
Iolo Williams: Welsh Wildlife, Past Present and Future

An interview with the conservationist, broadcaster and RWT Patron

Can you paint a picture of your own childhood growing up with nature?

I was very lucky to grow up in the small village of Llanwddyn, near Lake Vyrnwy, an area very rich in wildlife. I was out of doors in all weathers looking for birds' nests, fishing, finding snakes, orchids, Hen Harriers and Grouse. There were countless Yellowhammers and always Cuckoos calling. It was genuinely idyllic and it's no surprise that I ended up making a career with wildlife.

The idea of shifting baseline syndrome is important when considering wildlife, what would your grandfather have remembered, do you think?

We used to visit my taid in Caernarfon regularly and he had many tales. Lapwings were ten-a-penny and he used to take the first clutch of eggs to eat and then leave the second clutch alone. There were hay meadows everywhere and Corncrakes were so common- up to four or five in a field. They would make such a racket on warm summer nights sleep was impossible. My taid used to send dogs into the field to keep the Corncrakes quiet for 20 minutes so that they could get to sleep. The rivers were full of large trout and salmon. The Corncrakes were already gone when I was a boy but even then, when I went fishing, I could bring home 6 or 7 trout in one night. Now, you would have to fish for a week to catch that many.

What species would you draw our attention to that were common and widespread in the past but which are scarce or extinct in Wales now?

Farmland birds. When I was a boy, Curlew and Lapwings were still widespread and there were breeding Redshanks and Snipe. The hay meadows were filled with Yellowhammers and Linnets. When I was fishing, I would love to hear the plop! of Water Voles and this would be every night. They are fast disappearing too. There have been huge changes.

The problem is not just the decline in the number of species is it? There is the question of abundance.

Oh yes. We've got a photo of me as kid standing in the lane. In the background on telephone wires are about 50 Swallows and House Martins gathered before flying off to Africa. It was nothing special back then but now, seeing a dozen together is out of the ordinary. Many a time on a long trip in the car, we would stop and I was sent out to wipe down the windscreen because there were so many moths and other insects smearing it. That would never happen now.

What is the most pressing challenge to wildlife in Wales?

Farming. I'm not pointing the finger at farmers though. It's the present system of payments and market forces which drive the improvement of agriculture to produce more and



more -usually to the detriment of wildlife. In places, you see farms as large as ranches and I'm very worried by the spread of intensive poultry and pig units and the pollution they cause. Farmers have to be competitive and this favours the high inputs and intensive approaches to farming but this is all based on an artificial system. We don't want to end up with the high input, low quality approach of US agriculture. It's a massive hurdle and it can't continue but we have a massive opportunity now because of Brexit.

What do you think should be in the Welsh Agriculture Bill?

Hats off to our farmers, they produce food of high quality but they should also be rewarded for looking after wildlife. Instead of empty green fields everywhere, perhaps one in twenty-five could be a hay meadow. We could have sacrificial areas to allow scrub and wetland to develop. Not on every farm, of course, but some farmers are already doing this and we need to use them as examples of excellence to spread the word.

Do you think it is possible to create a system of sustainable land management for both communities and wildlife?

Yes, very much so. Here in Wales, we have lots of land and the luxury of being able to use it wisely. But at the moment, because grants promote bigger and bigger farms, families are being lost from the land. The Welsh language is rooted in these communities and how many folk now have Welsh as their first language? Grants should be directed at the smaller farms to sustain them in farming in a bio-diverse way sympathetic to the environment. This will create additional jobs for communities – like drystone walling, hedge planting and hedge laying.

Looking after wildlife and earning a decent living go hand in hand for farming communities. I know a farm with a wonderful herd of traditional Herefords and hay fields and it is better for wildlife than most nature reserves and they make a bloody good living too! A young couple on one

farm near Bala have brought hedgerows back and are using Welsh Blacks to graze the upland areas of their farm which is bringing back breeding Golden Plover. Curlews have returned and have attempted breeding. It's a joy to see people like this who respect and love the countryside.

Do you see any signs here in Wales, that politicians understand environmental problems and have the will to make meaningful change?

