

On safari in West Sussex



Late in July members of the Plumpton Wildlife & Habitat Group were treated to a free evening safari on the Knepp Castle Estate, near Horsham in West Sussex. This is an amazing project to ‘re-wild’ some 1,000 hectares of former agricultural land and restore it to a state of ‘natural productivity’.

The project was launched in 2001 by the estate’s owner, Sir Charlie Burrell. Weary of unprofitably farming the heavy clay soils using modern intensive techniques, he took out miles of internal fencing, replaced it with miles of external, deer-proof fencing around the estate’s perimeter, and began to introduce various herbivores that would most closely replicate the creatures who would have grazed Britain’s woods and plains before the advent of industrial farming – in this case, Exmoor ponies, longhorn cattle, roe, fallow and red deer, and Tamworth pigs.

The fields have been left to revert to scrub and sallow. The deer, ponies, cows and pigs influence the vegetation each in their own way: the longhorn cattle create paths through the scrub, spreading seeds and create a distinct ‘browse line’; the Tamworth pigs rootle up the ground looking for food, and the ponies and deer browse the sallow and other tree species. The animal numbers are carefully managed by the estate’s ‘wolf’ (a deer stalker), to ensure neither over- nor under-grazing – and the meat is sold through the estate farm shop. In this way they naturally create a range of different habitats – open grassland, scrub, bare ground and forested groves.

The project is also restoring the old ponds and water meadows and returning the River Adur – which was canalised in the 18th century – to its natural meander, thereby allowing the return of seasonal flooding, which will help avert flooding further downstream.

Another important aim is ‘connectivity’ – linking the estate with other biodiversity hot-spots. The Knepp project team is currently in discussion with neighbouring landowners with the aim to create wildlife corridors from Knepp to the sea.

Since the project began, wildlife has slowly but steadily regenerated. This year they recorded 126 sightings of the rare Purple Emperor butterfly. In 2014 they recorded 28 species of butterfly – in 2008 only 12 species were recorded – evidence that the rewilding is rapidly bearing fruit (or butterflies). Birdlife include little owl, cuckoo, hobby, nightingale, the highly endangered turtle dove, lapwing, swift, swallow and house martin. A total of 58 bird species were recorded in 2014. We saw a pair of red kites.

Our evening was wonderfully hosted by Penny Green, the estate's resident ecologist, who gave us a fascinating introductory talk and led the safari tour, ending in the gift shop. Having marvelled at the deer, come face to face with a Tamworth sow (rather grumpy) and her delightful adolescent piglets, and admired at a safe distance the amiable longhorns, it seemed wrong to be carrying home venison steaks and beef burgers – the more squeamish settled for gluten-free Sussex gingerbread and Dial Post honey.

The rewilding project is both a scientific experiment and an economic gamble. The estate needs to support itself, as well as its wildlife, and it offers a range of visitor activities – the safaris and other wildlife tours, education courses, camping, and holiday lets. They are currently taking bookings for the autumn to watch the fallow bucks do battle in the rutting season, 11-29 October. Visit the website for details of all the activities on offer. <http://www.knepp.co.uk/>

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