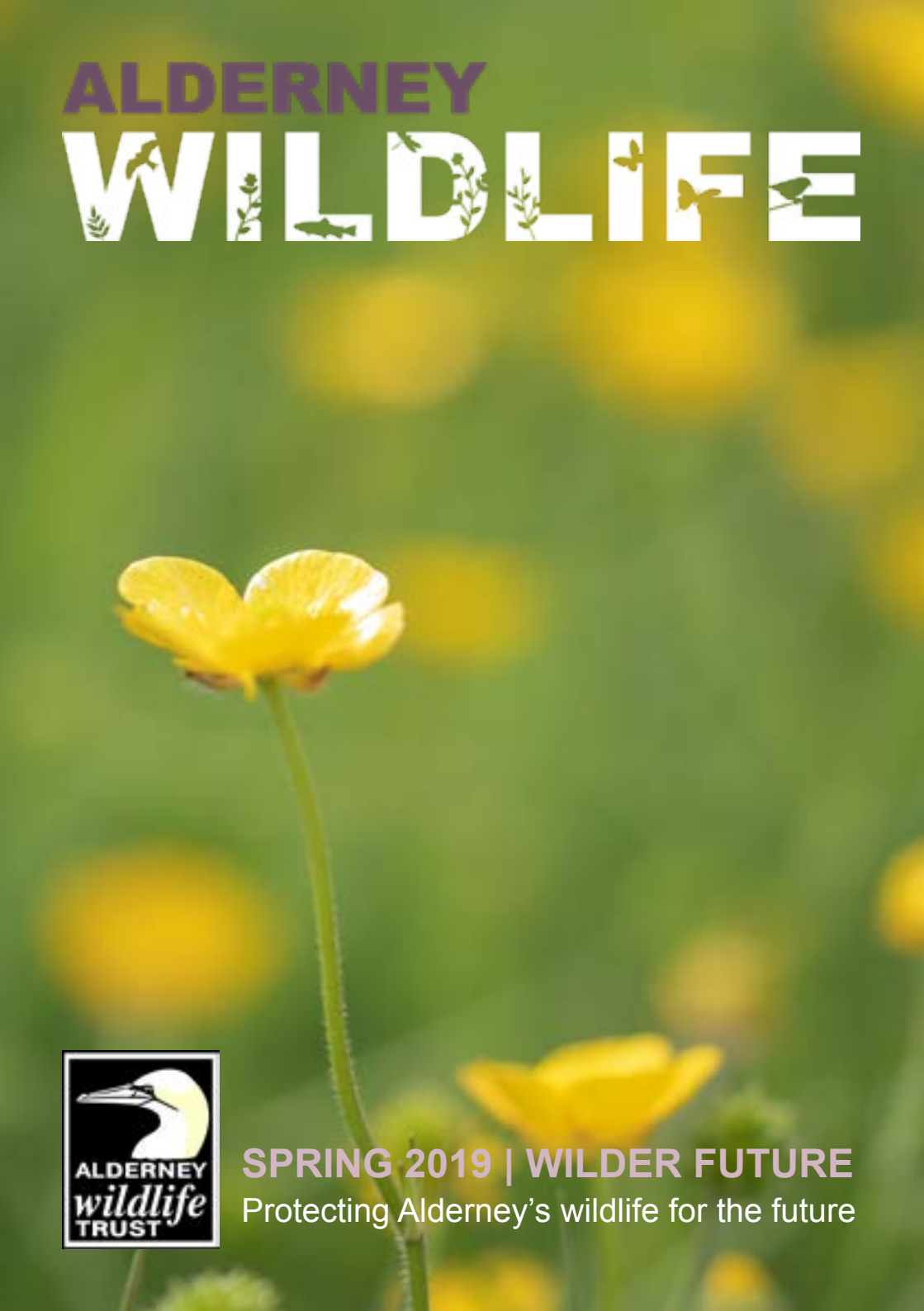
ALDERNEY WILDLIFE



ALDERNEY wildlife TRUST

SPRING 2019 | WILDER FUTURE

Protecting Alderney's wildlife for the future

Editorial

As you are already a member of the Alderney Wildlife Trust (and so have taken steps to support the protection of your local wildlife) I'm sure you don't need reminding about some of the dire statistics concerning biodiversity loss that abound at the moment. The UK has become one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world, losing species at an alarming rate. But we can all do something to reverse this decline, and that is where the Wilder Future campaign comes in.

The Wilder Future campaign is about building support for new laws that not only protect wildlife but also help to put it into recovery, and about people taking individual action where they live. By signing up to a Wilder Future you can become part of a movement determined to make a difference for wildlife and bring nature back from the brink. We will be sharing ideas to help put nature into recovery soon, but in the meantime you could have a look at the Wildlife Week programme (page 6) and take part in activities to engage with or learn more about our wildlife. Or why not write to a States Member, explaining why wildlife is important to you and the island and asking what they are doing to protect our natural environment here on Alderney.

Sign up here: wildlifetrusts.org/Wilder-Future

Front cover: Buttercups, Joshua Copping

Contents

2019: an important year for Alderney's wildlife

2019 is already a rather interesting year, higher than average raft counts for puffins in March, the launch of dynamic studies of slow worms and bats and a new strategy for the Alderney Community Woodland have been packed into the first 3 months of the year.

