORMICE IN BRIDDLESFORD WOODS, ISLE OF WIGHT** £12/16 Join PTES Dormouse Officer Ian White for a rare chance to see dormice in the wild as you help check nest boxes in the woods. Keep an eye out for red squirrels too!

## November...

**13 WALKING WITH WOLVES, READING** £25/30 Visit The UK Wolf Conservation Trust for the unique experience of walking with their socialised wolves. The wolves are handled by an experienced team and will interact with you on the event, often walking in amongst you. Due to the length, pace and terrain of the walk this event is not suitable for those with walking difficulties.

## December...

**2 MOONLIT TOUR AT WILDWOOD, HERNE BAY** £24/28 Many British mammals are incredibly difficult to observe in their natural habitat. However, under the light of the full moon at the Wildwood Trust, you will hopefully experience some amazing views of animals as they go about their nightly activities in their large, naturalistic enclosures.

**4 WINTER WILDFOWL, RUTLAND WATER** £12/16 In winter Rutland Water is home to 20 000 wildfowl, many of whom fly here to escape the freezing winter further east. Eggleton Nature Reserves supports internationally important numbers of gadwall and shoveler as well as smew, goldeneye, goosander, pochard, wigeon, teal and tufted duck. The hides will allow you to admire these spectacular ducks at very close quarters. Led by Opsrey Project Manager Tim Mackrill.

Prices shown are for supporters and guests respectively. For more details, or to order a copy of our exciting events brochure, call Zoe on 0207 498 4533 or visit [www.ptes.org](http://www.ptes.org).