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Is wildlife protection enough?

Before we can consider how to conserve our wildlife we need to understand its natural history – actually more than that, we need to understand its history as well as natural history. A recent book on woodland illustrates this¹. Oliver Rackham is a Cambridge academic who combines plant ecology with history and archaeology. He has given us many insights into our countryside and our woods in particular. Some are counter-intuitive. It is popularly believed, for instance, that our ancient oak woods are the last living remnants of the primeval wildwood that was eroded away by agriculture and industry. Quite wrong; our ancient woodlands are nothing like the primeval wildwood. The latter perhaps dominated by elm or lime probably contained tall mature trees which competed for light. The broad spreading oaks with hazel under-stories that we now cherish were created centuries ago because we selected the trees that were better adapted for fuel and timber. Far from destroying woodland, industry actually preserved it. Two of the most wooded counties in England are Sussex and Hertfordshire - they now have lots of woods because they needed it for charcoal furnaces in Sussex and as a source fuel close to London in Hertfordshire.

Another book by Roger Lovegrove describes the history of the control of our wildlife² – mostly unearthed from early parish records. We learn that systematic, and indeed state subsidized, predator and pest control goes back a long time. It was well established in Tudor times using bounty systems. This was before the agricultural revolution and most land enclosure. It certainly pre-dated Victorian game shooting interests which now shoulder much of the blame for the disappearance of some species.

To me this implies that if we want to retain the wildlife we inherited from our ancestors, like them we must be prepared to manage it too. Protection is not enough. For most of my career conservation agencies have thought mostly in terms of wildlife protection. The European Birds Directive (1979) was entirely about protection, so was the subsequent Wildlife & Countryside Act (1981). In spite of this birds and other wildlife have continued to decline. This is acknowledged in a recent report from the Environmental Audit Committee³.

We can do better if we think about managing species and habitats rather protecting them. Let me give you an example: moorland birds in the English uplands. On our Pennine moors there are thousands of pairs breeding curlew and lapwing, and hundreds of pairs of golden plover and dunlin. Most of this upland has been designated as Special Protection Area for birds under EU law. But this protection did not bring about this abundance of wading birds – they were there before. A research project we have just completed in Northumberland shows us what really made it happen. On experimental areas we employed grouse moor gamekeepers to keep down the numbers of crows and foxes – the key predators of these upland birds and on these areas the breeding success was three times what it was on the areas without gamekeepers.

Some 74% of our upland Special Protection Areas are run as grouse moors and there are 147 gamekeepers employed to control and predators. So, the biggest threat to these upland birds then is not weakening or removing the legal protection – it would be removing the gamekeepers.

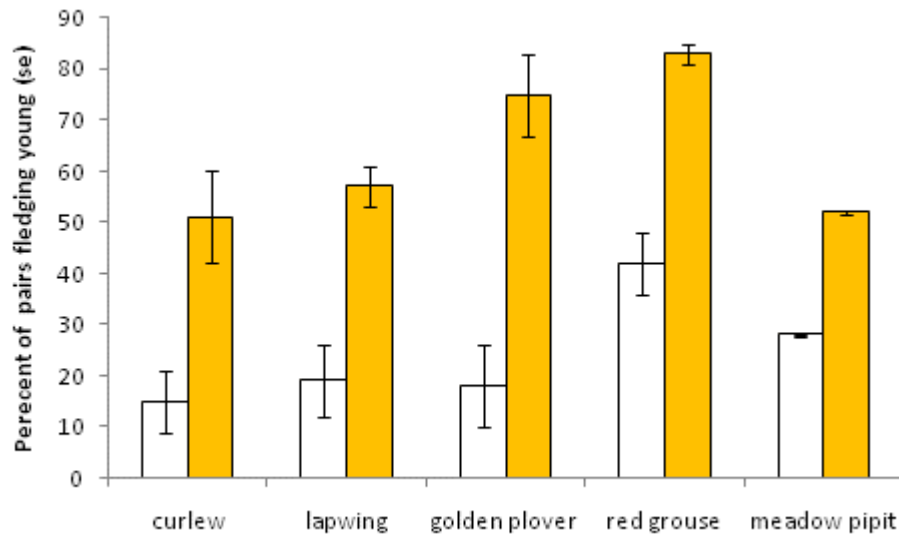


Figure: *The percentage moorland birds that successfully fledged young on experimental plots where some predators were controlled (yellow) compared to plots where they were not. [Data from Fletcher et al – unpublished].*

Quite a lot of the protection we have given animals in the past has really done nothing to improve their conservation at all. The red squirrel, water vole and crayfish continue to decline in spite of protection. In some cases it may have even made matters worse - I think we might have fewer problems with badgers if we were more willing to manage their numbers. This does not mean we should abandon protection and have an open season. It means that, like most wildlife, badgers should enjoy general protection but their numbers could be managed locally according to an agreed plan.

The Environmental Audit Committee report speaks of protecting biodiversity. In this context what is meant by protection is rather vague. A bit like saying we need to protect freedom. It does not tell you what should and should not be allowed to do. In the case of protecting upland biodiversity we think it includes killing foxes and crows.

The audit committee report endorses a new ecosystems approach to conservation. This is good as long as we understand what it means in the English context. As Oliver Rackham tells us our ecosystems are largely man-made and determined by land-use. We will not abandon farming in order to create a primeval ecosystem. We need to acknowledge that we can only restore biodiversity in the context of economic land-use. This will mean continued, and perhaps more, human intervention - not less.

References:

1. Rackham, O. (2006) *Woodlands*. New Naturalist Series, Collins.
2. Lovegrove, R (2007) *Silent fields*. Oxford University Press.
3. House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee (2008) *Halting biodiversity Loss*. 13th report of session 2007-08.