In March, after much deliberation, the decision was made by members of the former ABO (AWT) sub-committee to form a new UK company, ABO Ltd, in order to take on the responsibilities and assets of the ABO, previously held by the AWT. With residents Helen McGregor and Neil Harvey taking on the responsibility for its running, the company's sole purpose is to provide a bird observatory in Alderney with the same ornithological objectives within its constitution as that created by the AWT in 2015. All of us at the Alderney Wildlife Trust are hoping for a successful transition for this new business and look forward to seeing the results of its work.

And now with the summer rushing towards us we are working on a packed programme of events and activities to run alongside our research and conservation work. May's Wildlife Week will have special guest Lizzie Daly (TV presenter and naturalist), whilst August's Wildlife Fayre will see our Patron Miranda Krestovnikoff back on island. Planning is also well underway for the Inter Islands Environment Meeting and Wilder Islands Conference to be held between the 26-28th September. The Wilder Islands Conference will be co-chaired by our Patron, Dr. George McGavin, and aims to engage representatives from the islands of the British Isles, its Crown Dependencies and Overseas Territories as well as the wider scientific community on how to respond to the role of islands as biodiversity hotspots in the response to global environmental decline. With a growing list of leading scientists, conservationists and policy makers coming together for the event here on Alderney, it is hoped that together we can focus on what steps our island communities might take together for a Wilder Future.

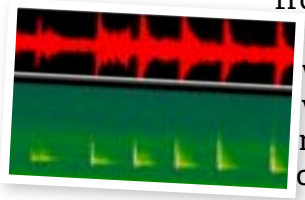
So for 2019 I am hoping for less small 'p' politics on Alderney and more big 'P' Politics and Policy making from our, and many other, islands.

News round-up

Terrestrial surveys 2019

The beginning of spring meant that we suddenly got a lot busier with our terrestrial surveys. Our surveys cover a broad spectrum of flora and fauna. However, this year we have a big focus on bats; those secretive, nocturnal, flying mammals that can create a sound-picture of their immediate environment with echolocation.

There are over 1100 species of bat distributed around the world, apart from the Antarctic and the high Arctic. Rodents are the only mammalian order to outnumber bats. Seventeen species of bat are known to breed in the UK; all are insectivorous microbats (different to the large fruit-eating megabats found in tropical and subtropical areas, including flying foxes). How many species are there on Alderney? That is something we want to find out this season.



We started this year's bat surveys by monitoring their winter activity at Water Lane. Bats in temperate regions hibernate to survive the winter. However, they do occasionally arouse to drink, to feed, and to move to another hibernation site. We picked up some bat activity at Water Lane every month this winter with an acoustic detector.

At the moment we are also helping with a UK study focusing on the migration of the Nathusius pipistrelle, with hopes of finding evidence of whether this species migrates across the Channel Islands from France to the UK. Nathusius pipistrelles weigh less than 10g but are known to migrate up to 2000km from their breeding areas in north-eastern Europe to their wintering areas in south-western Europe. So it might not be just birds that stop by on Alderney on their spring migration.

Hopefully by the end of this season we will know a lot more about bats on Alderney.

LEFT: RECORDING OF A COMMON PIPISTRELLE BAT FEEDING

Marine Surveys 2019

The Alderney Living Seas Programme is the mechanism through which the AWT responds to all marine activities and issues within Alderney's territorial waters. It includes implementing a range of surveys every year; to examine and explore the island's incredible marine habitats and species, since our current knowledge of Alderney's marine life is, well, rather patchy.

Within the intertidal environment (the bit where you can walk without getting too wet from the sea), our survey efforts this year will focus on recording marine habitats within our Ramsar Site, rocky-shore species and life amongst the beach strandlines. In particular, we will be focusing on looking for invasive species, such as the Asian shore crab (*Hemigrapsus sanguineus*) that arrived on Alderney last year, and also tagging any Green Ormers (*Haliotis tuberculata*) that we find. These surveys are linked with The UK Wildlife Trust's Living Seas Programme and other regional marine groups, such as the La Société Guernesiaise and Société Jersiaise.

Recording marine life in the subtidal environment (full immersion by the sea) can be rather difficult and often requires expensive gear and expertise. So we primarily use snorkelling as a simple (and fun) method to record any marine life we come across. This year we hope to record marine life within the island's eelgrass habitat beds in Longis and Braye Bays, as well as exploring other sites.

Marine mammals (whales, dolphins and seals) are considered an extremely important set of species in terms of conservation importance. This year, our marine mammal surveys will range from simple land-based observations and collating dolphin and seal photographs from the pubic to more complex scientific surveys, such as identifying the proportion of grey seal (*Halichoerus grypus*) pups and adults during their breeding season.

These surveys are primarily planned between April and October, due to calmer weather and tide conditions.

Many of these surveys are undertaken along with the public, so if you are interested in joining any, please contact Hannah, our Living Seas Officer at: livingseasofficer@alderneywildlife.org

Puffin Cam is rolling

It was lights, camera, action on the Burhou puffin colony from the start of April as we got our Puffin Cams running for the season. This year we have the addition of Colony Cam - which will do tours of the colony daily at 4pm and allow remote monitoring of the birds. You can watch at www.teachingthroughnature.co.uk

Wildlife Week 2019

Ten events to look out for!

