

Chapter 8

Wildlife Conservation

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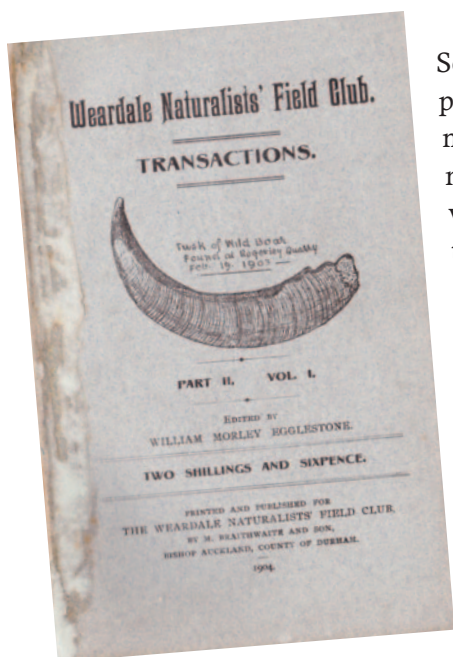


Curlew – the Northern Pennines are a refuge for this iconic species, in decline elsewhere © Enid Hoseason

Introduction

There is a lot in Weardale to be conserved — outstanding geology, important wildlife, built and social heritage in a living Dale that is a home and source of income for many. Today we take nature conservation granted: there are many organisations and individuals involved. Nature conservation is an industry in its own right, employing thousands of people, with very large budgets, if agricultural support from Countryside Stewardship and other schemes are included in the calculation. But that has not always been the case; today's nature conservation movement is largely a twentieth-century creation.

The Wildlife Trusts go back to 1912 and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) to 1889.



Some individuals and groups sought to protect wildlife before then but they would most likely have considered themselves as naturalists, not conservationists, fascinated with discovering, recording and classifying the natural world. Their close observations meant that when habitats and species began to disappear in certain localities, usually as a direct result of the actions of man, they noticed and, more importantly, some of them cared — the nature conservationist was born. And across the country in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Weardale included, some people began to worry about the state of the natural world.

Durham Wildlife Trust has some of the transactions of the Weardale Naturalists Field Club (established in 1896). One entry, reproduced on page 209, notes the Destruction of Wild Birds, and highlights a letter that appeared in local papers on 7th January 1902, with a copy sent to the secretary of the Weardale Naturalists Field Club. The letter, signed 'Ornithologist', draws attention to 'the wilful destruction and extermination of small birds' in Stanhope Dene. The author fears that 'If this is allowed to go on our small birds will soon be exterminated.' It seems that by 1902 nature conservation was on the public's agenda in Weardale.

This article is in stark contrast to the pattern of classic Victorian natural history, where rare birds observed in the area back to the 1870s were recorded, invariably including the name of the man who upon observing the rarity immediately shot it! Dotterel, Black Tern, Arctic skua and Quail all met the same fate. Thankfully, there is also an entry that is perhaps of greater significance

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saw in this country was killed by Mr. Crowthall, while we were shooting together on September 22nd, 1870; it rose from a hill stubble above Frosterley, in Wear-
dale, in the County of Durham." This bird was shot at White Kirkley, according to Mr. P. Wearmouth, whom I asked on May 14th, 1902. Mr. Wearmouth was in his 82nd year, and appeared to be able to recall all the particulars above-mentioned. He was game-keeper to Mr. G. E. J. Crowthall, and was present when the Quail was shot.

DESTRUCTION OF WILD BIRDS.

The following letter, signed by "Ornithologist," appeared in the local papers, January 7th, 1902, and a copy was sent to the secretary:—

Kindly allow me to draw the attention of the public and authorities at Stanhope Dene to the wilful destruction and extermination of small birds in that beautiful spot of Nature. I have been in the Dene occasionally recently, and have seen men with guns shooting crossbills, crested wrens, dippers, or any other that presented a shot. I myself saw into the teens of such beautiful and rare birds thus shot one day last week. If this is allowed to go on our small birds will soon be exterminated. And it is very prevalent not only in Stanhope Dene, but all round Stanhope. Herons, seagulls, woodcocks, kingfishers, pheasants, all have been shot recently, promiscuously and indiscriminately, mostly for the sake of shooting. Some of them found their way to bird preservers, but many of them are destroyed—starlings especially.

I am certain if the Dene Committee knew of the wholesale killing of our feathered songsters they would prohibit it at once. Besides, there is the danger to the public in having sportsmen shooting.

