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*RE-WILDING URBAN OPEN SPACES*

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Britain is geographically tiny but increasingly populous. We all know this and anyone travelling around England, in particular, can see the results of human population pressure in the widespread conversion of open land to housing, offices and infrastructure as well as the huge areas of intensive farming. This makes the open urban greenspaces for which we are custodians all the more precious and their good ecological management crucial for wildlife and ecosystem services<sup>1</sup>, not to mention their contribution to a cleaner local climate and health benefits. For more on ecology and biodiversity please see our policy on *Biodiversity Protection and Promotion in our Public Open Spaces* at this link <http://tinyurl.com/gwwaadk>.

Unfortunately, not many Planners and even fewer Politicians prioritise ecology, despite its being by far the most pressing issue on any agenda. To them, “urban greenspace” is most likely to be either a park where much wildlife is too often “managed out” by constant mowing and pruning, or it is potential space for development. Nonetheless, given half a chance, urban greenspaces can be real ecological jewels in the landscape, rich in wild species and natural history. Provide the habitats and native plantings, and the birds, mammals, amphibians, reptiles and invertebrates will come. This is no substitute for the urgent changes needed in global planning, halting the decline in biodiversity and an end to the marginalisation of nature, but it is something we can all do together at a local scale.

Nature is nothing if not determined. Its default status is colonisation, with reproduction, and of course, predators and prey, life and death. Wild species don’t care whether a habitat is anthropogenic or natural as long as it provides the essentials they need to survive and breed. So, if we can deliver the right conditions in urban open spaces, a healthy and diverse ecosystem will become established, compensating at least a little for the huge losses elsewhere. With our gardens, urban greenspace is probably the last safe haven for many wild species in lowland Britain outside nature reserves and protected pockets of semi-natural landscape. Ecologists recognise that mankind’s activities have been imposed upon, and interact with, often adversely, the natural background environment. Some call this background the “the wild matrix” and it is not passive but reactive and dynamic: if something can live somewhere, it will – the “default status” above – with concomitant natural selection and evolution.

#### Re-wilding

Assuming the site is not seriously polluted or biologically hostile (and even these can be remediated in time), re-wilding open space only needs priming and ongoing care in wise but relatively small measure, without seriously demanding management – a bit like rolling a ball downhill: you have to give it a little push to start it off, then only an occasional prod to keep it on track. At the bottom, it can be left alone (ecological climax) or started again at any point in its course or on a new route altogether. The timescale is a lot longer than rolling a ball, of course, but semi-natural ecosystems form autonomously. We can make judicious nudges in the desired direction rather than frequent elaborate interventions. Life, with its multiple negative feedback loops, favours homeostasis.

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<sup>1</sup> We have a paper on Ecosystem Services available on request. Nature enables our survival through the “services” it provides. However, beware a teleological take on this: nature does not “care” or have any “purpose”.

Whilst successful re-wilding demands we put aside conventional ideas that long grass, “weeds” and dead wood are somehow untidy and must be removed or battered into submission, it does not mean people should be excluded or deterred. Quite the opposite: it is only through closer contact with, and understanding of, nature that enough of us will become sufficiently passionate to demand and ensure its conservation for future generations. For the aware observer, a dead tree or a tiny meadow hold more wildlife interest and biodiversity than acres of manicured landscape with its close-mown, chemically treated grass and beds of alien ground-cover planting. Give any youngster – and most adults for that matter – a pocket lens, binoculars and a net, take them into any semi-natural habitat for an hour or two and the scene is set for an epiphany.

What, then, does re-wilding mean on the ground in urban open spaces? Looking around, the scene is daunting: there are habitat destruction, pollution, litter, invasive alien species and sterile wastelands in almost every urban vista. New developments are mostly pretty mean and ecologically depauperate in their layouts, having little if any respect for, or appreciation of, the intrinsic value of nature to the quality of peoples’ lives – but it’s not all that difficult to change. There is hope.

Re-wilding is relative and, in the context of this short explanation of policy, means making somewhere wilder than it was before so it becomes as wild as is reasonable for the local landscape. It is not the same as wilderness, which would be typified by having no intrusion by artificial light, be inaccessible to people, have no farming and nothing to deflect the growth of natural native vegetation. For our purposes in urban greenspace, we would define a wild place as land that is covered by diverse, native rather than exotic vegetation, where dead wood is allowed to accumulate (both on the trees and on the ground), where grassland is allowed to flower and set seed before it is cut, where leaves and grass cuttings can be allocated somewhere to decompose naturally, where shrubs and trees have a mixed age structure, where residual herbicides and pesticides are banned, and where the niche requirements for as many wild animals as possible, from the smallest invertebrates to the largest native mammals, are met; and finally, wild urban greenspace should be protected as far as possible from extraneous noise, dogs and cats and light pollution such as spillage from security lighting and street lamps.

These are the principles we try to observe when managing our urban greenspace and attaining the goal of a rich natural environment for people to enjoy. We will re-wild wherever we possibly can. Do remember that plants such as thistles, brambles, docks and nettles are British native species that are hugely important as components of wild habitats. They support an enormous number of invertebrates, birds and small mammals who feed on their leaves, stems, flowers, pollen, seed and roots as well as, in the case of brambles for example, providing protected shelter and nesting places.

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