Take your pick from some of our favourite Wildlife Week events over the week 27th May - 2nd June.
On this page are some of the best educational events and opposite you'll find some family-friendly fun.

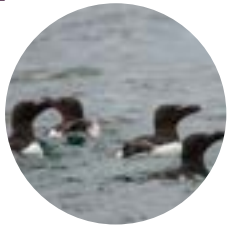
1. Creatures of the night walk

Monday 27th May 8.45pm

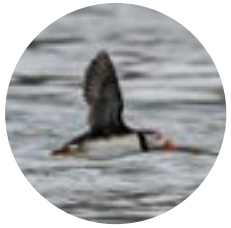
A walk around Longis as dusk settles, looking for bats, hedgehogs and even barn owls: this is a great way to appreciate some of our nocturnal species. All play important parts in the ecosystem, controlling insects, as pollinators and as indicator species, showing changes in other aspects of biodiversity.

2. Seabird special boat trip

Tuesday 28th May 2pm



Enjoy a three-hour boat trip around the island visiting the puffins and gannets, also stopping to see the smaller colonies of fulmars, guillemots, razorbills and shags. While you are on the trip our ecologists will be carrying out their monitoring counts of the breeding populations.



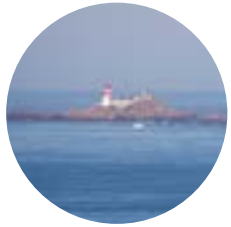
3. Macaw conservation talk

Thursday 30th May 6pm

AWT Conservation Officer, Connor, talks about his work in Costa Rica protecting the scarlet macaws, and the benefits of conservation volunteering.

4. Casquets boat trip

Friday 31st May 1.30pm



Another boat trip with a difference: see the Casquets lighthouse up close. Built in 1724 this is a treat not to be missed. We'll look for seabirds and seals on the way.

5. Wildflower wander

Saturday 1st June 10am

Improve your botanical ID skills looking for wildflowers on the coast as we catch the end of the cliff top displays and look for summer-flowering plants.

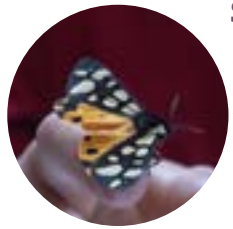
6. Rockpooling

Tuesday 28th May 10am

Search Clonque's pools for some of the vast array of marine life found in the bay, including ormers, crabs, starfish, and over 100 types of seaweed.

7. Moth trap & bug hunt

Wednesday 29th May 8.30am



Alderney is one of the best places in the British Isles for moths, with hundreds of species found on the island. Get up close and personal with the moths and learn about why they matter in an ecosystem. This is followed by a bug hunt, searching for other insects around Essex Farm and Longis.

8. Story time

Thursday 28th May 2pm

Perfect for younger children: delve into the weird world of animal names with this short story, told by a blue-footed booby. We'll see if we can find any weirdly-named creatures of our own afterwards in a search around the woodland.

9. Beach clean & art from waste

Sunday 2nd June 2pmm

A beach clean with a difference! Once we've cleaned Saye and Corblets beaches we will use the waste to create some art work - you can make your own individual piece or join in with something larger, highlighting the problem of marine litter for our wildlife.

10. An evening with Lizzie Daly

Friday 31st May 7pm

Lizzie Daly Wildlife

Lizzie Daly is a wildlife biologist, filmmaker and presenter who has worked on projects with CBBC, National Geographic and BBC Earth among others. Lizzie's passion for nature has taken her around the world, filming and conserving a range of species.
This evening Lizzie will talk to us about some of her latest adventures with wildlife and share some of the conservation projects she has worked with in countries including Australia, Panama and Kenya as well as Europe and the UK.

Discover the full programme of events on our website alderneywildlife.org/whats-on or pick up a programme from our shop

Gannets & plastics

Daniele Clifford - Ramsar Officer & Justin Hart - Avian Ecologist

Gannets use plastic iine and net as nesting material

Since plastics were introduced and started to substitute natural materials more than half a century ago, worldwide production has increased every year and they have touched almost every aspect of our daily lives. Almost 10% of the world's oil production is used to make persistent, non-biodegradable plastic products, which although recyclable, are mostly discarded (mainly to landfill) and end up in the natural environment. It is estimated that plastics already impact over 90% of seabirds. By 2050 it's predicted that 99% of seabird species and 95% of individuals within each species will have ingested plastic; but plastics in the ocean also pose other threats.

Gannets build their nests from loose strands of seaweed gathered from the ocean surface. They are not fussy nest builders and while searching they sometimes find other suitable material to bring back to the nest. These include pieces of plastic, typically nylon filament netting and synthetic rope but sometimes plastic bags and other household items. Over here Alderney's Gannets are no different and have been adding plastic material into their nests for many years. In fact so much nylon filament netting and synthetic rope has accumulated that the rocks on both Les Etacs and Ortac can appear in places strangely discoloured by orange and blue. Although not ingested these plastic materials pose a different threat, entanglement. Each year an unquantified number of adults and young Gannets become entangled in loose netting and rope. Some are strangled and die relatively quickly by asphyxiation. Others are less fortunate and are merely ensnared around a limb or wing. If the netting cuts into the bird then infection may take hold and kill it but if the bird is really unlucky it is just trapped and has to endure a slow death through starvation.

