

Rewilding Middle England

Must the central lowlands of England forever be tame? The opportunities for wild land in the region, and the threats to it, are explored in this article.

MICHAEL JEEVES

Ordered, planned and predictable

Browse through the magazine or website of Trees for Life¹, the inspiring nature conservation organisation working in the Scottish Highlands, and the idea of what rewilding is about is easily understood, even though it is a difficult concept to define. Restoring woodland to where it once was, together with lost predators and grazing animals, allowing natural processes to function, people interfering as little as possible, with few or no pre-determined outcomes, are just a few factors involved. Forrest Gump's mother said, "Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you are going to get". Well, nature conservation should be a bit like that, except that targets and planning are taking over to such an extent that the surprise factor is now missing. Whether it be 'x' hectares of reedbed, 'y' percent of scrub or 'z' pairs of lapwings, we know the plot from the outset.

Nowadays the Highlands are a spectacular and wild-looking landscape even if they are often said to be degraded, holding much less wildlife than they once did. Down in Middle England, however, it is all very different. The landscape from the East Riding of Yorkshire right through the Midlands, towards the South Coast, but extending eastwards into East Anglia, is 'champion' country, or what Oliver Rackham calls the 'planned countryside'.² Most of the woodland long having been removed, the open field system was developed here, from Anglo Saxon times into the Middle Ages, and the region was later subjected to the Enclosure movement. The result is little biodiversity and an extremely tame, neat and ordered landscape – the Black Hole of Middle England.^{3,4} Common land is generally scarce and there are few places that are not used intensively for something by people, who are present in huge numbers, together with their buildings and roads. The cities, towns and villages too are increasingly tidy, with little room for wild nature.

Take a look at the Wildland Network Rewilding Projects Database⁵ and it appears that little is happening in Middle England. The situation is not quite as bad as this, but the challenge of rewilding this region is surely greater than anywhere else in Britain. So, what then are the main issues, threats and opportunities?

Attitudes of people to wild land

At a nature reserve open day a while back a woman and her children looked at display boards showing two large colourful images, one of a meadow full of green-winged orchids and another of an oilseed rape field. To the amazement of the staff in attendance the woman pointed to the oilseed rape photograph and said "isn't

that wonderful children!" It was a good lesson in not assuming that everyone likes the same things. So, do people want wild land? Perhaps there is a need to find out.

It is probable that many people are happier when wild land and fierce animals are in remote places. There is certainly also a strong contingent that wants nature reserves to be like parks, with surfaced paths, dog bins and other formalised features and facilities. Others do value wilder land and more might if they had the chance to experience it. What is certain is an imperative to engage more fully with people over the rewilding issue and perhaps to acknowledge that different levels of wildness are appropriate for different situations.

Predators, large herbivores and other keystone species

Wolves, brown bears, lynx and wild cat disappeared long ago from Middle England, and most of the smaller, less fierce animals have been exterminated or severely reduced in number. Recently some have returned, for example otter, red kite, buzzard, sparrowhawk, raven and polecat. Exotics such as big cats (especially melanistic leopard, puma, and the former native Eurasian lynx) are considered by some to be established here and ospreys have been released at Rutland Water.

It is said that large predators and herbivores are essential to enable ecosystems to function properly⁶, but they make nature more exciting for people too. Only a few years ago buzzards were rare visitors to most of Middle England, now they are a common and spectacular sight. It should not be too long before red kites are widespread too, but it will be interesting to see whether ravens and polecats are welcomed back in the same way that the birds of prey were. Persecution is still a problem, especially of corvids, although stoats, weasels and foxes suffer too. Attitudes to predators are mixed, as is discussed elsewhere in this issue.

Although it is unlikely that the region will ever have wolves or bears again, there could be stronger populations of some of the species already present and perhaps the re-introduction of pine marten and goshawk in places such as the National Forest. Here and elsewhere there might be possibilities for re-introducing beaver and maybe other keystone species like wood ants. Large herbivores are already being utilised on some conservation sites and their involvement in nature conservation should be explored further. These animals are much admired by human visitors too, and can stimulate people's interest in a nature reserve or wild place.

Existing sites and reserves – their wild credentials

Middle England has, of course, some good places for wildlife. There are National Nature Reserves such as Sherwood Forest, with its fantastic veteran trees, and many other nature reserves and SSSIs. Together these only cover a small percentage of the area, and moreover not all of them are really very 'wild'.

Take nature reserves, for example. They are a real success story in nature conservation, but how wild are they? Table 1 has been adapted from the National

Trust for Scotland's Wild Land Policy 2002 and includes suggested indicators of wild land in Middle England.

