

## An Environmental History of Wildlife in England 1650-1950

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**Author:** Tom Williamson

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It was a rather strange experience to be reading Tom Williamson's book in the week that the British Government proposed legislation to define extinct British animal species as 'non-native', and thereby to prevent their re-introduction.<sup>(1)</sup> The consequent tweetstorm served as a timely reminder that few topics are as contentious as the state of England's wildlife, and some of the points made by Williamson will rouse strong feelings in his readers. Whatever one's views on the specific issues that Williamson sets out here, it is good to see one of our leading landscape historians contributing to the question of how we got to this point in the first place.

The opening chapter aims to set the background both to the topic and to the state of English wildlife in the mid-17th century, which is ambitious for just a few pages. In fact, Williamson does a particularly good job here, both stating and demonstrating the difficulty of defining terms such as 'wild' or even 'native', and being unafraid to tackle the contrasting views of Oliver Rackham and Frans Vera on the subject of the prehistoric wildwood, pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of both sides of the debate. The advent of non-equilibrium models in ecology is mentioned as well, albeit briefly. As with each chapter, there is a final summing-up that helps to crystallize the central argument. Having got us into the 17th century, Williamson takes two chapters to set out what we think we know about the composition and distribution of woodland, waste and farmland. Here, of course, the author is on very familiar territory, so East Anglia and the East Midlands are well represented. There are some clear, firm assertions here: 'There was relatively little woodland in seventeenth-century England' (p. 20); 'In the seventeenth century, there were vast areas of unreclaimed wetland in England' (p. 31). Those assertions are backed up by pertinent evidence, and given a much more nuanced discussion to show, for example, that there was not simply much more heathland than of late, but that heathland was of a distinctive character and utilized in particular ways that maintained its character. The key point that Williamson gets across very clearly here is that the pre-improvements landscape was socially constructed, not only in a social-theory sense but in a real dirt-under-the-fingernails sense. Turning to the wildlife, Williamson considers the consequences of the Tudor Vermin Laws, and the wilful extermination of animals that took place especially across arable farming regions. The obvious comparison here is with Roger Lovegrove's *Silent Fields*, which discusses wildlife impacts from Tudor times to the present day as reflected in the historical record.<sup>(2)</sup> Williamson pays tribute to Lovegrove's

book, yet manages to provide a more subtle and complex interpretation of the same sources of evidence. This may be at least in part because Lovegrove goes through the decline in wildlife species by species, whereas Williamson tries to take a holistic view of the landscape as a whole, with all of its complex knock-on effects.

Chapter four usefully reminds us that not all of England was farmland or forest. By the mid-18th century, towns had become a significant wildlife environment and the first industrial landscapes were beginning to emerge. However, it was the elite landscapes of country houses and their parks that drove much of the attitude to wildlife and consequent responses. Parts of the countryside were reserved for elite hunting, including the warrens, whilst animals perceived to be a threat to crops and livestock were hunted ruthlessly by the lower social orders. Williamson makes the good point that however much we may be appalled by the rate of slaughter of hedgehogs and sparrows, much of that carnage was undertaken by people who had good reason to fear loss or damage to their small crops, however misplaced those reasons may now seem to have been. Furthermore, the parish payment system allowed keen exterminators of specified vermin to make a few pence, and we really should not blame them for taking the opportunity. That balanced perspective is one of the strengths of this book, a rare strength in a field of investigation that is too readily polarized. Were it not for the vermin payments, of course, we would lack a crucial source of historical evidence on this point.

The Industrial and Agricultural Revolutions merit a chapter each. The general social and economic background is briefly set, then the consequences for wildlife and landscape worked through in more detail, making ample use of contemporary direct quotes and taking a largely non-judgemental approach. In chapter five on the Industrial Revolution, although there is plenty of comment on the pollution of air and water, nigh on half the chapter (about seven pages) presents these consequences in terms of the creation of new habitats in which novel communities could thrive and previously restricted species could extend their range and abundance. Williamson is careful to distinguish the early stages of the Agricultural Revolution, with the introduction of new field crops and more informed use of rotation systems, from the development of 'High Farming', restricting this term to the subsequent phase that emphasized imported and manufactured materials and mechanization, rather than more intensive use of labour. From the wildlife angle, this is an important distinction, as High Farming had a considerable impact on soil nitrogen and artificial drainage. None of this is discussed in isolation, as price increases during the Napoleonic Wars are shown to have had quite marked consequences in terms of cultivation of new land through drainage or 'improvement' of uplands. Historians of war and of wildlife have more common ground than may at first be apparent.