Last year, AWT staff members anecdotally estimated 100% of the Gannet nests contain plastic, however, the full extent and impact of plastic on the Gannet colony has not been properly studied here. Therefore, in 2019 the AWT aims to investigate this matter further, as part of the Ramsar management plan and on behalf of the States of Alderney.

We are currently observing nest building Gannets and counting the number of birds carrying seaweed vs plastic back to Les Etacs. We will also be recording any observed entanglement and mortality throughout the season and collecting any dead Gannets that wash up on Alderney (please inform us if you find any) or are left on the colony at the end of the season. Autopsies on these birds, carried out in collaboration with Alderney Animal Welfare, will allow us to investigate if the gannets are ingesting plastics too. If plastic is found, this may indicate Gannets mistakenly eat plastic or ingest it indirectly through their prey. Recent studies indicate the number of bird species that mistakenly eat plastic is growing.

While we are just starting to realise the impact of plastics, many more studies are needed. Further investigation this year will help us take a step forward in understanding the extent of plastic use by the colony and hopefully mitigate any associated impacts.

Before the gannets arrived back,- showing the amount of man-made material on the colony

In numbers

8,737

Pairs of gannets on Les Etacs and Ortac counted in the last census in 2015 (numbers are increasing).

100%

Of gannets have plastic in their nests it was estimated last year.

9

Gannets found dead on Les Etacs in 2019, between February when the birds arrived back on Alderney, and the end of April. All the birds found dead have been killed this year by entanglement in nets, rope and line on the colony.

Wilder landscapes

Connor Stapleton Goddard - Conservation Officer

If someone asks you to think of a wild landscape, what do you think of? Dartmoor? Rugged coastal heathlands? Or the rolling Yorkshire dales? All of these places are wild, certainly, but they have all been created and maintained by humans over many centuries. Over these many hundreds, or thousands of years in the case of Dartmoor, humans have been changing their landscapes and many of the species that inhabited these landscapes have changed and adapted with them. However, as civilisations developed, farming intensified, many of the traditional land management practices were lost; and with them much of the Great British wildlife. Practicing these traditional techniques and learning to work with nature again is a major step towards regaining much of that wildlife.

The Alderney Grazing Animals Project herd, currently roaming the wilds of Longis Common, is a key part of creating and maintaining a wilder landscape in Alderney. Without their grazing, brambles would spread, grass would swamp less competitive plants and we would lose many of the charismatic birds that live and breed on the common. Grazing such as this has been practiced for centuries throughout the UK. The farmers who grazed the cattle benefitted from the rich grasses and flowers on common land and the wildlife benefitted from the varied landscape the cattle and their dung created. Moving the cows around the common is one of the main ways the AWT is maintaining and improving the rich diversity in the Longis Reserve.

One of the grazing herd

Over the next few years the Alderney Wildlife Trust is aiming to graze the herd in some of the woodland glades in the Community Woodland. Long grass growth in the glades has reduced some of the wildflower species that used to be found in this area. Many people have mourned the loss of flower rich meadows in Europe as, undoubtedly, have many of the species who benefitted from them. The flowers attracted insects and butterflies which pollinated the trees and the orchards; the insects attracted birds and reptiles and bats; the birds spread the seeds and the bats kept the biting insects at bay; and the dung from the cattle attracted yet more beneficial invertebrates. As people moved away from this way of management towards more intense cattle rearing, these relationships broke down and our environment as a whole suffered.

With traditional management techniques such as low intensity grazing and carefully timed mowing, wildflower diversity can be restored for the enjoyment of visitors and wildlife.

Now that the majority of the Community Woodland has been planted with native trees, more thought and effort can be given to how it can be managed for the benefit of future generations and the environment. Coppicing has always been a way of sustainably harvesting timber from a woodland; and the varied ages of the trees it creates as a result has positively benefitted resident species. The Trust hopes to coppice the sycamore trees in the Greenwood Area of the Community Woodland to provide a multi-layered habitat for wildlife whilst using the timber of these trees to create products and firewood to reinvest into conservation and the community. Far from being the end of that tree's life, shoots will grow from the stump, creating a bushier tree and a perfect refuge for nesting birds and insects. Many of the wild woods throughout Europe have been managed this way for uncounted generations, and many species came to rely on this management for their success.

A wildflower meadow - only possible if bramble and scrub are controlled

PICTURE CREDIT: LEE SCHOFIELD

Bloody nosed beetle on grazed land

Removing invasive species in the woodland to make room for native trees

Often neglecting an area is not the answer for creating a refuge for wildlife. However, working with nature for the benefit of people and wildlife can go a long way towards a wilder landscape and a wilder future.

The Wilder Future campaign really kicked off in April, with the launch of a trailer for a new Wind in the Willows. The Wind in the Willows was written over 100 years ago, when the countryside was a very different place. The Wildlife Trusts' trailer looked at the environment Ratty, Mole, Toad and Badger must survive in now and the threats they face.

