

How do we value the wild?

For the last 40 years or more I have been involved, at weekends and on summer evenings and early mornings, in the collection of data on the wildlife of Warwickshire. This has involved bird ringing and population surveys, as well as hedgerow, wetland and river surveys. Over these years I have come to accept that I can never really know and identify and understand all the 'natural' world has to offer. I am in awe of it all and still get a thrill from seeing the annual cycles establish themselves, year after year.

At the same time I have come to understand something of the biodiversity and ecological complexity necessary to ensure the survival of habitats as complex and interconnected as we find in Ancient Woodlands, Ancient Trees and Hedgerows. One can walk amongst these habitats, record everything one sees and still miss over 90% of the species that go to make up and maintain such complexity.

Pockets of Ancient Woodland and thin lines of Old Hedgerows can never bring back the magnificence of Ancient Forest landscape which dominated our land for thousands of years. It is for this reason that we must do our utmost to protect that which remains. People still NEED to have and to see this wildlife on their doorstep even if they never venture far into it. More people than ever now see the countryside as a place of calm, tranquillity and a real contrast to their modern busy, but time poor, lives.

True wilderness in the UK is now very rare; human activity, originally farming but latterly building and construction has almost destroyed our wilderness and replaced it with a poorer, less diverse and much more simplified countryside. Much of our farmland is nothing short of a chemical desert; highly productive, but almost devoid of wildlife! Industrial scale farming, promoted by successive governments, has removed most of the wild flora and fauna which formerly existed on these landscapes and created a nightmare scenario where, not just bees, but all of our pollinators are in real danger.

The development of roadways, railways and creeping industrialisation of 'underused' landscapes as well as increasing urbanisation have almost ridden roughshod over our precious countryside. As 'weeds' are more and more efficiently eliminated the seeds are no longer there for our over-wintering finches, buntings and thrushes; autumn sowing has eliminated a valuable food resource for even more of our wildlife.

If only ecological complexity and biodiversity could be appreciated in the same way that stones, bricks and mortar can be seen. Ancient Woodlands would then be seen as towering cathedrals, visible for miles around. Hedgerows would be seen as lines of magnificent steeples, radiating the 'biodiversity power' generated by the Ancient woodlands themselves. Lone old Oaks, Ash, Beech, Sycamores, Apple and Pears and many other species would be seen as giant towers holding out against the onslaught of this devastation. All of this would be found to be overwhelming to most of us; we would be awestruck by it. Their size and magnificence would leave us breathless.

Their sheer size, 'power' and obvious importance to our own survival would make us think very carefully about destroying them. After all, when was there ever a plan to route a road or a railway line through an Ancient Cathedral? The planners could say that there is no problem; replace it nearby, build a new one in compensation, let the people have the new road and a replacement cathedral. Except that you can't rebuild an ancient cathedral. You can build a magnificent new one but it won't be anything like the original. In exactly the same way you can't replant an Ancient Woodland or hedgerow. It won't work. The myriads of species which make them what they are have taken many generations to develop. Once Ancient Woodland has been destroyed that's it. It's gone forever.

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