I think in Westminster we have the worst government for wildlife for a long time. The present system pumps money in and it's the multinational companies making fertilisers and all the chemicals for insecticides, fungicides etc that benefit. Politicians promote and sustain this. It's an old boy network, just like in the grouse moors debate. That's why little changes.

Three things need to happen before we see real change. First, politicians need to be persuaded by our case for change. Second, they need the political will, the political balls, to see it through. Third, we need to waste less and produce less food not more. The amount that is wasted by the food industry, consumers, *all of us* is criminal and it's got to stop.

A few years ago, at the Curlew Conference in Builth, you called for the various groups concerned with land management and conservation to put aside long-standing animosities to work together to reverse their drastic decline. Are there any signs this is happening?

No, in fact apart from a few examples such as in the Shropshire hills, landowners and conservationists are even more divided and, generally, the spread of extremist views on social media is part of the problem. During my childhood, Curlews were common and widespread, now they are a very scarce breeding bird in Wales. There is no doubt that habitat loss is the driving force behind the decline but recent research on the Shropshire/Montgomeryshire border shows that as a result of predation, mostly by species whose numbers have been artificially increased by the way we manage the land, no young are being produced. This means that in the short term, if we are to hold on to our breeding Curlew, legal predator control may have to be part of the solution. It's a difficult concept for many conservationists.

We can't leave a discussion of the present without asking you if you can give us signs of optimism - what wildlife successes have there been in recent years?

There's been a few. The spread of Egrets into so many places in Wales and breeding Goosanders on our rivers - as a boy, I found the first recorded nest in 1975! - and, of course, the restoration of the Red Kite population. But these are minor gains in comparison to what we have lost and what we are losing.

Rewilding has to some extent become a controversial word and the Wildlife Trusts like to talk about natural regeneration and letting go of

nature. To what extent do you think wilder farming methods, rather than wholesale rewilding, will be key to restoring biodiversity?

I hate that word but farming with a view to biodiversity and sympathetic to the environment does involve the growth of scattered woodlands in the uplands, the spread of Birch and Rowan in areas like the Cambrians and the Brecon Beacons. Our population of Hen Harriers is quite healthy at 45-50 pairs. The main problem is that they are shot if they wander to the Northern England grouse moors, but if grazing pressure in the uplands was eased their numbers could double and other species would benefit too. The restoration of the natural processes of the uplands would help to ease flooding and promote carbon capture.

The National Parks in the UK are receiving growing criticism for their policies which have seen their lands become some of the least biodiverse habitats in the UK. Do you think they could be reinvigorated with a new priority on wildlife rather than grazing, forestry and tourism?

The Parks are not addressing the issue of biodiversity at all. They are not helping wildlife or local people. There are not enough jobs for local people, who have to move away and there are too many 2nd homes. This is a massive problem and the Welsh language is dying as a result.

You are known as a very keen supporter of the plan to reintroduce beavers in Wales, what other species would be on your list for reintroduction?

Beavers would add so much to the Welsh landscape. I can't believe the level of opposition there is to them; we're not talking about wolves; I could understand that. I would love to see the Golden Eagle reintroduced. We had a single bird here for over 13 years and farmers were delighted to have it around. The Eagle Reintroduction Wales organisation is researching the feasibility of this - whether there would be enough prey to sustain a population. In Scotland, they predate Mountain Hares, young deer and grouse but in a more natural environment, their diet is more catholic - they will even eat corvids and small Foxes and Badgers. Local landowners would have to get on side but that needn't be a problem if there is adequate compensation for the occasional lamb that is taken. If they were back as a breeding bird in Wales in my life-time I would die a happy man.

Are you optimistic about the way young people have demanded real change in the face of the climate emergency and are you at all sympathetic to Extinction Rebellion?

I am delighted to see the younger generation so concerned - on marches, on social media and taking action to raise awareness and put pressure on politicians. It's past generations and my generation that have made a mess of things. I won't be alive to see the catastrophic results of the massive changes we have brought about but my two boys will. More power to their elbow. Their actions are understandable with this crop of politicians. I think Greta Thunberg is an amazing individual. She has achieved so much and has to put up with such venom and bile from some people.