Williamson next discusses what he calls 'New roles for nature', with the development of landscaped country estates in the early decades of the 19th century, of parks and gardens around the more genteel towns and cities, and the plantation of timber rather than well-structured woodland. On this last point, there is a lovely quote from that proto-Nimby William Wordsworth bemoaning the new larch plantations in his beloved Lakeland and suggesting that they should instead be planted somewhere else, 'in other parts of these islands' (p. 121). Although Williamson does not make the point explicitly here, Wordsworth reflects the way that some landscapes were becoming more 'precious' than others, a ranking that owed more to subjectivity and fashion than to any systematic assessment and one that continues to complicate landscape conservation today. The 19th century also saw the parallel expansion of shooting estates and gentleman naturalists, the former the location of the gamekeepers who become one of the principal villains of this story, and the latter individuals who were well-intentioned but sometimes equally destructive. Williamson takes care to point out that an interest in 'nature' was not necessarily the preserve of the more leisured folk who could afford the time and equipment, and makes the nice distinction that the separation of many working people from the land effectively allowed them the freedom to regard wildlife as something other than weeds and vermin. Different attitudes to wildlife were therefore differentiated not by socio-economic class, but by the same town/country divide that echoes through contemporary conservation debates, as any badger will confirm.

The period of the Great Depression, through the late 19th to mid-20th century, is often presented as a time of rural neglect when 'nature' made something of a comeback. Williamson presents this interpretation, then shows in some detail that the picture was far more complex and regionally contingent. Ample use of

quotations again shows up the subjectivity with which landscape and wildlife are viewed. Dudley Stamp's comments about the 'tragic' desolation of former water meadows in the West Country, for example, neglect to mention that the water meadow system was specific to a form of agriculture that was no longer practiced: the water meadow landscape had become redundant (p. 146). Even a geographer of Stamp's experience and with his attachment to factual evidence could, it seems, be maudlin when it came to bemoaning rural change. One aspect of this period that Williamson does not mention is the emergence of an interest in what we would today refer to as 'sustainable' farming, adapting the methods of High Farming to make fewer input demands, a topic that John Sheail has ably discussed.<sup>(3)</sup> This was a complex period in the English landscape. Country estates adjusted to cope with greatly reduced labour, men having been lost either to the cities or the Western Front, and some landowners took it upon themselves to repopulate the land with exotic species such as grey squirrels and various deer, and an assortment of local, then national, conservation bodies were formed. In short, there is far more to be discussed than could be accommodated in this one chapter, and it does leave the reader wanting more.

To his credit, Williamson then turns to urban and suburban development during the same period and its consequences for wildlife. It would be far too easy to present maps to show the great expansion of our major cities between 1850 and 1950, and to conclude that urban sprawl has been an unmitigated wildlife disaster. Williamson presents just such a map (fig. 29, p. 163) and it is certainly eye-catching, with Regents Park almost on the edge of London in 1850. However, much of this spread was suburbia, and suburbia increasingly meant gardens, quite small individually but adding up to a considerable area that was not subject to ploughing or to the predations of gamekeepers. Some plants and animals adapted with great success, as some species have been doing for millennia.<sup>(4)</sup> Williamson even includes what he calls 'edgelands' – landfill sites, sewage farms, reservoirs – as places to which wildlife has adapted, albeit a wildlife that is often unlike anything seen in the imagined rural England of earlier times. There is a rather neat chain of causation that links the 20th-century boom in the use of concrete, superficially a Bad Thing because of aggregate extraction and high carbon footprint, with the creation of extensive gravel pits, the abandonment of those pits when they are worked-out, and their subsequent colonization by marginal vegetation and aquatic wildlife even to the point of some becoming SSSIs (pp. 180–1). Aggregate extraction is messy and destructive in the short term, but should we welcome it as a source of landscape diversity for the future?