I can hardly call them sportsmen; they don't deserve that name. The wholesale destruction of our small birds in this wanton fashion demands immediate attention, and a stop put to it at once. It is to be hoped that the Naturalist Field Club will be on the alert and preserve as far as lies in their power the bird-life of the neighbourhood, the wanton slaughter of which calls for immediate action.

This matter was brought before the members of the Club on January 14th, and it was agreed to call the attention of the Dene Committee to this wanton destruction of rare birds, and also that the *Press* be notified with a view to assist in stopping this practice. One of the rules of the Club is "the protection of the characteristic birds of the country."

LORD BARNARD'S ESTATES.

The following is a copy of a leaflet distributed to the keepers on the above estates, a copy of which was sent by his lordship to the secretary.

MEMORANDUM OF INSTRUCTIONS TO GAMEKEEPERS, GAME-WATCHERS, WOODMEN, AND OTHERS EMPLOYED ON LORD BARNARD'S ESTATES.

Rare birds or animals (including Peregrine Falcons, larger Seagulls, Badgers, &c.) must never be destroyed without special instructions.

Owls of all kinds, Kestrels (or Windhoovers), Buzzards and smaller Seagulls must not on any account be destroyed.

Where rats, mice, voles, &c., are numerous, Weasels should be preserved. Pole Traps are forbidden.

Rady Castle.
February, 1900.

for nature conservation than Ornithologist's letter. It is a report of a leaflet distributed in February 1900 by the then Lord Barnard to employees on his estates, prohibiting killing, without special permission, of a wide range of wildlife, and names '*Peregrine Falcons, Larger Seagulls, Badgers*' as some of the '*rare birds or animals*' to be left unharmed unless instructed otherwise. Owls, kestrels, buzzards and '*smaller Seagulls*' received complete protection and '*must not on any account be destroyed*'. Interestingly the relationship between predator and prey is recognised, as weasels were to be preserved where '*rats, mice, voles &c., are numerous*'. This entry is particularly fascinating as it pre-empts the nature conservation legislation that began to enter the statute books during the twentieth century. There are lists of species with varying degrees of protection, as in today's Wildlife and Countryside Act and Habitats Regulations, and a prohibition on certain methods of control and killing of species (Lord Barnard's leaflet states that '*Pole traps are forbidden*'), again just as in today's Wildlife and Countryside Act.

Twentieth-century legislation and impact

As public interest in nature conservation grew, legislation followed, but Weardale and surrounding areas were slow to benefit. In 1912 Charles Rothschild founded The Society for the Promotion of Nature Reserves and set about compiling a list of places 'worthy of preservation' because of their wildlife value. By 1915 a list of 284 sites — the Rothschild Reserves — had been compiled. Widdybank Fell, in Teesdale, was one, and the only one in County Durham. Weardale and the middle section of the Wear valley were not listed.



The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, is often cited as the first nature conservation legislation in the UK, but the landscapes of Weardale and Teesdale weren't considered suitable, and it wasn't until the North Pennines Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) (a designation also created under the 1949 Act) came into being in 1988 that Weardale's landscape was designated and protected. But landscape is not necessarily nature. There are of course inter-relationships between the two, but preserving how a landscape looks and protecting it from development does not necessarily mean that it is rich in wildlife or that steps are being taken to conserve and restore wildlife. Thankfully, when the North Pennines AONB Partnership was created Weardale's landscape still had wildlife value and the Partnership is active in conserving and restoring that wildlife.

The 1949 legislation also enabled statutory protection for areas of land because of their importance for wildlife. Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) are the result — a designation also supported by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Areas that were already known and valued for their wildlife interest

Left: Low Barns Nature Reserve © Durham Wildlife Trust.
Right: peat restoration — taking a plug of peat to block a grip © North Pennines AONB Partnership

quickly benefited. Upper Teesdale was designated in 1951, but the Wear valley didn't see its first wildlife site designated as a SSSI until 1966, at Witton-le-Wear, now Durham Wildlife Trust's Low Barns Nature Reserve. The area's geology, a feature that SSSI status can also be applied to, had benefitted from designation earlier when Fairy Holes Cave was protected in 1961. Natural England is the government body responsible for SSSIs and their Designated Sites website and associated MAGIC web mapping can be used to find full details on the area's SSSI locations and designations. Investigation will show that a handful of locations were designated in the 1970s and 80s, but that it wasn't until the 1990s that large areas of upland habitat at Bollihope and above Stanhope received SSSI status.