Wilder Future came about because our natural world is in critical condition. More than 60% of plants and animals in the UK are threatened and one in eight face extinction. Wildflower meadows have declined 97%, these habitats are vanishing for the species that depend on them for homes and food. Ratty – actually a water vole – is the UK's fastest disappearing mammal, gone from 94% of the places in which it was once found.

These huge losses are not only a problem for wildlife but also for humans, as the natural world plays an extremely important role in our wellbeing, both mental and physical. Clean soil, air and water are vital life support systems but we continue to pollute them by burning fossil fuels, using pesticides and fertilisers and concreting over vast areas for roads, towns and homes.

It seems we are only just starting to face up to the realities that climate change and wildlife decline will bring about. The UK recently became the first country to declare a climate emergency, but so far the British government continues to back fracking, supports the first new coal mine in 30 years, wants a third runway at Heathrow, has proposed numerous new roads and subsidises the extraction of fossil fuels. All this will mean missing a net zero emissions target by 2050, let alone the target by 2030 which is needed if we have any chance of keeping warming below 2°C.

And where is Alderney in all this? While we are only small, we still have an impact and a part to play in nature's recovery. Alderney lacks any real legal protection for its wildlife and also continues to almost exclusively use carbon-intensive methods for travel to, and on, the island and for its energy needs.

Despite all this negativity there is still a chance for a Wilder Future, but inaction cannot continue. We need a future where wildlife sites are protected, one where we continue to make space for nature as well as for people. A future with binding targets to reduce emissions, pollution and needless consumption, and a future where our natural world can recover. Not just for us but for our children and for their children after them.

Islands can act as strongholds for nature, with species losses in Guernsey estimated to be 20 years or more behind that of the UK, but this can only continue if we conserve this precious diversity.
If you share this vision for a wilder future please write to our States MemCombers explaining what nature means to you, and why we must commit to both action on climate change and to protect wild places. Please join us to create a Wilder Future – wildlife doesn't have a voice but you do. So speak up.

ANDY ROUSE/2020VISION

RICHARD BURKMAR

AMY LEWIS

Rewilding - busting myths

Alastair Driver is a director at Rewilding Britain, he works to influence policy and create partnerships for English rewilding projects.
You can find out more about Rewilding Britain at:
www.rewildingbritain.org.uk

SCOTLANDBIGPICTURE.COM

Trees are a key part of rewilding - you can see healthy woodland regenerating, like here in the Cairngorms

No-one owns the term "rewilding" and you will see many definitions out there, but here at Rewilding Britain (the only national organisation in Britain specifically established to promote rewilding) we describe it as

> "The large scale restoration of ecosystems towards the point where nature is allowed to take care of itself."

I should emphasise the word 'towards' here, because rewilding is a long-term process – a spectrum of activity for example, from my tiny garden wildlife pond through to 100,000ha of completely unmanaged countryside - which of course we don't yet have in the UK. In other words it should be considered to be an inclusive activity – we can all contribute, even on a tiny island like Alderney, but to do so we must be bold enough to move along that spectrum significantly further than we have yet done, both in terms of scale and in terms of reduction in management. In mainland Britain to do this effectively, we believe we need to rewild blocks of at least 10,000 ha in England and Wales and 100,000 ha in Scotland.

The fundamental principles of our approach are as follows:

- we treat communities and livelihoods as a priority – i.e. we have to make this work for the benefit of human society as well as wildlife, and this inevitably means it needs to work economically, both in the short and long term.
- we need to work at nature's scale – i.e. at such a scale that wildlife can thrive and that the ecosystem service benefits, for example: improved flood risk, water quality, carbon sequestration etc. are sufficiently significant to be measurable.
- we rely on natural processes to create the desired outcomes – i.e. if you restore natural soil and water conditions, natural vegetation types and structure, the right mix of herbivores and the right mix of carnivores, then nature will automatically respond and biodiversity will increase both in terms of variety and abundance.

Of course the reality of the situation in a crowded group of islands like the British Isles, means that compromises need to be reached in order to get anywhere near this kind of large-scale ambition. For example, we can't expect to suddenly leap to the right mix of herbivores and carnivores with Elk, Bison, Wolves and Lynx roaming freely in rewilding core areas. And so until such time as the environment and societal opinions are ready for that, we need to consider which proxy herbivores we should introduce to enable the recovery of natural processes and we need to consider to what extent we act as the apex predator to manage the herbivore numbers for the same purpose.

This is not pure rewilding, but in my view, it is the next best thing, as it's pragmatic and it goes a long way to achieving all of the principles described above. What it also does – and this is extremely important - is move both the environment conditions and societal thinking in the right direction, so that future generations are better placed to consider taking that crucial extra step towards pure rewilding, as and when they are ready to do so. Although I have described this approach as a compromise, it will still be hugely challenging to achieve, because we will need to reintroduce a suite of formerly native species in most rewilding areas in order to restore natural processes and generate the economic benefits from rewilding. We are barely scratching the surface with nature-based tourism in the UK, but we will need a greater variety and abundance of charismatic species in our wild spaces to draw people to those places and in doing so generate revenue for those more remote rural areas. So species like Beavers, Pine Martens, Wild Boar, Red Squirrel, Black Grouse, Hen Harrier, Golden and White-tailed Eagles and even Juniper and Scots Pine etc will all be high on a list for consideration in the appropriate locations.