Williamson concludes with a chapter headed *Nature, History and Conservation*, which would be a good stand-alone essay. The point has already been made that this author tries to present a balanced view of a highly polarized subject, and in this concluding discussion he strives to see all sides, to weigh up, for example, the negative consequences of central Government subsidies for drainage and hedge removal against the legislation that established National Parks, AONBs and SSSIs. Ah, but there's the rub. Specify that this or that place is 'special' and you imply that the rest is not; designate a patch of landscape as of Outstanding Natural Beauty and you beg the questions 'In whose eyes?' and 'What is natural anyway?'. Today's Wordsworths and Ruskins may think they have the answers, but not to the satisfaction of, for example, the urban greeners and rewilders. The rewilding movement of recent decades (p. 191) does have something to recommend it. It would certainly be a fascinating experiment to see how different landscape patches evolved from their current constituents and structure if human interference were to be relaxed. However, any notion that this would somehow return the land to a pre-industrial, pre-improvement Arcady is unmitigated codswallop. Ultimately, one of the strengths of Williamson's book is that it makes this point, albeit more elegantly, both on ecological and on historical grounds, a welcome convergence of perspectives.

My grumbles regarding this book are relatively few. The Great Depression years need a fuller treatment than a single chapter allows, in order to tease out the complex details of a period that is so fully documented and tantalisingly just beyond living memory. Some of the best of that documentation is photographic, and Williamson makes some use of early 20th-century images. These and other images would be more useful if they were better reproduced in the printing: figs 10, 16 and 26, for example, all suffer from being 'muddy', with a consequent loss of detail and contrast. One topic that deserves more consideration, perhaps, is the place of roadside verges as wildlife corridors, mentioned in passing, and as a habitat patch in their own right.

The wide verges of drove roads are largely gone. Those that remain are usually mown rather than grazed, no longer the ‘long acre’ of travelers but increasingly recognized as a place where hay-meadow communities may persist given thoughtful management. There is an interesting story to tell, one that integrates ecology, history and social attitudes, as the verges switch from pasture to meadow.

*An Environmental History...* is an engaging read, written with clarity and care, and with only the minimum use of specialized vocabulary. It is described as a textbook for upper-level undergraduate and postgraduate students, though one would hope for a wider readership. Williamson persuasively makes the point that the species-rich past landscapes that we conjure from Gilbert White and John Clare were always a work in progress, and that “Man, not God, made the countryside ...” (p. 188). It is therefore open to us to make the countryside of the future, and to decide what wildlife we want. That is no easy process: archaeologists such as myself want red kites (*Milvus milvus*) back in England because they were something of the past that we nearly lost, ecologists want them because we have shorn the rural ecosystems of large predators, and some farmers and gamekeepers continue to poison and shoot kites for much the same reason. Value judgments prevail, and those values derive from deep-seated and often poorly-articulated beliefs about what ‘should’ be out there in our gardens, fields and hedgerows. Those beliefs, in their turn, have some historical basis and some of them have appreciable time-depth. One hopes that Tom Williamson’s book will find its way onto the shelves of at least some arable and livestock farmers and at least some of those more inclined to hug bunnies than to hug farmers. Above all, perhaps, it should be read by legislators who think that they can deny the long history of England’s wildlife by an administrative *fiat*.

## Notes

1. <<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/georgemonbiot/2014/jul/21/infrast...> [2] [consulted 23 July 2014].[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. R. Lovegrove, *Silent Fields: the Long Decline of a Nation’s Wildlife* (Oxford, 2002).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. J. Sheail, ‘Elements of sustainable agriculture: the UK experience, 1840–1940’, *The Agricultural History Review*, 43, 2 (1995), 178–92.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. T. P. O’Connor, *Animals as Neighbors. The Past and Present of Commensal Animals* (East Lansing, MI, 2013).[Back to \(4\)](#)

The author was pleased and flattered by the review, and has no comments to make on it.

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[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/103144>

[2] <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/georgemonbiot/2014/jul/21/infrastructure-bill-stopping-reintroduction-wildlife-uk>>