Wildlife site designations are derived from European as well as UK law. Two major pieces of European Union legislation are relevant to Weardale. The first, Directive 79/409 on the Conservation of Wild Birds of 1979, replaced by the Birds Directive of 2009, provided for Special Protection Areas (SPA). The second, the Directive on the Conservation of Natural Habitats and of Wild Fauna and Flora of 1992 (known more simply as the Habitats Directive), created Special Areas of Conservation (SAC). The first protects an area of land because of its importance for birds and protection for the birds themselves. The second protects a range of habitats and some of the species that rely on them. These extra layers of protection are also tied up with SSSI status in UK law so the boundaries of the designations coincide. The North Pennine Moors, which includes some parts of Weardale, were designated as SPA in 2001 and SAC in 2005. The North

Pennine Dales Meadows, again with sites in Weardale, were designated in 2005.

So, by the end of the twentieth century nature conservation was

enshrined in law, nationally and internationally. Large parts of the Dale were now protected — and the result of all this effort? *The State of Nature* report published in 2019, the most authoritative and well researched study of the current status of UK wildlife, showed that since 1970, 41 per cent of species have decreased in abundance. Many other statistics can be quoted — the fact is that across the world wildlife is in decline and in Weardale the story is the same.

Does that mean that nature conservation does not work? No, it means that we are not doing enough. *The State of Nature* report highlights the increased effort of charities and volunteers, with expenditure up 26 per cent since 2010 and volunteers contributing 40 per cent more time since 2000. But public sector spending has fallen by 42 per cent since 2008. The pressures on wildlife continue, with human activity destroying habitats and placing greater demands on our landscape and natural resources. Climate change is adding to that pressure, so it is no surprise that wildlife populations are failing. If the threat is increasing, we need to do more just to maintain the status quo. If we do less the result is all too easy to predict.



Otter with Salmon at Low Barns, November 2012 © David Raymond

Success and Solutions

The science of ecology has established the intricacies and inter-relationships of the natural world and the principles that can be used to conserve and then restore wildlife populations. And the benefits to human society are now being recognised,

The Wear valley is a good place to look at how nature conservation works and how species can be brought back from the brink of extinction.

The photograph on page 215 of the Otter and Salmon, taken on the River Wear in 2012, tells the proverbial 1,000 words — something that would have been thought impossible just 30 years ago. Why? There were no otters, not only on the Wear but just about everywhere in England. The Otter was persecuted and hunted by man for centuries but managed to survive as part of our native fauna, unlike our other native aquatic mammal, the Beaver. But twentieth-century industrial and agricultural pollution, particularly the pesticides dieldrin and DDT destroyed the ecology of rivers and the food chain that the Otter, as the top predator, relied upon. Together with toxins in fish building up in the Otter's tissues, this led to a collapse of Otter populations. They were probably extinct in County Durham in the 1980s, although a small population in Cumbria may have occasionally crossed over into the head waters of the Wear.

Salmon suffered a similar fate and were rare in the Wear in the second half of the twentieth century due to the chronic pollution of the river from agricultural pesticides, industrial pollution, coal washings, raw sewage and ship building in the estuary. Britain was

known as the dirty man of Europe for a good reason — wildlife and the wider environment suffered. However, action was taken and change occurred. Some of that was deliberate, with both domestic and European legislation forcing industry to reduce discharges to the environment. Other improvements were bi-products of political decisions; closure of much of the region's heavy industry reduced pollution into our rivers and the privatisation of the water industry created new regulatory bodies and investment. The water quality in the Wear and its tributaries improved, the ecosystem began to restore itself — Salmon, and other fish, began to return. In 1965 the rod catch of Salmon on the Wear was 2; in 2013 it was 1,731. The future of the Atlantic Salmon is of course far from certain for a range of reasons, but those figures show that, if we create the correct conditions, nature can restore itself.

With the river rejuvenated, the relic Otter population began to expand. 1978 was a great year, Otter hunting was banned as were some of the worst pesticides, and the slow road to recovery started, supported by the nature conservation movement, with the Wildlife Trusts at the forefront of Otter conservation. Durham Wildlife Trust played an active part, supported by volunteers, with projects to survey and record the presence of Otters as they returned to County Durham, moving down the River Wear and spreading east. That process was supported by the creation of improved habitats on the river banks, including otter holts. Today, if you are very lucky, you can see both the Otter and the Salmon on the Wear. Chapter 7 describes the impact of improvements in water quality on aquatic wildlife.



