



Knepp Wildland Safari

Consultancy Trip

During the summer, our consultancy team at Maydencroft were fortunate enough to attend a guided tour of the much publicised Knepp Wildland Project. On a hot mid-summer afternoon, our team members with backgrounds in ecology, arboriculture, land management and forestry were introduced to the Knepp Wildlands in Hampshire, where there was plenty to feed the imagination and interest of everyone.

The Knepp Wildlands is situated on the 3,500 acre Knepp Castle Estate just South of Horsham in West Sussex. Since 2001, the landscape here has been in transition from a regime of intensive farming practices to a pioneering rewilding and river restoration project which uses grazing animals as the primary driver for habitat creation and management. The aim of the project is to demonstrate how a 'process-led' approach, whereby nature is given as much freedom as possible, can be a highly effective, financially viable method for conservation and ecological restoration, and one which can be replicated on a national scale by utilising arable land for natural capital and biodiversity net gain.

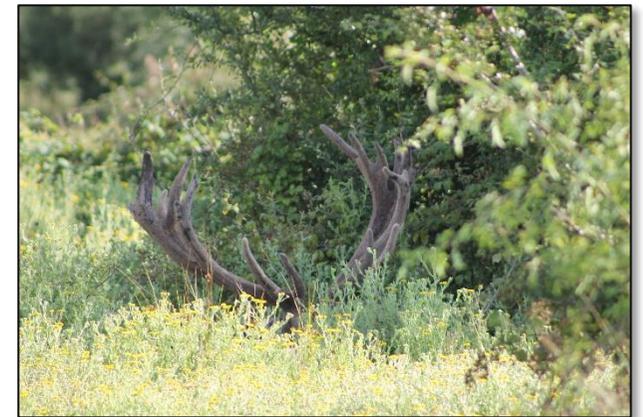


Now entering its 19th year the Wildlands is a mosaic of unimproved grassland, scrub and woodland, with the only resemblance of its agricultural past being the extensive network of species-rich hedgerows which once formed the field boundaries, and standalone veteran trees. Red deer, wild boar, longhorn cattle and Exmoor ponies roam freely throughout the landscape, and in the process of significant browsing and trampling, maintain a finely poised equilibrium between the various stages of succession, suppressing and interrupting vegetation growth. This creates natural clearings, much like the man-made glades and rides which we see across many woodlands today, and areas of low-lying shrubs and scrub, similar to what is achieved through coppicing practices. It is widely considered that this type of landscape draws parallels to our prehistoric natural environment, in which other large herbivores such as the aurochs, elk and bison would have had an identical role. The response of wildlife to these new dynamic habitats has been phenomenal, with common species multiplying as well as a number of rare species becoming established such as nightingales and turtle doves.



Binoculars and cameras in hand, we headed out into the wilderness in a rickety ex-military vehicle. Our team were fixated on the fantastic sightings the wildlands had to offer, and for a group of individuals with particular interests in reptiles, lepidoptera and birds among other species groups, there was very little scope for disappointment. Our first stop on the tour was a stunning veteran oak tree, which upon closer inspection, was brimming with invertebrate life. Most notable were the colonies of purple and white letter hairstreak, which were conveniently basking on the tree's lower branches, perhaps as a result of the intense heat. From here we followed a track down to a large, low-lying plateau of scattered scrub and grassland, and during our journey were treated to a sighting of a third elusive species of butterfly; just off the track to our left sat a magnificent purple emperor butterfly, proudly exhibiting herself on the outer branches of an oak tree.

The scrubland was awash with life, and we were staggered by the variety of birds meandering between the blackthorn and bramble thickets. It was a marvellous sight to see skylarks darting back and forth across the skyline, whilst in the backdrop the staggering antlers of a red deer buck could be seen penetrating the horizon in the afternoon sun. After stopping to take it all in, we were led deeper into the scrub to some discretely placed reptile refugia. Ecologists Alison Hood and John Salisbury were very enthused when carefully lifting these to reveal two large female grass snakes (which by nature did not hang around for a chat), and some healthy clusters of slow worms retreating into the desiccated ground.





As Maydencroft are heavily involved in conservation grazing, countryside stewardship schemes and habitat creation and management, we hoped that our visit to Knepp would expand our vision and fuel us with ideas for future projects, with many of our clients having already expressed a desire to conceptualise a less intensively managed, natural landscape. We were particularly keen to observe how the longhorn cattle operated in an open environment which incorporates scrub, grassland, deciduous woodland and riparian habitats, given that the breed is symbolic to Maydencroft and our centuries old tradition of cattle farming on the estate, accentuated by the fact that the longhorns also play a pivotal role in our own conservation projects. Head of Consultancy Matt Perry was overjoyed to see a healthy herd marching through the woodland scraping their impressive horns on trees.

Whilst perched on a viewing platform in the canopy of a tree, snacking on the homemade brownies provided by our host, we evaluated what we had learnt from our visit to the Wildlands; we all agreed that our eyes were opened to the significant importance that rewilding has to play not just in creating habitats in which wildlife can thrive, but also in providing the crucial linkages between the country's most important conservation areas such as SAC's and SSSI's. These designated sites are becoming increasingly isolated in Britain, and creating long-term buffers and corridors between them through rewilding is arguably of even greater importance than creating standalone sites with a wealth of endemic species to write headlines about. Furthermore, we came away with a burning desire to begin implementing rewilding principles within our future projects, and to maximise the potential of our glorious grazers by trialling them in a more open setting, where they can become the engine for the future of conservation.