

Life & times

A WALK IN THE ENGLISH COUNTRYSIDE IS FAR FROM THE WILD EXPERIENCE IT ONCE WAS. BUT, AS JIM JONES HAS DISCOVERED, IT ONLY TAKES A LITTLE IMAGINATION TO ENVISAGE THE WAY THINGS WERE AND PERHAPS COULD BE AGAIN.

The themes of time and change are alive in the Surrey Hills along this section of the North Downs Way. The grass-capped chalk escarpment I am walking along and the wooded valley below are here because of the eroding action of the River Hogsmill. The woodland around me contains derelict hazel coppice, a testament to changing farming and forestry practices. As I walk through the July afternoon I pass patches of dusky blue scabious dotted with six-spot burnet moths, and swathes of marjoram, knapweed and bird's-foot trefoil. The squat, incongruous edifices of World War II pillboxes that loom along the ridge are a defence against an enemy that never came.



We have become used to wandering in a countryside free of large predators. How would a rural ramble feel if that were to change?

Echoes of the past

This kaleidoscope of past and present leaves me dreaming in the hot sun and I begin to contemplate the fortunes of things I can't see: the animals that should be here but are no longer. How different would my walk be if I shared the paths once more with wolves, lynx and wild boar? How would I feel if I caught sight of a beaver dam in the valley below? I've been lucky enough to walk in the Polish Carpathian Mountains where large predators such as wolves and bears are still part of the living landscape. But in the same mountains I have listened to farmers with furrowed brows convey their anger at the loss of livestock. Not everyone is keen to see long-absent large animals reintroduced to the landscapes they once inhabited.

The mammal fauna of our islands is set

Watching and waiting: there is increasing interest in the idea of reintroducing large predators such as lynx to Britain.

to change. The first licence to reintroduce a large mammal into the wild in the UK has been granted and in 2009 beavers will return to Scotland in what will be the first rigorous scientific trial of its type in the UK. If successful, more will follow – feasibility studies are also taking place in Wales and in England.

Beavers aside, feral wild boar – escapees rather than planned reintroductions – are spreading throughout southern counties of England. A recent study by David Hetherington and colleagues has identified two habitat networks in Scotland that could support 450 lynx – potentially the fourth largest population in Europe. Previously deemed to have gone extinct in Britain thousands of years ago, remains of a lynx found recently in Yorkshire have been dated to c1 500 years old, suggesting that in fact humans may well have been a factor in the species' demise. The Wolf Trust is proposing a trial reintroduction of wolves into the Highlands. A pair of moose and a breeding population of wild boar have been reintroduced to a 50 000 acre fenced reserve on Paul Lister's Alladale Estate in Scotland, with plans to eventually reintroduce lynx and wolf there too.

A game of consequences

There are ecological consequences to any reintroduction. Beaver and boar will impact on the landscape through dam-building and rooting behaviour. Large predators will hunt large herbivores and indeed this is often cited as a good reason for restoring wolves to areas where browsing deer currently prevent

regeneration of native trees. Even with the aid of powerful computer models, however, achieving a useful balance of predators and prey would be phenomenally complicated. One such model was recently used by Martyn Gorman to predict the outcomes of a wolf reintroduction in Scotland. The results suggest wolves are unlikely to impact significantly on the populations of red deer.

Mixed feelings

These animals disappeared from our shores because of human behaviour. It would be unethical to reintroduce them if it were likely that this situation could reoccur. Moreover it is inevitable that reintroduced megafauna will interact with humans and change our own use of the landscape. If we want these charismatic animals back, we must accept that a shift in our own behaviour will be necessary.

On my downland walk I was confident that the only surprises I may encounter would be a plant I hadn't seen before, an interestingly shaped tree, a beautiful view or a chat with a fellow hiker. In Poland I was distinctly aware that there might be other eyes concerned with my movements. If I was lucky I may catch a distant glimpse of a wolf through the pines. If unlucky I might unwittingly disturb a highly-strung animal with young. Would Britain's ramblers be happy to entertain this element of risk in their favourite walk? Could we curb our enthusiasm for a blanket right to roam in order to allow wild carnivores their rights too?