TERRY WHITTAKER/2020VISION

Rewilding Britain has an ambition of 1 million hectares of rewilding in Britain by 2100 – that might sound a lot, but actually it's less than 5% of the land area. Nevertheless it is still highly challenging and to achieve it, we need a strong economic model to underpin it. In summary such a model should have four strands:

(i) a government-funded payment for ecosystems services arrangement - i.e. the "public money for public goods" Environmental Land Management Scheme being proposed by Defra

"We will need a greater variety and abundance of charismatic species in our wild spaces to draw people to those places and in doing so generate revenue for those more remote rural areas."

(ii) business sector contributions to add to the government contributions above – e.g. a carbon tax to fund carbon sequestration through tree-planting, peat bog restoration etc. and water company contributions to help fund catchment-sensitive farming

(iii) a local 'rewilding intervention' economy based on the use of local skills and machinery to carry out the necessary rewilding interventions such as tree planting, bog restoration, fencing, removing fencing, river restoration, wetland creation etc.

(iv) a nature-based local economy based on creating a more attractive place for people to visit, containing "charismatic mega-fauna" such as those I mention above.

I have worked in UK conservation for 40 years now and I know The Wildlife Trusts and other NGOs have done amazing work to conserve our natural heritage for many decades, and goodness knows what state our biodiversity would be in if they hadn't, but the simple harsh truth is that traditional nature reserve and protected site conservation on its own is not enough to reverse the decline in biodiversity. We need something significantly larger in scale and less intensive in management, to sit alongside the ongoing conservation of our nature reserve hotspots. That '*something*' is, in my view, 'rewilding' and there are no organisations better placed to make it happen than The Wildlife Trusts.

Please consider signing the 'Rewilding Britain' petition calling on the government to commit to natural climate solutions, including rewilding, to prevent climate breakdown and restore nature.
https://tinyurl.com/y2f3cjl9

@AliDriverUK
@RewildingB

Reintroductions

Some species that will help with rewilding have already been given the go-ahead for reintroduction. Meet two...

Beaver

Beavers are architects of the landscape, the dams and ponds that they create help to slow rivers and prevent flooding and these wetlands provide habitat for a whole range of wildlife. They became extinct in the 16th century in the UK but have been successfully reintroduced to parts of Scotland and now have legal protection there. There are also growing populations in Devon, Cornwall, Yorkshire and Gloucestershire, with more locations likely soon.

Beavers were reintroduced to Cornwall in 2017

NICK UPTON

White-tailed Eagle

The white-tailed eagle (also known as sea eagles) once soared above much of England but became extinct there in the 18th Century due to habitat loss and human persecution. They were reintroduced to Scotland and Ireland in the last 40 years. In April it was announced that there would be a release of up to 60 eagles in the next five years on the Isle of Wight, hopefully leading to re-establishment in southern England. White-tailed eagles are top predators, and their reintroduction will highlight the need to conserve British wildlife and their habitats.

White-tailed eagles coming soon to the south coast

NEIL ALDRIDGE

Wilder coasts

COMMON TERN - JOSH KUBALE

Alderney has two species of rats, the Black rat, introduced to the island via boats, and the Brown rat, native to the island. Rats are adaptable, smart and prolific breeders. They are omnivorous too and readily exploit new food sources. On islands they are notorious for damaging ecosystems as they can become voracious predators of native fauna, particularly if their populations are left to grow unchecked. This is especially the case where native animals have not evolved suitable defensive behaviour and the rats have few predators. On Alderney the population of rats is bolstered by our presence and has spread to all corners of the island including the near shore islets where they are known to predate our native wildlife.

During the AWT's regular monitoring and ringing of the seabirds that nest on the islets around Alderney's coast, evidence of rats predating eggs and chicks have been found. In 2017, 21 eggs and 15 dead chicks were discovered in 3 rat caches at the colony of Common terns on Houmet de Pies. In 2018, the AWT in collaboration with the States of Alderney Public Works Department and RSPB, implemented a rat control scheme on Houmet de Pies. This work saw a small number of Common tern chicks fledge from the islet for the first time in three years.

Building on the success of the rat control scheme last year, the AWT in continued collaboration with the States of Alderney, has expanded the programme to include some other islets that are accessible to rats from the mainland at low tide. These include the Hanaine Bay Stack, the Twin Sisters and L'Etac de la Quoire. In addition, all these sites, including Houmet de Pies, have been baited on the adjacent shore too. It is hoped, that reducing rat predation will help maintain biodiversity by improving the breeding success of vulnerable birds such as Guillemots, Razorbills, Shags and Common terns, ensuring their continued presence for generations to come.

Lesser Black-backed Gulls

Adult Lesser Black-backed Gull on Burhou

A chick hatched that year on Burhou

Ringed as a chick on Burhou in 2012, this gull was spotted in Morocco winter 2018/9

One of Alderney's significant wildlife treasures is often under-rated; namely the internationally important colony of Lesser Black-backed Gulls on Burhou. Britain holds almost 40% of the world population of this enigmatic long distance migratory gull, and Burhou alone holds 1% of this total. In terms of numbers the Lesser Black-backed Gull is therefore second only to the Northern Gannet in terms of the percentage of the world population which nests within Alderney.

