Cornwall Federation of WI's: Climate Ambassador Book Reviews

Wilding: The Return of Nature to an English Farm, by Isabella Tree. Picador 2018, ISBN978-1-5098-0510-5. Price varies.

In the year 2000, Isabella Tree and her husband Charlie Burrell gave up the struggle to make a living from their intensive farm on the Knepp Estate in Sussex, and instead sold their dairy herds and farm machinery, put their arable land out to contract, and sought funding from the Countryside Stewardship scheme to restore the Knepp Repton park. The story of their resulting journey, as natural processes were allowed to reassert themselves throughout the estate during the next two decades, is the subject of this beautiful and inspiring book by Isabella Tree, a professional writer. The gradual re-introduction of large mammals to the landscape triggered an astonishing series of wildlife recovery, including breeding skylarks, woodlarks, jack snipe, thirteen of the UK's seventeen bat species, and sixty invertebrate species of conservation importance including the rare purple emperor butterfly, and, by 2012, thirty-four nightingale territories. This is a must read for those of us interested in the restoration of our natural environment.

Orchard: A Year in England's Eden, by Benedict Macdonald and Nicholas Gates, William Collins 2020. ISBN 978-0-00-833373-7

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now

Is hung with bloom along the bough

And stands about the woodland ride

Wearing white for Eastertide

From 'A Shropshire Lad', A E Housman 1896

Orchards are not only beautiful, they are crucial to the preservation of large wildlife populations. Fringing the western shadow of the Malvern Hills, north from Ledbury to the Wyre Forest, there lies one of the largest, most aged deciduous woodlands in our country – the last remnants of the orchards which once covered England. It runs in the shadow of the Malvern Hills for eighty kilometres, and it harbours astonishing amounts of wildlife.

By the time Housman was writing 'A Shropshire Lad', English orchards were already in decline. For three hundred years apples had been grown for cider making. In 1664, John Evelyn described Herefordshire as 'one entire orchard' and most hedges were enriched with fruit trees. As woodland cover declined over the centuries, orchards provided new habitats for the tiny creatures which live in rotting fruit and decaying wood and support a rich food chain of mammals, birds, lichen and fungi.

The two authors of this book met when they were both working on Springwatch. Together they describe their year-long experience of a productive ancient orchard, managed with minimum intervention, and the diverse wildlife populations it supports, both resident and migrant. This orchard contains varieties of apple developed when cider-making was in its heyday, and now largely forgotten,

but still used here to produce excellent cider. The apples still bear the names of the people who so carefully crafted them, Betty Prosser, Thorns: or the places they came from, Black Worcester pear or Kingston Black apple.

Between lyrical passages of landscape description, and careful explanations of the delicate balance of the eco systems under scrutiny, we learn much about the teeming life of this ancient orchard, and the reason for the rapid collapse of populations exposed to intensive farming, pesticides and loss of habitat.

This book is a delight, and reminds us how much remains to us to cherish and protect, in the face of the many threats to our diminishing natural world.

Back to Nature: How to Love Life – and Save it, by Chris Packham and Megan McCubbin, Two Roads, 2020. ISBN 978-1-529-35039-5

By contrast, Chris Packham's is an angry and unsettling book. Part memoir, part scientific study, and part polemic, this book excoriates the dysfunctional way in which the natural world is managed in the UK, in particular in respect of land use and land ownership, wildlife crime, unsustainable practices such as the farming of salmon and the raising and shooting of grouse, and lobbying by big chemical companies.

The book is studded with inset blocks of text, separate from the main argument, which have been written by Megan Mcubben, a zoologist and also Chris Packham's step-daughter. These insets examine separate topics such as marine protected areas, the usefulness of wasps, communication between trees via fungal networks, the return of storks to Sussex, and tree planting. Trees are not just for Christmas: we need the right varieties in the right place, and they need to be watered and cared for until they are established. The authors describe how thousands of saplings were planted along the route of HS2 to replace the many hectares of ancient woodland that are being destroyed. However, these saplings died of drought, so the contractors grubbed them out and replaced them, explaining that it is cheaper to plant new trees than to water the old ones. Not a very constructive mindset.

