

# LOST WORLD

How tidying up our countryside has created a fatal mess for our wildlife. By Ben Macdonald

Today, we stand on the brink of the first mass ornithological extinction in recent times. In spite of the glamorous return of raptors to our skies, the trumpeting of Cranes over wild Broadland meres, or the ghostly march of egrets to colonise our coasts, the countryside is sick, and much of it is dying.

Birds familiar to generations, like the Cuckoo or the Starling, may one day be the preserve only of poems or photos, as mythical as the Wolves and Elk that once frequented these shores.

It has not always been this way. Today, if we look to the meadows of eastern Poland, or the valleys of the Picos de Europa, we see not only the last refuges of a pre-industrial world, but glimpse how our countryside might once have looked. Here, even villages remain under glorious attack from the natural world.

In a landscape free from the need to tidy up, gardens merge with meadows, meadows with orchards, orchards with woodlands. Across these networked landscapes, as yet untouched by pesticides, throng the buzzing lifelines of once common British birds – insects in abundance.

What we might term ‘corridors’ are, in these places, simply ramshackle expressions of nature, where habitats, and their associated species, blend seamlessly together. In such places, an inventory of garden birds bears startling resemblance to the accounts of many an early Victorian naturalist – Wrynecks in the ant-filled orchards; shrikes and Corn Crakes in the buzzing meadows. It is a sight both beautiful, for its existence, and painful, for its loss from modern Europe. In these realms, however, remains the rare opportunity to value, and examine, the landscapes and species once familiar to Britain.

Many of today’s declines – those of Cuckoo or Willow Tit, for example – seemingly date back only to the 1970s. Others, like Corn Crake, go

back much further. Yet all their stories form part of an industrial narrative, one that takes us back to the very start of that revolution. If we are to reverse these species’ fortunes, we must first understand the long view.

Drawing arbitrary lines in the sands of history isn’t always helpful, but we might do worse than 1830. This was when the naturalist William MacGillivray wrote, of the Corn Crake, that “few birds are more common, in so much that there is hardly a patch of yellow iris, or meadowsweet, or nettle or dock, or other tall weed, in which a crake or two might not be found”.

Yet even then, as the first railroads were laid across a thronging countryside, the decline of the Wryneck was first observed. In some ways, we might regard this cryptic woodpecker as the first casualty of our modern landscape. Its very existence militates against the march of modern agriculture, the use of insecticides and the incessant need of modern Britain to tidy up, slowly removing the non-woodland trees and undisturbed ground that provide it with its two essential needs – an abundance of cavities and a high density of accessible ant larvae.

As we might still see at the scruffy edge of a Polish petrol station, the Wryneck was once an afterthought of rural man, a bird so common as to be termed the Cuckoo’s mate. Even today, as scientist Murielle Mermod wrote recently in *Ibis*, the international bird science journal, “the persistence of Wrynecks is possible... as long as the essential resources (access to ground-dwelling ants and breeding cavities) are present”.

Yet even with such simple needs, our breeding Wrynecks were doomed. And, though they are 40 years gone, their UK extinction retains enormous significance, for it anticipates and explains the declines of many more species.

Photos of the early Victorian landscape do not exist. Fortunately, the likes of Constable and



The situation Ben Macdonald describes will concern every birdwatcher. Habitat destruction is a huge threat to many of our bird species, and while reserves can slow declines, or preserve isolated populations temporarily, what’s really needed is joined-up thinking. The landscape linking those conservation islands and corridors needs to be transformed.

This is where we can all play a part. One of the themes that emerged from our recent Best Bird Garden competition was that a little ‘mess’ goes a long way – leaving patches to grow unhindered, with wildflowers, weeds and the insects that go with them, pays an immediate dividend in attracting and supporting new bird populations. You can see the same if you’re on holiday in Spain or Portugal this summer – species such as Corn Bunting, fast declining here, thrive in the sort of scrubby, weedy areas that would bring the clean-up crews running over here.

Now we’re challenging you to come up with ideas on spreading that philosophy. It might be as simple as pressuring your local council to leave verges, hedges and open spaces uncut wherever and whenever safety allows, or planting a scattering of non-woodland trees, but it will certainly involve resisting the urge to tidy up and make our landscape uniform, and sterile.

We’ll be looking at the best ideas in depth, showing you how to put them into practice, and trying to turn the tide of decline.

■ Send us your thoughts by email or message by using the addresses on page 3.



