

Rewilding or habitat management - or both? Audrey Compton



Rewilding is a bit of a buzz word at the minute - and like many words, it doesn't have a very precise meaning! It is fair to say that rewilding usually involves humans providing a site where nature can be left to do its own thing, so that habitats develop naturally, for example, without ponds being dug or trees being planted. The most that would be provided is some key wild species, such as deer, primitive ponies, primitive cattle and possibly primitive pigs, and a fence around the boundary to keep them in (and to protect the wildlife from us and our highly dangerous cars and pets!).

It is tempting to label every wildlife project as a 'rewilding project', but many also involve habitat management - not because rewilding isn't a great idea, but because wildlife is in such trouble, that were we to only allow areas to develop naturally, we would lose a lot of species that are already very rare – often because the species have very specific needs.

It is useful to look at the Knepp project, which many of us have either visited, or read about in Isabelle Tree's excellent book 'Wildling'. At Knepp approximately 3,500 acres of land, divided into three blocks by roads, have been allowed to rewild naturally. For many years the land had been farmed very intensively for dairy farming and growing corn; many years of fertiliser, herbicide, fungicide and insecticide use had reduced the number of species drastically. However, completely stopping active farming for the last 20 years has allowed our most useful habitat, scrub to grow. Scrub is our most persecuted habitat, because we think it is 'untidy', 'ugly' and hard to control; the fact that few people notice that it is full of birds and insects says a lot about us!

At Knepp, small numbers of native cattle, a few red deer and a very few wild-type pigs have created very good habitats within the scrubby areas - wallows, small ponds, meadows and copses. Now some rarer, beautiful and very charismatic species, such as Turtle Dove, Nightingale, Cuckoo and Purple Emperor are more common at Knepp than in any other part of England! Meat from the cattle, deer and pigs sells at a premium, because it is natural meat - helping to compensate for the small amount produced.

It is an amazing place and a fantastic result - but can rewilding guarantee that some of our rare species won't become extinct? If we find more rewilding sites that have been intensively farmed and sprayed, will very rare plants and other sedentary species come back? The exciting species that are doing so well at Knepp were either already there, or not far away - and they are species that can fly. Many rare plant species are rare because they don't have easy dispersal methods - their seeds aren't blown by the wind or carried around attached to a fox's fur; even in good habitats, they spread by **centimetres** per year, rather than by kilometres. If we pin our hopes on rewilding to save them, we may well lose them! For these species we need to look after specific habitats which are carefully managed – for example, meadows which are grazed in a slightly different way every year allow many different plant species to seed.

On sites where species have been lost (it might be more accurate to say 'where we have got rid of them'), we will need to put effort and money into reintroducing them. So, some rewilding schemes may include some re-seeding or, like, Knepp, reintroduction of species such as Stork, that simply won't get there on their own. Some insects and birds, even migratory birds, need a birthplace memory (and a winter-home memory) - and once they have become locally extinct, they need reintroduction. Storks, cranes and beavers all now live on 'rewilding' sites, but wouldn't be there if they hadn't been reintroduced.

We definitely need lots more big rewilding projects, such as Knepp - and a lot of small rewilding projects too! But if we don't want to lose a lot of rare species (some of which we are hardly aware that we've got) we need to keep on managing the habitats where they are hanging on, as well as getting better at species identification, so that we know exactly what we've got - and can reintroduce some species to new, suitable habitats.