Often, the message is about how resilient the natural world is, and how it can recover very quickly if left to itself. The authors describe some remarkable initiatives for bringing our depleted ecosystems back from the brink, notably at Knepp in Sussex and in the Cairngorms. Marine habitats recover remarkably quickly when protected from threats such as over fishing and bottom trawling, and they become refuges for the survival of fish stocks.

This is a challenging book, but one we need to read. Chris Packham insists that we are not talking about the loss of biodiversity, but about its wilful destruction. He asserts that the conservation agencies both in England and the devolved countries are not fit for purpose due to massive budget cuts, the absence of scientific expertise in senior management, and political interference. He concludes that, as members of the public, we have a duty to inform ourselves of how bad things have become, and to take active steps to halt the decline – steps which include everything from feeding our garden birds, writing to politicians, and joining street demonstrations.

A Life on Our Planet: My Witness Statement and a Vision for the Future, David Attenborough, Penguin Random House UK, 2020, ISBN 978-1-529-10827-9.

Sir David Attenborough was born in 1926. He has spent his life exploring the wild places of our planet and making films about the creatures that live there. The trajectory of his life has followed, step by step, the progress of what has been called 'The Great Acceleration' – that is, the huge advances in science, technology, and exploration which mark the unfolding of the 20th and 21st centuries.

This extraordinary book begins in 1937, when the world population was 2.3 billion, when levels of carbon in the atmosphere measured 280 parts per million, and when 66% of pristine wilderness remained. In the first part of the book, in what the author describes as 'my witness statement', each chapter is headed by a date and tracks the steady rise of these statistics to, in 2020, a world population of 7.8 billion, 415 parts per million of carbon in the atmosphere, and 35% of wilderness remaining. Are we, he asks, sleepwalking into a catastrophe?

What lies ahead? In the middle chapters, the author outlines how the Earth is a sealed system: it is our planet, and we share it with all the living world. To restore its balance, we need as a priority to stop burning fossil fuels and to switch to green energy. But we also need to restore the planet's ecosystems, which have sustained human civilisation for 12,00 years, and life in the wild for millions of years before that. And, he asserts, we need to rewild the world.

Part three of the book reveals David Attenborough's vision as he outlines the routes we might take towards a sustainable future, for example:

- Abandoning the impossible goal of annual economic growth
- Switching to clean energy
- Rewilding the seas, and protecting no-fishing zones over at least one third of the planet's oceans
- Making farming sustainable, and improving practice to limit land use
- Rewilding the land

Although the early chapters of the book make for grim reading, the later section is optimistic and inspiring, outlining the exciting innovations that are already coming into play in many parts of the world. There really is a global movement for change.

However, that movement must have fairness at its core, financing resilience building for those communities already experiencing the worst calamities of climate change. It is women who bear the brunt of these calamities, and education for women across the globe is hugely important, enabling them to feed their children, whilst empowering them to limit the size of their families if they so wish.

The book's conclusion restates the importance of restoring the natural world. Sir David Attenborough's most recent series is entitled 'Our Perfect Planet' (BBC 1 Sunday at 8pm) and examines some of the extraordinary and once pristine ecosystems now under threat from man-made climate change. Well worth watching, and the book makes essential reading.

Elegy for a River: Whiskers, Claws and Conservation's Last Wild Hope: by Tom Moorhouse, Penguin Random House UK, 2021, ISBN 978-0-8575-2701-1

A key message of this book is – we know how to do conservation, conservation research is funded and there are lots of people willing to spend their time leaping into rivers, thrusting their hands into dens and burrows, or sitting up all night getting extremely cold and wet. We have the solutions to biodiversity loss, but we lack the funding and political will to implement our findings.

Tom Moorhouse has spent a large part of his life in rivers, investigating first the plummeting decline of our water-vole population, and then the rise of the signal crayfish, an escapee from crayfish farms in the 1980s and now inhabiting our British rivers in ineradicable billions whilst eating our native white-clawed crayfish, destroying river banks with their tunnels, and generally causing havoc. The story is one of invasive species, because the decline of water voles is largely due to their being eaten by American Mink. The mink breed in spring and feed their young on water voles. Water voles, which are prey to all sorts creatures and have in the past sustained their large populations by having very large families, breed in the summer – too late for the population to survive the depredations of mink. It would be possible to eradicate the American mink, but it would cost tens upon tens of millions of pounds, which will not be forthcoming.