Globally, the conflict between humans and carnivores focuses mainly on the predation of

livestock and game and the transmission of rabies. A study by Philip Baker and colleagues showed that livestock losses are generally small but can have significant impacts on individual producers. Martyn Gorman and Dave Raefaeli estimate that the current financial cost of wild mammals – including predators – on agriculture in the UK is £250 million per year. This sounds a lot but it's pretty insignificant compared with the £50 billion worth of food wasted annually by households and restaurants.

For our own good?

Appraising the impact of predators in these purely economic terms is an interesting exercise, but it does little to challenge the myths and legends that surround these animals; most of us have little real idea what it might mean to have them back living around us. We live in an agricultural landscape with no real wilderness. Too many of us have never strayed outside the urban environment. Yet as Jules Pretty explores in *The Earth Only Endures*, the evidence for positive benefits of green spaces and the animals within them on our physical and mental well-being is growing. The challenge of overcoming even a perceived sense of risk can provide a real boost to personal self-esteem. Such benefits are notoriously difficult to quantify, and whether they would ever be sufficient to balance the potential costs of reintroducing exciting large carnivores to Britain's countryside remains to be seen.

Find out more...

Face to face...

Find out what a close encounter with a wolf is really like on a PTES *Wildlife Encounter*. Details of next year's events will be published early in 2009 and posted on our website www.ptes.org.

Websites to get your teeth into...

www.wolftrust.org.uk The website of the Wolf Trust, which advocates the reintroduction of this infamous extinct predator to parts of the UK.

www.toothandclaw.org.uk Website about the Tooth and Claw project, recording and examining attitudes to predators in Britain.

www.alladale.com Discover the private wilderness reserve where former native species have been restored to a semi-wild existence.

Further reading...

Gorman, M.L. (2007) Restoring ecological balance into the British mammal fauna. *Mammal Review* 37:4 pp316-325

Gorman M.L. & Raffaelli (2008) The functional role of wild mammals in agricultural ecosystems. *Mammal Review* 38:2&3 pp220-230

Baker, P.J. et al (2008) Terrestrial carnivores and human food production; impact and management. *Mammal Review* 38:2&3 pp123-166

Pretty, J. (2007) *The Earth Only Endures: On Reconnecting With Nature and Our Place In It*. Earthscan, London

Hetherington, D.A. et al (2008) A potential habitat network for the Eurasian Lynx *Lynx lynx* in Scotland. *Mammal Review*

Diary

december...

5 WINTER WILDFOWL AT RUTLAND WATER £12/16 In winter Rutland Water is home to over 20 000 wildfowl, many of whom fly to our shores to escape the freezing winter further east. The nature reserve at Egleton supports internationally important numbers of gadwall and shoveler as well as a range of other stunning wildfowl, including smew, goldeneye, goosander, pochard, wigeon, teal and tufted duck. Come and visit the hides with Tim Mackrill, who manages the Rutland Osprey Project, for a unique opportunity to admire these spectacular ducks at very close quarters.

11 MOONLIT TOUR AT WILDWOOD, HERNE BAY, KENT £15/19 Our elusive British mammals are usually 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. Wildwood is home to a wide array of British animals, living in large and naturalistic enclosures. Join Anne Riddell, Education Officer at the Wildwood Trust, to experience otters splashing in their pool and maybe hear the wolves howl at the moon!

All our events are led by expert guides. Prices shown are for supporters and guests respectively. For more details, or to order a copy of our exciting 2009 events brochure call Nicola on 020 7498 4533. Alternatively you can visit www.ptes.org.

The Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2008

The winners of the *Wildlife Photographer of the Year* will be announced very soon, and the annual exhibition of winning and commended images opens at the Natural History Museum in London on 31st October. For tickets and information visit the museum's website, www.nhm.ac.uk.



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