

Green, unpleasant land

The ambivalence and indolence in British attitudes to nature

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Mark Cocker

OUR PLACE

Can we save Britain's wildlife before it is too late?
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Mark Cocker begins this book with the statement that he has no capacity for polemic. This may come as a surprise to people who know him, but he is in fact making a good literary distinction here. *Our Place* is not a diatribe and it contains no lazy soap-box rhetoric. It is a work of serious and sustained advocacy – passionate and committed, to be sure, but all the more powerful because Cocker develops his main arguments with such forensic care that if you accept his premisses you may find it difficult to resist his conclusions.

He is addressing what he sees as a central paradox in the UK's national life. We seem to care very deeply about nature in this country. If you take the membership of our environmental organizations as an index, we have never cared more: the National Trust now has over 5 million members, the RSPB some 1.2 million, the Wildlife Trusts 800,000, Friends of the Earth 300,000, and so on through the many smaller organizations focused on particular conservation efforts – the Woodland Trust, British Trust for Ornithology, Butterfly Conservation, Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, Plantlife, Hawk and Owl Trust, and Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society – over 8 million memberships in all (compared with a combined membership of the main political parties in Britain of just over 700,000). As a proportion of the population, this makes Britain by far the most nature-conscious country in Europe. No wonder we sing of our “green and pleasant land”.

And yet, and yet . . . our wildlife is declining on a huge scale, and we are witnessing the diminution and destruction of what has indeed been a priceless natural and cultural inheritance. In the past fifty years we have lost over half of it, mostly by our own agency through our farming and forestry policies and through urban development. That is a staggering statistic and should be a deeply shocking one. To give specific examples, over 40 million breeding birds have vanished from our countryside, including many much-loved species deeply embedded in our national culture: skylarks, cuckoos, lapwings and curlews are all down nationally by over 60 per cent, nightingales and grey partridges by over 90 per cent and turtle doves by 96 per cent (so now almost extinct); and the figures for flowers, butterflies, moths and other insects are as bad or worse – these latter suffering particularly from the indiscriminate use of pesticides, which have destroyed the food chain from the bottom upwards. We have also lost about half of our ancient woodlands and well over 90 per cent (4 million acres) of our flowering meadows in the past hundred years. The whole intricate and interconnected network of life has been rent asunder. There are, to be sure, a few cases of species that are flourishing and increasing their ranges (wood pigeons, buzzards and little egrets, for example), but the overall trends are undeniably and disastrously downwards. And in an international set of scientific comparisons of the Biological Intactness Index (BII), measuring the completeness of the

biodiversity in 218 countries, Britain comes twenty-eighth from bottom. Yet the public at large seems scarcely to have noticed that the green and pleasant land they happily celebrate is in fact becoming denatured and lifeless.

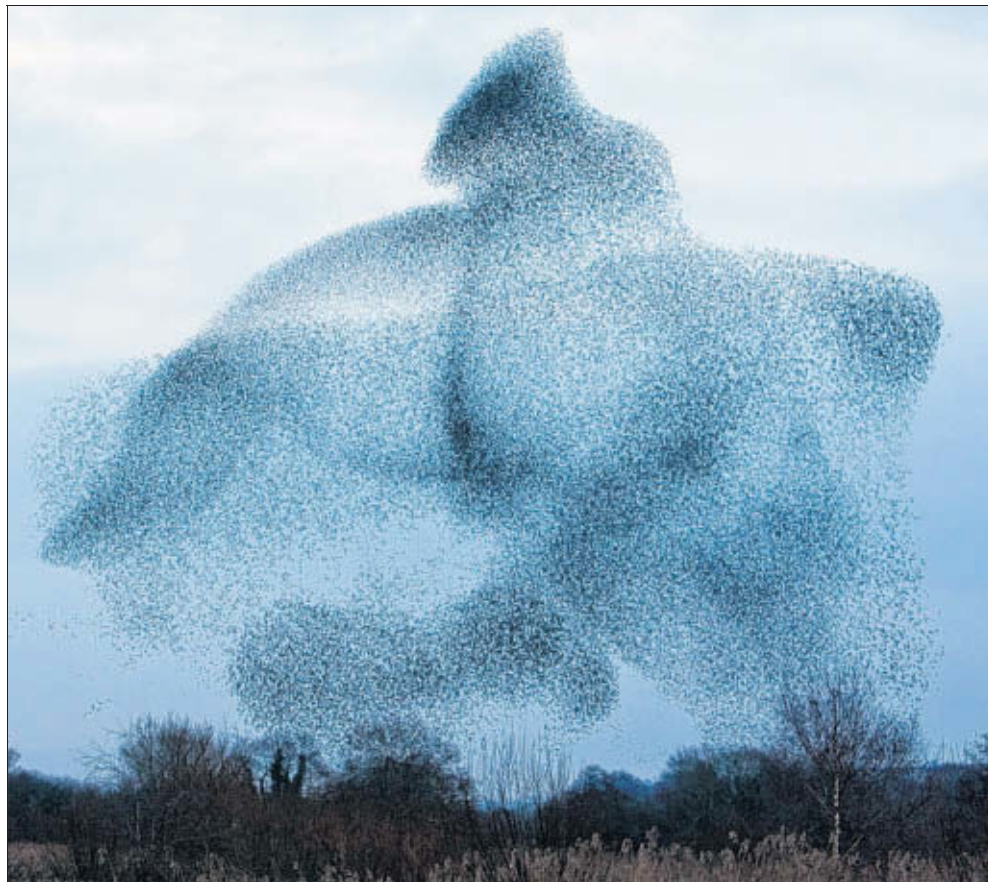
Cocker investigates this paradox in a personal journey of discovery through the British countryside. He looks in particular at six places that embody the changing fortunes and the conservation history of our landscapes – from the coastal strip of north Norfolk, through the flat fens and farmland round the Wash, to the Peak District and Upper Teesdale, and thence to the vast bogs of the Flow Country in northern Scotland. Through these encounters he traces the institutional histories of all the major environmental organizations