The author softens the sadness of the story by being very amusing about his experiences in the field – the failures, the accidents, and his affection for the water voles in spite of the regular bites they delivered when he took them out of the traps to tag and examine them. He describes water voles as 'famous, beloved and harmless'. They are truly British – the oldest British water vole remains date from about 14,700 years ago. They offer a good basis for the debates around conservation priorities – which creatures belong here, and which need to be eradicated. But the reality is that we can neither save the water vole, nor eradicate the mink or the signal crayfish.

The book ends with a close look at the case for funding conservation, and how it is viewed as competing with human priorities such as reducing poverty and building schools. Against this view, Moorhouse states that nature is the fabric that supports every single human enterprise, and that every species lost is a tear in that fabric. He writes 'Species keep our climate stable, our oceans productive, our lands habitable, our waters pure and our crops pollinated, fertile and pest-free'. And, for those of us not convinced of the case for cherishing nature for its own sake, he sets out the economic arguments for conservation, including the $235-577 billion dollars worth of work done globally by pollinators, or the need for insurance companies to invest $5-10 billion annually to protect coastal habitats in advance of claims for coastal flooding. Investment in marine protection would increase the profits of the seafood industry by $53 billion a year. The list goes on, and the cost of the ecosystem services we lost between 1997 and 2011 is estimated at US$4-20 trillion. Bio-diversity loss contributes to the emergence of diseases that pass from animals to humans, resulting in pandemics. It's a good argument!

The Accidental Countryside: Hidden Havens for Britain's Wildlife: Stephen Moss, Guardian Faber, 2020, ISBN 978-1-78335-164-0

Many of us will be aware of the extraordinary way in which peregrine falcons have colonised Britain's cities, taking advantage of cliff-like buildings on which to build their nests and scope their prey – the ubiquitous pigeons which fly beneath them. Stephen Moss begins his story with a description of this charismatic creature, the fastest bird on earth, perched on the roof of Tate Modern ready to stoop at 180 miles an hour and pluck some unfortunate bird out of the air.

Having drawn us in with this dramatic moment, the author goes on to describe how wildlife has colonised our ruined buildings, our wastelands, our flooded quarries, sewage farms, abandoned collieries and gravel pits. In the Shetland Islands, tiny migrating storm petrels head for the island of Mousa by night, and nest in the gap between the two stone skins of Mousa Broch, a dual-skinned Iron Age fort, safe from the predatory black-backed and herring gulls. Hadrian's Wall is a haven for wildlife, sheltering early migrants such as wheatear and ring ouzel: house martins breed amongst the stones, and peregrines and ravens nest along the wall itself. Old Churchyards are hugely important for lichens, and have been studied by lichenologists more than any other habitat.

The coming of the railways allowed plants and animals to expand their range along the newly opened corridors. It also opened the countryside to enthusiastic Victorian botanists , bird watchers and collectors of fungi, who established natural history societies all over the country, and introduced the new idea of nature conservation. Abandoned rail corridors have become walking and cycling trails, and railway tracks are now home to 1600 species of plants as well as scarce butterflies such as the heath fritillary.

Railway lines still in use by trains also provide wildlife corridors. In 2018 The Guardian reported that Network Rail was removing tens of thousands of mature trees in order to prevent the slowing of trains by leaf fall: not only that, but they were chopping them down in spring and summer, when birds were breeding in them. That contravened the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act that protects breeding birds against disturbance, and the Government stopped the programme. But, as the author demonstrates throughout the book, our accidental countryside is by and large unprotected from development.

This matters. As demonstrated by Chris Packham and other environmentalists, our National Parks and our agricultural land tend to be wildlife deserts, nibbled by sheep or managed for grouse shooting, or in the case of arable land, often ploughed, compressed by heavy machinery, burnt and poisoned until the soil life that is the basis of our hierarchy of wild creatures disappears, and so do they. In the UK there is more wildlife outside National Parks than inside them, in forgotten corners safe – for a while – from the attention of people. To quote Stephen Moss 'It's these messy corners that need to be prioritised, not the green swathes of agri-desert that make up so much of our lowland countryside'.

