

## Who owns the countryside?

Do you suppose we'll ever get wildlife conservation a little higher up the political agenda? Every politician who ever spoke a platitude claims to be in favour of it – it's just that none of them ever really take it on. They're frightened they'll look trivial. People (you know – people with votes) might think they believed that birds were more important than human beings.

It's an odd world, when a matter like the future of the planet is regarded as trivial, but we have to accept that this is where we are right now. When things get tricky, conservation is always the first thing to go. For years, people in conservation have been trying to explain that our resources are limited, yet that concept has almost no meaning at all in political life. We carry on as if we had another country or another planet to spare.

But I have noticed a small change in recent months. It may not be significant in the end, but right now there is a subtle shift in public apprehension going on: and there are a few tender green shoots of public concern about wildlife conservation. And when there's enough public concern, the politicians have to act. At least, that's what's supposed to happen in a democracy.

And I see this small shift in a strange alliance, not something I would ever have expected. It's an alliance between Hen Harriers and bees.

So there I was, in a taxi that was taking me from Edinburgh airport to my hotel. The driver asked me why I was there; I explained that the following day I was to give the keynote speech to the AGM of the Bumblebee Conservation Trust. 'What's happened to the bees?' A sudden energy in his voice. 'Where have they all gone? I'm pleased you're doing it, you know, because it's something that really worries me.' The taxi driver has spoken: that infallible interpreter of all public moods and values, as every journalist in a hurry well knows.

But it's not just Edinburgh taxi drivers who worry about bees. A YouGov poll last year found that of all the environmental

issues – and Lord knows there are enough of them – the one that concerns people most is the loss of bees. Not climate change, not planning and urban sprawl, not agriculture, not overfishing, not pollution, not rainforest destruction: bees.

There's a wonderful line in the Ted Hughes poem *Swifts*: 'They're back – which means the globe's still working.' The thing about bees is that they're disappearing: and that is a very clear indication that the globe is really *not* working as it should.

And that's something that reacts on us at a pretty deep level. We don't need to know everything about the mechanics of life on earth to understand that without pollinators, life as we know it can't continue. The shortage of bees sends us a clear message that there really is something amiss in the way that we are running the planet. This shaft of insecurity is something that we can build on, something that could convince politicians that there really is some kind of public concern about environmental issues: that this is something people are beginning to worry about. And that they want to see something done about it.

It's a radical shift in public perception: wildlife conservation is traditionally seen as a favour, something that we humans dole out to the wild world out of the goodness of our hearts. Yes, let the Giant Panda survive: we like pandas and the idea of them still munching their way through the bamboo forest cheers us up immensely. And aren't we a wonderful dominant species for letting them do it?

But it's easy to see that if we kill off the bees, we are waging war on ourselves: that we are spoiling our planet, that we are doing dreadful things to our own home. Suddenly conservation is no longer a favour but something to do with the survival of every species on the planet, our own included. We conservationists have been saying this sort of thing for years: but it seems that the silencing of the bees' buzz is more eloquent than any words.

So let's move on to Hen Harriers. I don't have to explain this issue to the readers of *British Birds*: but the point here is that the attitude of the wider public to this systematic persecution is changing. There has been a slow build-up of concern that has spread far beyond birders. And it's not concern as in anxiety. It's concern as in anger. And that seems to be a damn good thing.

The conservation movement has been too polite for too long. No criticism of the RSPB or the Wildlife Trusts: it's essential that we have mainstream NGOs that are mature, responsible, cautious, and capable of taking part in the debate at a sober and serious level. But these organisations aren't enough. We need voices out there saying that this matters, that this is something that affects us all: and that's worth making a fuss about. The persecution of Hen Harriers is about a much deeper question than a few deaths: it's about who owns the countryside. Concern for Hen Harriers is a rejection of the view that the countryside – or for that matter the country – is a place where a few very powerful people can do exactly what they like.

It's not about gamekeepers, it's about landowners. It's not about birds, it's about power. And the widening ripples of anger about this issue are spreading out beyond mainstream conservation organisations, and beyond birders and other people who have an obvious interest in the health of the countryside. Why should rich people be able to take part in an activity made possible by systematic law-breaking? It's like saying that everyone in the cabinet can drive drunk, or that everyone with an income above a million pounds a year is entitled to a little rape.

So this combination of anger and concern – harriers and bees – is moving in on the national consciousness in a kind of pincer movement. At its base is the feeling that the countryside is not something for specialists. Birds are not just for birders. You don't have to be able to tell a ringtail from a Red-flanked Bluetail to feel concern about the future of our wild places. It's something that matters to us all.

It's a bit like *The Great British*

*Bake Off*. Before this programme caught the imagination of so many people, it was widely accepted that making fancy cakes and baking your own bread was old hat, something people no longer bothered with unless they were specialists: cooking buffs, baking nuts, generally pretty unusual people.

But now everybody seems to be baking. Every bookshop is full of baking books, every kitchen store full of more and more recondite baking equipment. Baking has become mainstream. What Paul Hollywood and Mary Berry have done for baking, so Hen Harriers and bees are beginning to do for the wild world: making it plain that this is something that everyone can be a part of.

Either way, it's about life, and bread, after all, is a symbol of life in most western cultures. The difference between home baking and the wild world is that there is an alternative. You don't *have* to bake your own bread, even though it's rewarding to do so. You can go out and buy a loaf.

There is no alternative to the wild world. You can't go to the Co-op and buy a moor and a couple of Hen Harriers, or a flower-rich meadow and a few boxes of bees. If we don't care for the wild world, we lose it. And this is a truth that's beginning to spread. So we must keep on telling that truth, and retelling it. In the belief that people are beginning to listen.

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