Wryneck is extinct as a breeding bird in Britain – and birds as familiar as Starling could follow if we don’t act, says Ben Macdonald



Constable’s famous ‘The Hay-Wain’, painted in 1821, shows the landscape of an older Britain. Note the range of vegetation types, the profusion of non-woodland trees and, most importantly, the ‘untamed’ character of the landscape as a whole

Gainsborough give us a far more valuable and fully-coloured resource. Their paintings are not only things of enormous beauty, but they show us how similar our green and pleasant land once was to the scruffy, varied wilderness of Poland’s Biebrza or France’s Basses Vallées Angevines.

They show us a rampant predominance of untamed land – vast tracts of soil, marsh, wet plains and meadows, broken only by a profusion of non-woodland trees such as Apple, Cherry or Elm. Lawns, fields and other monocultures had yet to be conceived.

Looking at them, we can almost hear the Wrynecks complaining harshly from the gardens of nature-ridden cottages. Less nostalgically, we might see that such terms as ‘farmland’ and ‘woodland’ are rendered redundant when describing such a landscape. Here, cavities and ant-rich open land are not the feature of ‘orchards’, or ‘woodland’ – they simply characterise an entire landscape.

It is little wonder, therefore, that birds such as the Wryneck were once afterthoughts in such a

place. Diversity of structure – the proximity of A to B; of cavities to soft soil, for example – was once the status quo. Today, such heterogeneity has all but gone. Only in our largest and most untidied realms does it remain. The cryptic Wryneck may have left us, but it gave us the clues we needed, and have often ignored.

What both Victorian paintings and contemporary Polish landscapes show are states of semi-natural ‘mess’, in which man’s economic or cultural reluctance to tidy or tame the countryside results in the proximity of diverse habitat types, each benefiting the other.

The landscapes painted by Constable are retained in every ancient corner of Europe, just as they are banished from every modern one. In such a context, thinking of Britain as an isolated conservation entity makes little sense. We are a post-industrial nation, sharing our landscape with most of western Europe. Likewise, the Wryneck has not shunned our shores in particular, but industrial Europe as a whole. It is simply a casualty of the two key changes that

have taken place in the last 200 years – a loss of diverse structure, and a loss of food.

Such loss of structure is widely remarked upon in conservation. Yet, even today, there is remarkable ambivalence as to whether England’s meadows once truly brimmed with insects. A crippling lack of food, driving the starvation of many nestlings, has become an elephant in the conversation room – mentioned only in passing.

## Not just birds

Yet, we need look no further than the collections and accounts of Victorian lepidopterists, Britain’s long list of recent insect extinctions, or the fact that many of our lost species, such as Red-backed Shrike, remain common in the insect-rich meadows of an older Europe, to realise that a lack of food forms the single most important difference between the ecosystems of pre and post industrial Britain.

On this note, we might see the Wryneck or Red-backed Shrike as early heralds of our countryside’s dwindling diet. Each has ➔

“In some ways, we might regard this cryptic woodpecker as the first casualty of our modern landscape”

relatively demanding needs: the Wryneck, a profusion of accessible ant larvae, and the shrike, a pleasant pestilence of large-winged beetles, grasshoppers and Lepidoptera.

With the removal of flower-rich meadows, the ploughing of undisturbed soil, the devastating use of insecticides, and the growth of monocultures, such diets were the first to suffer. In 1898, the naturalist SG Castle Rustell, visiting the New Forest, wrote that “butterflies, alarmed by my approach, arose in immense numbers to take refuge in the trees above. They were so thick that I could hardly see ahead and indeed resembled a fall of brown leaves.”

If a Victorian naturalist could catch thousands of butterflies in a day, it seems absurdly obvious that shrikes found little difficulty in doing the same. Today, our tidied, poisoned landscape largely precludes their plentiful needs.

Such reductions in food were, before World War Two, tied largely to losses of vegetation structure: the grubbing of hay-meadows, fallow grasslands or wood pasture. These undoubtedly stunted the staggering abundance of insect life, yet even after such structural changes, the late 1960s retained large insect-feeders, like Cuckoos and Whinchats, in relative abundance.

In the last 40 years, however, chemical warfare has dealt their diets an even greater blow. Today, many of our soils are too bleached to support even floral diversity, let alone a multitude of insects. And such trends form a one-way journey. Even if we rebuild the structures suitable for insect life – fallow grasslands, or floral meadows – our insect populations fall far below the threshold for recovery. The thought that clouds of fritillaries or grasshoppers could reappear in a friendlier landscape, like a Crane to a wetland, is absurd. The only places to see such sights are, like Salisbury Plain, those that have never lost them in the first place.