With the Lesser Black-backed Gull now being listed as a "Conservation Priority" in the EC Birds Directive and being "Amber Listed" in the British Birds of Conservation Concern, Alderney clearly has an international duty and responsibility to protect and conserve the species.

Fortunately, the gull population on Burhou has been well studied for the past decade and we now know a great deal about our important gulls and their lifestyles.

Many people assume the gulls to be present all year, but this is not in fact the case. The Lesser Black-backed Gull only visits Alderney to nest and rear their young. When this task is done the entire population moves away from the island. The first adults will be leaving the colony by the end of July, followed by the main exodus of adults in August. Any youngsters that had been raised each year tend to remain a few weeks later than the adults, before they too drift away.

So... where do they go? Through the use of individually coded colour leg rings we know that the majority of our gulls spend the winter in Iberia, mainly on the coast where they gather at fishing ports or on beaches where the traditional form of fishing (Xavega) is still practised. Others will visit landfill sites, even far inland.

A minority of Lesser Black-backed Gulls do not, however, stop in Spain or Portugal, but carry on to winter along the coasts of north-west Africa. Our own researchers have spotted many gulls ringed on Burhou all along Morocco's Atlantic coast from Casablanca in the north all the way down to Agadir and even further south into the territory of the Spanish Sahara. This past winter alone we had reports of 19 different gulls in Morocco and four in Spanish Sahara.

None of these birds are however, the long-distance record holder for Alderney. This distinction is still held by a chick (Black 6T5) ringed on Burhou in July 2010, which was then seen at a bird reserve in The Gambia, almost 3,000 km from Burhou! The bird was photographed there in February 2012. Sadly, but remarkably, the final record for this gull came from Burhou itself on 12th July 2013 when the bird was found freshly dead back in the very colony in which it had been born three years earlier.

It is easy to think that gulls are always successful in their breeding attempts, but on Burhou this is far from true. Our gulls behave as a truly 'wild' colony in that the adults do not appear to use organic rubbish from landfill sites to feed their young (unlike birds in Guernsey and Sark). As a result our gulls here are far more susceptible to the vagaries of food supply during the chick-rearing stages from early June to the end of July each year. In good years, when natural food is abundant, the birds can raise one or two chicks each, but there are some years when the total number of chicks raised to fledging by the 1,100 pairs of gulls barely reaches double figures.

Lesser Black-backed Gulls do not predate Puffins and studies have shown that kleptoparasitism (the stealing of food collected by other animals, such as fish from Puffins), is very minor on Burhou. While there are about 45 Great Black-backed Gull pairs on Little Burhou, predation of the Puffins by this species is very minor and of no concern. There is no evidence-based case to take any action against the gulls and Alderney should be playing its part in the international conservation of these important bird species.

While for the majority of people in Britain it is the return of the first Swallow which is the forerunner of spring, for many island-based bird watchers it is the return of our very special Lesser Black-backed Gulls (several weeks earlier than the Swallows!) that are the true harbingers of the end of winter and the arrival of spring!

Insect update

David Wedd

The winter and early spring weather has been very varied, with cold spells alternating with periods that have been much warmer than are normally seen here in the early months.

There have been no surprises among the hibernating butterflies: Peacock, Red Admiral and Small Tortoiseshell were first seen in January, and Comma in February. More unusual were three sightings of the migrant Painted Lady in February and March, and in the same period three records of the rare Large Tortoiseshell, either from hibernation or migrating from the Continent. Holly Blue was first seen on 3rd February, and by March there were several flying on the ivy in the Valley. Small Copper was on the wing in late February, and commonly after that.

What was particularly surprising was a sighting of Emperor Dragonfly by the Etheredge Family on 22nd February near Houmet Herbe – with two more seen by other viewers before the end of the month at Longis Pond. It was noticeable that several of the damsel-fly larvae found in Butes Lane at Jo Watt's garden Pond Dipping on 16th March were almost full grown.

Drinker caterpillars have been seen all round the island, and numerous Jersey Tiger larvae have been found on giant echium plants. We have released a few dozen caterpillars of the beautiful Palpita vitrealis micro-moth on jasmine in the Valley. The Emperor Moth pupae that have overwintered at Vallee Clos have emerged in numbers in April. More than thirty, spread equally between the sexes, have hatched out so far, and we have hundreds of eggs for the next generation.

The Valley light trap has been operated weekly throughout the winter and at the beginning of March the Gauvains re-started their trap. Nothing particularly uncommon has been found in either trap as yet, although several specimens of Pale Pinion and Red-Green Carpet are pleasing.


Painted Lady


Small Copper


Drinker moth caterpillar


Emperor moth

EVOLUTION IN ACTION?

In recent years numbers of summer migrant bird, Blackcap have been overwintering in Alderney. It has a small, thin beak developed for picking up tiny insects emerging in spring and summer. In the winter there are few of these and we were intrigued by the numbers of the birds seen feeding on seeds on bird-feeders. More recently we have seen (twice) a blackcap tackling an Angle Shades moth. This insect is considerably bigger than its normal food supply and the bird was finding it very difficult. One Angle Shades escaped, while the other was subdued rather messily and then eaten. If the blackcap continues to overwinter here, how many years (centuries?) will it take for the bird to develop a beak large enough to tackle these bigger insects?