Brown Hare © G M Heeley



Lapwings © Ian Hoseason



Melancholy Thistle © Steve Gater



Dragonfly © Ian Hoseason

The future

Unprecedented must be the word of 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on society. Unprecedented also applies to nature conservation today. Nature as we know it and see around us every day is facing an unprecedented threat from climate change. Brexit has the potential to create unprecedented change in the agricultural sector and in a country where approximately 75 per cent of the land is farmed, that will have significant implications for wildlife. There is also an unprecedented opportunity to make things better; so can we?

At the parochial level, it is possible today to see Otter and Salmon in Weardale but only a few decades before it was not. Public interest in the plight of the natural world pushed legislation to change, habitat destruction was reversed and with further public engagement and effort species returned. That model can be applied again and be used to generate more widespread change. Numerous organisations with an environmental remit, from the United Nations down, continue to warn of the crisis facing the natural world. The 2020 UN Convention on Biological Diversity announced that none of the global targets set in 2010 had been met. Nature continues to decline. Yet in Britain at the height of the Covid lockdown nature was the good news story, with wildlife sightings in towns and cities being celebrated. Public support, it seems, is there.

Legislation is coming to bring about change. An Environment Bill is making progress, albeit slowly, through Parliament. It promises legally binding targets on a range of environmental issues, including nature's

recovery, with a new watchdog to make sure targets are met. There is great hope in the nature conservation sector that the requirements for biodiversity net gain from the planning system and mapping out of a Nature Recovery Network can be turning points. There are also links to the Agriculture Bill and legislation to replace agricultural subsidies currently derived from the European Union. The proposal is for a shift to public money for public goods, with farmers receiving payments for delivering environmental benefits to society, such as wildlife schemes and natural flood management.

These changes are welcome, but there is complexity and contradiction. Net gain from development will only happen if there is development in the first place and in the natural world there is usually a lag between a new habitat being created and it reaching its maximum potential to support wildlife. Net gain needs time. Next to where a development takes place will not always be the best place to deliver net gain, so a community may lose its local wildlife with people elsewhere gaining. However, all too often at present it seems that the loss happens and no one benefits. Changes to the planning system will draw developers and nature conservation bodies together — one has the need and the money to create and manage habitat and the other has the skills and knowledge to do that, but often no money. Conflicts of interest will have to be managed or there could be a loss of public confidence and support for wildlife charities.

Farmers and landowners know that change is coming and organisations such as the National Farmers Union and CLA that represent farming and rural interests seem generally supportive of the direction of travel.

Perhaps unsurprisingly as one sector that will definitely be impacted by biodiversity loss and climate changes is agriculture; greater environmental sustainability makes sense for their businesses as well as the planet.

The Basic Payment Scheme, which made payments based on owning and managing land will be phased out by 2028. These payments have underpinned the profitability of many farm businesses, particularly livestock farming in upland areas. New national arrangements for farm subsidies are being trialled – the Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS). ELMS is likely to start in 2024, but as yet farmers face uncertainty and don't have the full information they need to make long-term decisions. As a result implications for wildlife are also uncertain, but there is certainly an opportunity for greater collaboration between all the interested parties to develop schemes that were better than what went before.

How will these changes impact in Weardale? No one knows. Will the Dale benefit from development elsewhere, as a place where net gain can be delivered more easily (as land is more available and less expensive)? Or, as there is less demand for local development will there be less net gain? Will farm management change, delivering greater public goods whilst still delivering high quality local produce and keeping farmers in business? Or will future international trade deals mean that our current farming systems are economically unviable? In that scenario, what will happen? The land will still be owned and the owner will still probably need to generate income. Will there be reforestation, rewilding and eco-tourism, or agricultural intensification with increased fertiliser and pesticide use to try and make farming pay? Will there be a change in

thinking on how land is managed for wildlife and action taken to conserve species at particular risk, such as raptors? How do you provide conservation measures that satisfy the often conflicting views of local people and visitors? How do you stop illegal persecution of the Hen Harrier and other iconic birds? We can't answer these questions, yet, but what the conservationist, farmer and landowner can do today is see where they might work together to find the answers.

