

Rob Yorke Nature Notebook

The delights of planting your very own wood

I'm enthralled by how the wood I planted a few years ago near my house in the Black Mountains is unfolding. Growth spurts of randomly planted trees give it a wonderfully shambolic air: rowan saplings bend with bunches of berries, squat sessile oaks sprout from their bases, red dead-nettles provide pollen for bees, juicy purple bird cherries appear and goldfinch-attracting thistles compete with beech while hoverflies hang in the lee of the Scots pine.

Earlier this year, a male tree pipit displayed overhead — filling the air with song, he alighted on a sweet chestnut. He delighted me but failed to attract a companion. Maybe fox tracks in the grass frighten pipits from this vestige of woodland.

Fragmented pockets of habitat do little for wildlife. Populations of marsh tits are declining because they cannot bring themselves to fly across open terrain in search of mates. I've sought to connect my wood to its surroundings by taking advantage of tree packs from Coed Cadw (woodlandtrust.org.uk) to plant a thick hedgerow interspersed with my own aspen and whitebeam for a pale, leaf-fluttering effect. Nature adapts fast. Making room for the new trees, I used a chainsaw to remove the overshadowing branches, and later discovered that a redstart had reared its young in a hollow bough I had left wedged against the fence.

Transylvanian trek

In Romania, on a family holiday travelling with donkeys through the countryside, nature is abundant. Riches abound for those who forage for mushrooms, raspberries and bilberries among the native norway spruce and silver fir. With goshawks and crested tits flitting across the tree tops, our slow progress mirrored the way the land has been farmed for centuries. The air is filled with the sound of the heat-fuelled wings of wild bees and the chafing legs of crickets. Sharp-eyed red-backed shrikes impale them on thorn trees for later consumption. We trek through searing heat across Transylvanian herb-rich hay meadows. Birch saplings seek to reclaim the land every year — where farmers waste or forget, nature gains. There has been little intensification in the name of agricultural efficiency. Rural communities subsist on small plots shared with vipers, butterflies and the potato-destroying Colorado beetle.

It's a paradox that every piece of grassland, however steep, is regularly cut by scythes to feed pigs, chickens and cows, which are kept in pens to prevent them from muddying the tiny fields. After passing down shaded wet lanes, full of vivid yellow-bellied toads, we ascend over a hot heathery ridge to be confronted by two large, aggressive dogs.

Crying wolf

Romanian shepherd dogs are bred to keep wolves at bay. The country is home to about 15 per cent of Europe's wolves and, although they avoid contact with humans (preying on deer and wild boar), they shadow the large sheep flocks being grazed in the hills over summer. Livestock losses are low, albeit sometimes locally significant, but the culture of fear around these opportunistic carnivores underpins ancient superstitions, such as binding the blades of scissors (mirroring wolf jaws) to stop attacks on animals. Staying with a family in Margau, a village east of the Apuseni Mountains, we were told about wolves coming down to the edge of the village during the winter. The attitudes of the sheep farmers have been formed over generations of coexistence and conflict as they live alongside the large predators.

Thousands of miles away in Washington State, technology makes these things easier to predict. Many of the wolf packs there have radio collars so farmers can track any potential interaction with their cattle. Funds set up by conservationists are available to pay for cowhands to ride with livestock to ward off wolves.

Shepherds and cattle farmers are not in fear of their lives from wolves but the threat to livelihoods from nature red in tooth and claw creates disputes with those who defend wolves.

This is explored in a fascinating book published by Cambridge University Press in May, *Conflicts in Conservation – Navigating towards Solutions* (part of Ecological Reviews), on building trust and engagement among human protagonists living alongside, and standing up for, wildlife.

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