Wild shores

Joshua Copping

Stuck to rocks along our coastlines are the weird and wonderful sea anemones.

Alien Creatures

When walking the shore at low tide, you've probably noticed jelly-like blobs dotted along the rocks, but how much do you really know about the secret life of these anemones?

They are actually stinging polyps closely related to jellyfish and coral. And whilst they spend most of their time attached to rocks throughout the intertidal zone, they do occasionally move, just very slowly at around 10 cm per day.

Strange Adaptations

At low tide anemones draw their tentacles in and the animals resemble fruit pastels stuck to the rock. But as the tide rises and water covers them, these blobs transform and start to resemble flowers, their tentacles swaying in the water, searching for food. When their prey, usually small fish or shrimp, get close enough, they use their venom-filled tentacles to ensnare the unlucky victim and slowly consume it.

Secret Immortality

But most impressively, anemones can be immortal in the right conditions. They don't weaken with old age, just grow bigger. If they lose a tentacle they grow a new one and can even grow new heads with mouthparts if they lose these too. As long as they aren't preyed upon or poisoned by increasingly polluted waters, they can carry on living for forever.

So, the next time you're walking along the shore and spot one of these unassuming jelly-like blobs, now you'll know how impressive they truly are.

BEADLET ANEMONE
The most common species in the British Isles

SEE THEM

- Rockpooling on the Longis reserve or Clonque Ramsar site (on bedrock not loose gravel)
- In the sea caves on an AWT kayak tour of the coast

Top tips
3 SPECIES TO SPOT

Strawberry Anemone
A large anemone with green spots on its red body, making it looks like a strawberry!


SUE DALY

Gem Anemone
A small striped anemone that comes in a range of colours but typically pink with grey banded tentacles.

Snakelocks Anemone
The purple tentacle tips are actually caused by the presence of symbiotic algae used for photosynthesis.


BECKY HITCHIN

Watch news

The Watch group have had a busy start to the year, with lots of activities and ways to see wildlife between January and April. We kicked off the year with the Big Channel Islands Beach Clean, with groups from across the islands taking part to remove over 90 bags of rubbish from our beaches. These beach cleans help protect marine wildlife, stopping them eating or becoming entangled in the litter we remove.

In February we had a beautiful sunny day for World Wetlands Day; we went for a walk in the Longis reserve to see the coastal wetland and then Longis pond. The gannets arrived back on the rock just a few days later on the 10th, marking the first big wildlife return of the new year.

For Arbor Day in March we planted 100 native trees in the Alderney Community Woodland, to replace some non-native conifers that had been felled. Native trees support more wildlife than non-native species which is why the AWT are aiming to eventually only have native broadleaf woodland in the area. All the saplings planted this year were birch which has small leaves and so forms an open canopy (so good growing conditions for woodland flowering plants below) and is home to more than 300 types of insect!

We also made bird feeders, helping to provide food for birds in the colder months when they need bigger fat reserves to survive. We used wood offcuts and rope from beach cleans for the feeders to keep them sustainable.

Later in the month we went pond dipping, looking for all sorts of creatures in Jo Watts' pond which she kindly let us use for the afternoon. We found lots of newts and pond snails, and some other pond invertebrates. We also noticed a small clump of frogspawn so hopefully the tadpoles are doing well. Garden ponds are very important for wildlife, providing a wet habitat for amphibians and insects, somewhere to drink for other animals and the damp edges are home to unique plants and insects too. You can pledge to build a pond in your garden and find out more about why ponds are so important at www.wildaboutgardens.org.uk

At the Shark Egg Hunt we found egg cases from cat sharks and undulate rays, which the Shark Trust will use to learn more about where these species breed.

Most recently we held a 60 minute 'bioblitz' and found 54 species of all sorts on the field near Essex Farm. Some of the best finds were emperor moths and field pansy.

The Watch group would like to thank David Wedd for passing donations from sales of his book 'Sunshine Land' on to the AWT, after his well received talk on Ghana at the museum. The donations will go towards running Watch activities.

Visiting a UK reserve

Imogen Rutter - 2017 Reserves Officer

I found work with Cumbria Wildlife Trust in 2017 and after a few months as a seasonal warden, moved into a Reserves/Project Officer role at a new site called Eycott Hill. Eycott is located just within the Lake District National Park boundary. It's about 216 hectares of upland fell and swamp-mire communities and a designated SSSI for its interesting geology and botany. It's composed of a number of ridges and valleys, formed by volcanic lava flows. It has some fantastic species, including the round-leaved sundew, mountain everlasting and mountain pansy. It's also home to upland and wetland birds, such as curlew, skylark, wheatear and short-eared owl.

Most of my role involves running the conservation and training outcomes of the Heritage Lottery funded project. I run volunteer work parties, organise contractors to carry out restoration work and run educational events for the general public, as well as farmers and students.

Can you go wild for 30 days? Make time for nature, explore wild places near you and share your love of wildlife with the world this June.

#30DaysWild

Get in touch

We would love to hear your thoughts, questions and ideas

Alderney Wildlife Trust
48 Victoria Street
GY9 3TA
01481 822 935
admin@alderneywildlife.org

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