The results of our insect desert are everywhere. Whinchats now choose the relative safety of northern uplands; areas too vertiginous for their grassland to be tidied, or their insect prey sprayed into oblivion. In the south, they have retreated largely to Salisbury Plain, secured by the military before the march of modern agriculture could poison its grasslands.

Densities of Cuckoos now tend towards areas where neither tidying nor chemicals can touch the plenitude of insects their voracious chicks demand. Their increased reliance on wetlands hints at the insect desert that lies beyond the larvae factory of a phragmites reedbed. Yet in the wood-pastures of Speyside or the New Forest – landscape-level habitats, where diverse structures and unsprayed insect populations abound – Cuckoos remain common. It is tempting to look to migration routes for answers, yet those on our doorstep might be more compelling, if not more uncomfortable.

### Not out of the woods yet

With the landscape under such attack, can we, in turn, talk of a ‘woodland’ bird as a separate conservation entity, when most of our woods form tiny oases within a chemical monoculture?

No bird illustrates this illusion better than the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker. This species’ core requirement is a corridor of dead wood, rich enough in varied surface insects to sustain a year-round diet. Its vast territories necessitate a



Zywoko, or ‘Stork’s village’, in Poland – note the connection of flower meadows and non-woodland trees with a high diversity of vegetation types

Hans Winkler (Alamy)

“**In some ways, we might regard this cryptic woodpecker as the first casualty of our modern landscape.**”

networked landscape, with food levels maintained across the whole. In this light, it becomes clear why the New Forest, whose ancient ‘inclosures’ merge with rich, natural heathland and wood pasture, or Herefordshire, with its seamless blend of orchards, Alder streams and small, connected copses, remain so attractive to this vanishing sprite. In contrast, the Forest of Dean, built of same-aged oak and Beech blocks – intersected with lifeless conifers – has become a desert for this tiny bird.

A recent study has shown that 48% of young Lesser Spots starve to death in the nest. In analysing this shocking figure, we must first remove this diminutive bird from its ‘woodland’ box. Like the Wryneck or the shrike, the Lesser Spot does not ‘think’ in terms of homogenous habitats. Its survival demands a profusion of accessible insects across large and diverse corridors of soft and rotting timber. Yet if we observe our woodlands from the air, we see how few of them now flourish in a traditional landscape, where non-woodland trees, swamps and meadows merge with forest, connecting a population of surface-dwelling insect life.

The decline of our countryside stops at no frontier. Woodland and farmland become meaningless distinctions if both suffer from the same diseases of homogeneity and starvation. Older foresters often tell me of ‘caterpillar drip’, a relict characteristic of many woodlands, even until the 1970s. Here, in late summer, caterpillars would be heard falling softly through the canopy. Yet today, many of our woodlands have become, in reality, monocultures of their own.

With its meadows, wood pasture or understorey ripped out, its surrounding fields poisoned, an oak woodland will become as barren as a barley field, devoid of the insect

diversity needed to support anything but the least selective generalists.

As such declines continue, species die out in order of their conservatism. Snipe, once common across our meadows, shun vast tracts of now-drained land for carefully-managed grasslands. Willow Tit, once common in damp or scruffy field margins, retreats into wet Birch-woods, where its nesting stumps cannot be tidied away. And as our sterilised landscapes preclude more and more life, our list of generalists continues to decrease.

Who, for example, would ever have thought the Starling a conservative species? Yet, as its permanent pastures disappear, and with them its nestling diet of beetles, millipedes and cutworms, we must not be as complacent as those who took the Wryneck for granted. Soon, it will become a specialist. Then, it will be gone.

We must look to the landscapes of the past for the solutions of the future. We must conserve not the isolated reedbed, but the few connected and untidied landscapes that remain. The New Forest, Cairngorms, Dartmoor and the croftlands of Tiree, offer us visions for how structural diversity, across large tracts of land, can work.

Yet starvation, unlike structure, is not so readily visible. Silently, it pervades our countryside, killing chicks and stunting productivity. Landscapes cannot rebuild without their food supplies, and we cannot stand by and passively wait for insect populations to rebuild themselves. Whether we look to the Starling, the Cuckoo or the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, their complex needs were once both simple and shared: a connected, varied and untidied countryside alive with insect prey. Unless we can recreate this vision, the vanishing species of this generation will most certainly be the myths of the next. **EW**



Enil Frenay (Alamy)

Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers need a large territory full of insect-rich wood – a reduction in this has led to a fall in population