National Trust, the ladies of Didsbury whose protests against the feather trade supplying female millinery led to the foundation of the RSPB, naturalists like Max Nicholson and Derek Ratcliffe, and contemporary activists like George Monbiot and Mark Avery. Along the way, we hear of the triumphs and failures of celebrated environmental campaigns such as the Mass Trespass on Kinder Scout (1932, won), the battles to save the flora at Cow Green (1964–7, lost) and the nightingales at Lodge Hill (ongoing).

The places themselves are brilliantly evoked. Cocker's life, he explains, has been largely driven by his responses to landscape. Whereas most people choose a course in deciding which university to apply to, he chose a landscape and ended up in north Norfolk, where he has lived ever since. He is now one of Britain's foremost “nature writers”, and the many dimensions of that ill-defined genre are crucially relevant to his project here. The book is at once an autobiographical narrative of discovery; a lyrical celebration of wildlife encounters; a deep grieving for our disappearing fauna and flora, shot through with alter-

In his final chapter Cocker disentangles some of these elements, in a conclusion that one feels is a summation not just of this book but of his whole career to date as a writer-naturalist. He propounds what he calls “Ten Truths” (though they are in fact a mixture of general observations, injunctions and suggestions), which come to us not borne on tablets of stone but as a set of much more nuanced, interlocking recommendations. One should resist the temptation to jump ahead in the book and read them in advance of the chapters they draw on lest they seem rather bald, but they jointly constitute a very powerful analysis of the state we are now in, how we got here and what can be done. The “Truths” begin with a succinct summary of just how bad things are, and a sober prediction that they will get worse. There are then some practical recommendations: a rallying cry to the conservation organizations to combine into a National Environmentalists' Union, equivalent to the NFU, to represent their case – our case – more effectively at the highest political levels; a call for the simplification of the multiple designations of places of special natural importance, often made even more confusing through shorthand acronyms like SSSI, AONB, SPA, SCA and NNR; a related plea for the wider use of common rather than scientific names, as has been achieved in the case of fungi and moths, to make more publicly accessible the organisms currently hidden by specialists “behind a Latin wall”; and a vigorous attack on the psychology of obsessive tidiness and control in our countryside, public spaces and gardens, which has been exercised through a battery of deadly chemical interventions and the drastic clearing of “unruly” vegetation and all other manifestations of nature's creative disorder, reaching its symbolic apogee in the viral spread of plastic grass.

There are two other recommendations, however, that go to the spiritual heart of the book. First, Cocker argues, we need to develop forms of ecological imagination that match the complexities of the physical ecology of the natural world, to see ourselves *within* nature and to accept both the privileges and responsibilities that flow from that. Secondly, we should challenge the dominant roles that science and economics have played in reducing the valuation of nature to the narrower criteria they deploy professionally. A Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) is not only or primarily of *scientific* interest, for example, it is a cultural resource too. Diversity in nature has been a primary driver of human creativity in literature, poetry, music and the visual arts. But, as Cocker ironically remarks, we should beware of assuming that the current upsurge in nature writing is itself evidence of a new awakening – it may be a compensatory, nostalgic reaction in the face of the remorseless diminution in the source that sustained it. “Ultimately”, Cocker says, “without the thing itself, without the underlying diversity, these responses will be like the light from a dead star: they will persist for a while, maybe even decades, but they will travel onwards into the darkness that will eventually consume them.”



A murmuration of starlings, Somerset

that have sought to protect these very different places. He describes in some detail how the remit and perceived mission of each has evolved, the differences in the profiles of their typical memberships, and their petty rivalries. Some of these internal histories are documented at considerable length, but the successes and failures of such bodies in finding a common purpose are an important part of the case he is building. They are also a device for Cocker to introduce us to key players in his story, such as Octavia Hill, the founder of the

nating moods of despair, anger and occasional flashes of hope; and a historical study of the political, scientific and social contexts that help explain how our landscapes have come to be as they now are. These elements are fused in the writing, along with many apparent digressions and asides, in a way that gives the book a richly textured feel. The structure is not a linear one, but the argument advances on several fronts simultaneously and in more than one dimension, in a complex literary ecology matching his subject.