Table 1. **Indicators of wild land in Middle England**

Positive indicators	Negative indicators
Natural processes allowed to function – 'nature in charge' e.g. natural regeneration, extensive grazing, flooding, predators not controlled, non-prescribed management outcomes	Natural processes constrained – 'people in charge' e.g. tree planting, hedge laying, mowing, flood defence, dams (reservoirs), predators controlled, prescribed management outcomes
Sense of remoteness	Closeness of built-up areas
Large size	Small size
Scenic grandeur (rough terrain, cliffs, rocks, flowing water, sea)	Uninspiring scenery
Solitude	Presence of crowds or group activity
Quietness	Man-made noise
Absence of re-assurance in a hazardous and challenging environment (risk)	Security, tameness
Extreme weather such as gales, heavy rain, frosts and blizzards frequent	Extreme weather rare
Absence of man-made structures e.g. nest boxes, tern rafts, hides, seats, surfaced paths, fences, roads, pylons, overhead wires, buildings, signs	Presence of man-made structures

By scoring each indicator between one and five (negative to positive), but multiplying the natural processes score by a factor of three to reflect its importance, admittedly crude wild land values of individual sites can be compared. The total possible score is 55 and for illustration some of the nature reserves of the Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust when assessed using this system give some interesting results (Table 2).

Table 2. **Wild land values of some Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust nature reserves**

Reserve	Score (out of max 55)
Launde Big Wood (SSSI)	37
Charnwood Lodge (NNR)	34
Prior's Coppice (SSSI)	32
Cossington Meadows	28
Rutland Water (SPA)	18
Cribb's Meadow (NNR)	17



Charley woods – a naturally regenerating woodland illustrating the wildlife value and potential of The National Forest.

Photo: Michael Jeeves

The Trust's wildest reserve at present is Launde Big Wood, a good-sized, fairly remote ancient woodland, most of which is purposefully 'managed' with minimum intervention. Next comes Charnwood Lodge, a very large varied reserve with rough terrain, rock outcrops and low-key management. Other LRWT ancient woodlands score highly too, such as Prior's Coppice. Here there are repeated calls for the muddy rides to be surfaced, but these have been resisted so far in order to preserve the wild feel of this marvellous woodland, not to mention the wildlife that lives on the rides. Next on the list is a wildish floodplain wetland, Cossington Meadows, and then a gap to lower scoring reserves.

Grasslands such as Cribb's Meadow are carefully managed through grazing, mowing and 'weed' control to achieve a desired sward height and elimination of unwanted species. While it is a lovely and relatively remote place, Cribb's Meadow is not especially wild. Rutland Water Nature Reserve is remarkable in that it holds a tremendous amount of wildlife, but the reserve scores poorly in terms of wildness. This would probably be true for most of the large wetland reserves in Middle England, where attracting large numbers of visitors is a high priority and there are therefore hides, surfaced paths, interpretation centres and so forth, as well as controlled water levels and intensive management. Colin Tubbs wrote passionately nearly 30 years ago about the paradox of increased wildlife but reduced wildness where nature reserves are created. He thought that "too many reserves have lost their appeal through the safari park approach of their managers..."⁷ Clearly some places do require a high degree of human control in order to maintain traditional practices such as hay making and others like Rutland Water provide an important role in introducing people to wildlife, but a better balance needs to be struck between honey-pot, ordered reserves, and wilder ones.

For comparison, Chee Dale, a superb nature reserve in the Peak District, just outside of the region being considered, appears to score highly with 43 using the indicators in Table 1, while Beinn Eighe National Nature Reserve in the north of Scotland amasses a hugely impressive 51.

There must be potential for some reserves to be wilder and they could be used as demonstration sites to promote wildness as a concept. It is another matter on SSSIs and other legally protected sites, at least at present. The objective of getting SSSIs into 'favourable condition' through prescribed means severely restricts the scope for wildness. For example, a lowland reservoir in Leicestershire notified as a SSSI for its draw-down zone plant communities developed a wonderful tangle of wet woodland along its margins in the absence of grazing. This woodland, itself an important habitat, is being cleared in order to try and restore the specialised draw-down zone plant communities, even if that is near impossible to achieve because of eutrophication of the water. Also, on heathlands, one of our wildest landscapes, despite the fact that they are the product of centuries of management, suggestions have been made that one Leicestershire SSSI should be compartmentalised with fencing to facilitate control of grazing. On another stock must be removed in the winter, so the whole concept of extensive naturalistic grazing is undermined. This is all to achieve defined levels of scrub, bracken, bare ground and ericaceous shrub cover. There seems to be little room for the dynamism of nature.