Climate change adds further uncertainty. All ecosystems change over time and species shift in responses to changes in habitats. Our fragmented landscape makes that shift a challenge for many species as they inhabit isolated patches of habitat not connected to the next patch. If climate change speeds up environmental change many species will become extinct. Other species may replace them, but that process will not favour the specialists in their discrete niche — diversity will be lost. Could the drive for conifer plantations in an attempt to sequester carbon override the value society places on the conservation of species-rich grasslands or our upland landscape? Could the ecological crisis be made worse in attempts to address climate change? Will suitable UK legislation maintain improvements in water quality and how will actions to reduce flood risk further downstream impact in Weardale?

It is easy to be pessimistic, it is the route of least resistance, but there are grounds for optimism. In 1902 'Ornithologist' feared that there would soon be no birds left in Stanhope Dene, but there are still birds in Stanhope Dene. Society didn't let it happen and recent events have shown just how important wildlife still is to society. The Wildlife Trusts are campaigning for the return of 30 per cent of all land and sea to nature by

2030 — making the UK a wilder place with nature to be proud of, not one of the world's most nature-depleted places as it currently is. The heathlands, bogs, meadows, woodlands and wetlands of the Wear valley, with the river at their heart, are the perfect place to make that happen. It is vital to secure the active partnership of all wildlife and conservation bodies, folk who own land, live, work and learn in Weardale and who visit the Dale if it is to be an even better place in the future.

Postscript - Historic Environment

Conservation of historic landscapes in Weardale can be, and has been, achieved through government agri-environment schemes and many historic buildings and core areas of our historic villages have received statutory protection over the years. This has taken the form of statutory Listed Building and Scheduled Monument designation (overseen by organisations like Historic England and the local authority Conservation Teams), and the development of local authority-designated Conservation Areas.

Within the North Pennines AONB there are currently 16 Conservation Areas (8 in Weardale), 183 Scheduled Monuments and 968 Listed Buildings of various grades. Conservation Areas, defined in the 1967 Civic Amenities Act as areas 'of special architectural or historic interest, the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance' are central to the conservation and preservation of the historic ambience of the main settlements in the Dale. These are located in Wolsingham, Frosterley, Stanhope, Eastgate, Westgate, Ireshopeburn Newhouse and West Blackdene, East Blackdene and Cowshill. They were not designed

to stop development, but to facilitate its management in a positive and proactive way, so as to benefit current and future generations. Additional planning controls, relating to the demolition of buildings, and other minor developments apply in Conservation Areas and the preservation of their character is now a material consideration in the planning process.

The primary legislation governing listed buildings and conservation areas is the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990. If the Secretary of State (for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport) considers a building to be of special architectural or historic interest it will be included in a list of such buildings maintained by Historic England (available online through the National Heritage List for England). Applications for new list entries, or for the removal or amendment of existing entries, are made to Historic England who will investigate the application and make recommendations to the Secretary of State for a final decision.

‘Scheduling’ gives statutory protection to nationally important archaeological sites. The presumption is that they will be maintained for future generations in much the same state as they are today. ‘Scheduling’ derives its authority from the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act (1979) and decisions on ‘national importance’ are guided by ‘Principles of Selection’ laid down by the Secretary of State. The whole process, and the subsequent protection of designated monuments, is managed by Historic England. Important aspects of the Dale’s history, especially those relating to past mining and quarrying activities have benefitted from the processes and actions set out above.

The North Pennines AONB Partnership has also been instrumental in Historic Environment and broader,

cultural, conservation. Its Management Plan realises that the long-term future of the region's natural and cultural heritage lies in local people caring about, and caring for, it. It promotes an holistic view of conservation, seeking to integrate natural and heritage conservation activities, and it outlines a series of historic environment related actions that guide its work in this area. These include: identification, conservation and enhancement of historic landscapes (field boundaries, woodland and wood pasture, parklands, mining landscapes etc), use of planning legislation to avoid the piecemeal erosion of the historic character of buildings and settlements, encouragement of greater community participation in the identification and conservation of 'special' aspects of the area's historic environment and use of agri-environment schemes to conserve and enhance archaeological features and the built heritage.

The Plan also acknowledges the importance of conserving and understanding the area's cultural, 'intangible', heritage, ie. its folklore, stories, music, literature and art and clearly in this realm, whilst also preserving material aspects of the Dale's heritage and history, key locations like the Killhope and Weardale Museums have central roles to play.

All of the above are legislative and procedural mechanisms for the preservation and conservation of the historic environment. None would be effective without popular support and involvement in their application. Ultimately it is the actions of the people of Weardale, over many centuries, that have shaped the landscape that we cherish today. The pride of those living and working in this special place for their surroundings is the best guarantee that the historic environment will continue to be cared for in the future.