And sometimes, they are prioritised, in urban corners such as the Gunnersbury Triangle in Chiswick, protected by local action in 1982, in Woodberry Wetlands at Stoke Newington reservoir, or in Samphire Hoe, deliberately created by the dumping of spoil from the building of the Channel Tunnel and now a wildlife friendly destination for 100,000 visitors a year. Our own gardens, managed sustainably, are hugely important refuges for wildlife. So are many of our city parks and green spaces, gradually being rewilded due both to budget cuts and to a new ecological awareness among parks management teams. We are exhorted to 'bring about that change, by telling councillors and park keepers that we want more butterflies and skylarks, and fewer sterile deserts'.

Enshrined in the new Environment Bill is the notion of Biodiversity Net Gain (inexplicably delayed until 2024), whereby developers will be required to examine the wildlife found on the site and ensure that the completed development provides an increase in habitats. The Government estimates that this will save an estimated 9,644 hectares of habitats a year, and create an additional 5,428 hectares. Environmentalists have been working with developers for many years, encouraging simple changes that make room for wildlife. The author describes a housing estate outside Peterborough, the Hamptons, build in the 1990s on a brownfield site, a collection of nineteenth century clay pits. Working alongside local conservation organisations, the developer integrated these man-made wetlands into their plans and made a series of village communities where people could live close to nature and wildlife. Kingsbrook, just outside Aylesbury, is an example of a wildlife-friendly development achieved in partnership with the RSPB.

These things can happen, and this book is well worth reading as an introduction to the new actions and debates taking place around conservation in the last decade or so, as well as being a fascinating summary of our accidental wildlife havens.

Climate Justice: a Man-Made Problem with a Feminist Solution, Mary Robinson, Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2019, ISBN 9781408888438

We all know about Climate Change and the consequences of increasing global temperatures. We also know that the effects of climate change are not spread equally around the globe. What we may not know is the impact this is having on the daily lives of many people now and which, indeed, threatens their very survival. In her capacity as UN Special Envoy on Climate Change, Mary Robinson has met the people living this reality and in this book she recounts their stories.
From Alaska to Australia, Kenya to Kiribati, the narrative is one of adapting to each crisis as it comes along. In Alaska whole communities are having to relocate because ground that was permanently frozen is now soggy and unable to support schools and houses.
Kiribati is an island kingdom straddling both the Equator and International Date Line. Most of the islands are less than 6 feet above sea level and, with current predictions of rising sea levels, plans are being made to move the entire country.

Against this bleak picture Mary Robinson tells of her encounters with (mostly) women of extraordinary resourcefulness and determination who are making a significant difference at grassroots level. Constance Okollet describes how in September 2007 flash flooding swept away houses, crops, animals and people in her village of Asinget, Uganda. Realising that deforestation was one cause of the flooding Constance set about persuading her local council to fund tree planting. She is now a regular speaker at the annual UN climate meetings.
The M'bororo tribes of Chad are nomadic herders with a finely attuned knowledge of weather patterns handed down through generations. With Lake Chad only a tenth of its former size and water holes drying up, many herders are having to abandon their traditional lifestyle. In a highly patriarchal society women find it hard to be heard but Hindou was determined to speak up for her tribe. She is now a climate activist and supporter of women's rights and indigenous groups.
These women have not been content to wait for international aid to help them; they have educated, organised, pressurised and "got on with the job".

This book brings together three vital threads:
-climate change is now
-it is a crisis affecting all of humanity

- immediate action is needed

But underlying this is the fact that climate change is unjust. The people suffering the most have not caused the problem and they are often least well equipped to deal with it. But there are remarkable people, many of them women, making a huge difference at local, national and international level. Mary Robinson celebrates these people in her book..

(Review by Kim Sudell, Climate Ambassador, Cornwall Federation of Wis).

The Future we Choose by Christiana Figueres and Tom Rivett-Carnec (2020). Manilla, ISBN 9781786580375

Ms Figueres is an internationally recognised leader on global climate change, who led the difficult international discussions which resulted in the Paris Climate Agreement of 2015. Tom Rivett-Carnac helped to mobilise support for the agreement.

The authors set out alternative scenarios: the one where we fail to make the necessary changes and by 2050 endure a changed world spiralling out of control, or the one where the world is able to breathe, the air is fresh, nature is thriving, and entire populations have a better quality of life. They maintain that we still have time to choose between these opposing scenarios, and they set out ten actions we can take to achieve the one we want.

Pippa Stilwell, WI Climate Ambassador, Cornwall Federation of WI's, 07 July 2021