Farmland

The notion of letting nature have a little more say is a difficult pill for many farmers to swallow. Even the conservation-friendly farmers want to be in charge, so realism is necessary when contemplating the rewilding of farmland. The new Single Payment Scheme has already produced narrow field margins of rough grass and the Environmental Stewardship Scheme is surely going to benefit wildlife. These schemes will not, however, result in a wilder looking land, where the emphasis is still on prescribed outcomes and control. Abandonment of much land in the rich area of Middle England seems unlikely, but if farmers were paid through these schemes to set-aside areas for several years, on a rotational basis with much less interference than hitherto, then that could create some wild places in the countryside. If these places were located next to rivers or existing good sites, that would be even better. There are a few examples of this happening and they are producing encouraging results. Negative perception of so-called 'weeds' is something that will have to be overcome.

The creation of more woodland on farmland should be encouraged and it will surely be necessary to link existing woodlands to make them more viable ecological units, especially with the threat of a changing climate. More land is being bought by people who do not necessarily want to farm, so there must be potential to find a few who are interested in doing something exciting and different. A large private estate in south Warwickshire, known as the Forest of Dennis, is already being established by one (Felix Dennis, a wealthy publisher) who is aiming to create an area of woodland extending over an astonishing 25,000 acres (approx. 10,000 hectares).⁸

Rivers and floodplains

If the opportunities for rewilding are limited on farmland, the situation on floodplains is much more promising. There are currently many conservation initiatives along river valleys, often taking advantage of old gravel workings. New reedbeds are springing up everywhere, as well as marshes grazed by wild-looking longhorn cattle, wet woodland, lakes and more reedbeds. River valleys are recognised for their existing and potential value to wildlife. There has even been some restoration of rivers that have been engineered in the past, such as the River Tame at Middleton Hall.

Numerous gravel pits, grants to enhance them, the scarcity of arable farming and relatively small land holdings, wet land, enthusiastic non-governmental organisations, a dedicated government body (the Environment Agency) and support from water companies and local authorities have all combined to facilitate successes in river valleys. With more gravel extraction inevitable and a probable decline in the profitability of floodplain farming, perhaps even more can be achieved in these places. There are still threats, such as high land prices in pony paddock areas, development and climate change. The latter may lead to drastic measures to reduce increased danger of flooding of towns and cities through the construction of dams, thereby taming rivers again.

Existing woodland

Although the cover of woodland in Middle England is generally low, there are some denser wooded areas, like Rockingham Forest in Northamptonshire. In most of the region, though, there are only quite small, scattered ancient woodlands and fox covers. A few places have concentrations of relatively new and sometimes large conifer plantations, often on former heathland. Many of the older woods were once intensively managed by regular coppicing, but during most of the twentieth century were either neglected or planted with conifers, and then neglected. This has resulted in the loss of some wildlife, but neglected woods are wilder than those with carefully mown rides and coppice coupes surrounded by tall fences to keep deer out. Ironically perhaps, deer are considered by many conservationists to be a major threat to woodland biodiversity, yet others see the absence of large herbivores in ecosystems as a critical issue. It all depends on the circumstances of course, but there are mixed messages being sent here.

Woodlands are the best places in Middle England to find wildness. They can offer a refuge from twenty-first century civilisation, at least as long as internal roads, tree tubes, external noise and the like are kept to a minimum. Natural processes are being used to rewild a number of damaged ancient woods, for example in Forest Enterprise woods such as Owston Woods in Leicestershire.

Area-based projects

Conservation, landscape and recreation work has increasingly become focused on defined areas. One of the best examples is surely the National Forest. This



Mountsorrel Quarry, the largest granite quarry in Europe - an example of a site with potential for rewilding through sympathetic restoration, once work is completed.

Photo: Michael Jeeves

initiative started in the early 1990s and through its innovative Tender Scheme the area of woodland in the Forest has been increased substantially. The Tender Scheme rewards landowners handsomely for carrying out not just tree planting, but conservation, access and recreation work. It is certainly a model that could be used elsewhere. Community Forests (the smaller tracts of mixed woodland helping to revive the edge of many cities) would benefit from having similar grant schemes, because encouraging farmers to plant trees is difficult. A farming representative memorably said recently that there are only two things that will make farmers plant trees - money and mental illness!

The Great Fen Project, Sherwood Forest and OnTrent are other exciting area-based initiatives. There are more in the early stages of development throughout Middle England. The challenge is to get rewilding higher on the agenda of some. There must be the potential in the National Forest for wild land, if only because much of the new woodland may well end up unmanaged. Hopefully increased wildness can be achieved in a more positive way though.

Biodiversity Action Plans

BAPs are now a well-established part of nature conservation, enshrined in many a strategy. The principles on which they are based are good – strong partnerships, agreed priorities, objectives and targets. Of course there are problems, not just a shortage of resources to actually do much, but also an implied message that biodiversity can only be increased through targets, planning and control.

Notwithstanding concerns from both sides of the argument, BAPs can be used to further rewilding initiatives. It really depends on how the plans are written. The fact that so many grant schemes now demand that projects contribute to BAP targets means that BAPs must be taken notice of. The important thing is to ensure that the plans include rewilding concepts. Local BAPs perhaps have more

flexibility for this than national ones and for example the Leicester Leicestershire and Rutland floodplain wetland Habitat Action Plan was used to help secure funds towards the purchase of 100 hectares of land adjacent to the River Soar.

Quarries

In addition to the numerous sand and gravel pits on floodplains and elsewhere, Middle England also has, because of its geological diversity and location, many other quarries. These have considerable potential for restoration to benefit wildlife and wild land too. The key is the creation of a varied topography with a nutrient-poor substrate and the use of natural processes as drivers in the evolution of the site.

Lafarge Aggregates started one innovative project in the mid 1990s, in the largest granite quarry in Europe, at Mountsorrel in Leicestershire.⁹ Following the construction of a new landform, the original restoration plan was to topsoil the landform and then plant trees. The Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust suggested that instead no topsoil be used and that the trees be left to regenerate naturally (the land has on one side an ancient woodland). To its credit Lafarge was keen on this idea, no doubt partly because of the scarcity of topsoil, and it was supported strongly by its forestry consultant, Leicestershire County Council and English Nature. The results were remarkable, with up to 58,700 trees per hectare growing within five years (R. Pakenham pers. comm.).

Public perception is important and certainly Lafarge had to think hard about what local residents would say about a quarry company appearing not to do anything on land it had turned into a 'wasteland'. In the event little adverse comment was received.

With many quarries still being worked and more undoubtedly to come, opportunities for wild land are there to be taken. Often mineral companies do not actually own the land they are working, which is a problem, and the planning system does not seem able to adequately ensure the long-term future of restored sites.

The wild side of towns

Wild land is now very scarce in many towns and cities. Open space is at a premium and even where it occurs twenty-first century wealth enables ordered landscaping to rule the day. Acres of grass are regularly mown, trees and shrubs are planted and maintained, and householders increasingly concrete, slab or brick over gardens. One conservationist was galvanised into a scathing attack on the destruction of wild land in London and its replacement with landscaped wildlife areas, making the point that planted or sown trees and other plants are not actually *wild*.¹⁰

Contemplation of wild land in urban and suburban situations begs the question do wild places have to be big? There is much discussion of large areas in conservation circles these days, but small wild places have value to wildlife and can bring much pleasure to people too. If more gardeners could be encouraged to

let just a small part of their land go wild and local authorities did the same with parks, a great deal could be achieved. The culture of the neat and tidy approach is a major obstacle and wild land is frowned upon as the product of the idle.

A new era of conservation?

While sound science and policy are familiar themes in nature conservation, philosophy is rarely mentioned. The truth is that nature conservation is as much an idea as anything else and ideas have changed over time. We look after what we like, especially charismatic and attractive species. Of course policies and science are both important, but opinions are many and varied on what we are trying to achieve. Long may it be so. Wild land, or wilderness, is certainly an idea and everyone will have an opinion on it.¹¹

But if there are exciting wild land projects being developed in the Scottish Highlands and other upland parts of Britain, why bother with Middle England? Aldo Leopold, the great American wilderness advocate, when considering the apparent acceptance that Grizzly Bears were going to become confined to Alaska in that country, wrote that "relegating Grizzlies to Alaska is like relegating happiness to heaven; one might never get there".¹² We need some wild land everywhere.

References

1. See: www.treesforlife.org.uk/ www.treesforlife.org.uk
2. Rackham, O. (1986) *The History of the Countryside Dent*. London
3. Colston, A. (1997) Conserving Wildlife in a Black Hole *ECOS* 18 (1) 61-67
4. Jeeves, M. (2005) News from the Black Hole *ECOS* 26 (3/4) 95-103
5. See: www.wildland-network.org.uk/projects/wn-rewild.database.htm
6. Dennis, R. (1995) Scotland's Native Forest – Return of the Wild *ECOS* 16 (2) 17-21
7. Tubbs, C. (1979) Poor Substitute for Wilderness *Birds: Summer Issue* pp 26-27
8. Dennis, F. (2005) The Forest of Dennis *Tree News Autumn/Winter Issue* pp 50-52
9. Pakenham, R.A. (2000) Landscape Restoration – An Alternative Approach *Quart. J. of Forestry* 94 313-318
10. Bertrand, N. (1999) Putting the Savage Back into Wild Flowers *BSBI News* 80 39-41
11. Oelschlaeger, M. (1991) *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology*. Yale University Press. New Haven and London
12. Leopold, A. (1949) *A Sand County Almanac* Oxford University Press. New York

Michael Jeeves is Head of Conservation with the Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust. The views expressed here are his own. mjeeves@lrwt.org.uk