Truly wild
Brecon Beacons

Inconvenient trunk

Gimme shelter

Wild streams and wild birds (with apologies to the Rolling Stones)

ROB YORKE

The sun beat down mercilessly as I travelled light, with rucksack and rod, high up in the Brecon Beacons. So light, in fact, that I had forgotten my fly reel, but the main thing I remember about that day was the unpleasant sunstroke. There wasn't a single sliver of shade to the upland stream and I had to hunker down behind a rock to get out of the sun, mopping my brow with sphagnum moss. Earlier in the day, a single red grouse exploded from a thinning area of heather. The sheep – far and few they may have been – had left nothing for bird nor fish; no habitat, no shrub, no cover – a landscape of short grass and parched rock. In Scotland, parts of the uplands are devoid of trees due to overgrazing by red deer and in southern England, browsing from roe and muntjac is affecting low shrub habitat for birds.

Putting aside the impact of grazing stock, we also like things neat. Habitat trimmed and tidy. Convenient. Pleasing to the eye.

Immaculate farms sell well at auction, gardeners surreptitiously apply moss killer to lawns; vegetable growers pull competitive weeds within hours of emergence; motorway verges are tightly shorn; fisheries mown around reedless lakes or banks of

chalkstreams; pheasant shoots clear areas for sewelling lines to flush birds and magazines sell well with a front cover depicting the familiar, smooth mounds of the Lake District.

Admit it, we've all waded into a stream to snap off an errant branch hanging over the best lie in the pool to return later for some flawless casting action. Another school of thought has gone the opposite way – obsessed by removing grazing animals to let things revert to nature. 'Rewilding' the uplands might result in bracken and scrub taking over for years before eventually reverting to woodland. Then, perhaps, native wildlife is reintroduced – from wild boar

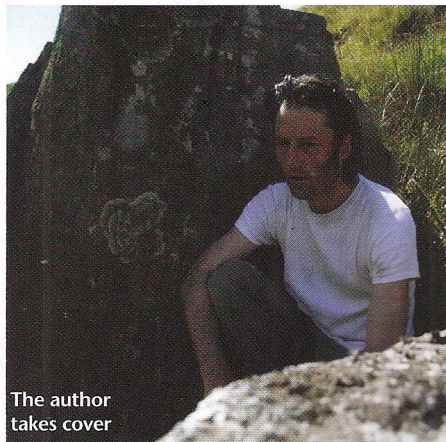
to wolves. The latter has had interesting impacts in Yellowstone Park in the US (three per cent of the UK's land area) with the mere sniff of a wolf causing deer to avoid potential death areas such as valley bottoms. This in turn allows habitat to grow back to the river bank which in turn improves fish stocks¹.

Many argue that the UK is too small an area to experiment with such 'trophic cascades' from the presence of apex predators. This passes the responsibility of management to humans – not just that of habitat, but how we pursue our sport and manage predators, where required.

There is a similarity with other quarry species. As salmonids are known as indicators of riverine health, gamebirds such as grey partridges, listed on the Farmland Bird Index, are referred to as barometers of farmland health.

Other game species, such as blackcock, have habitat requirements closely linked to changing practices of upland land management, forestry and farming.

The brown trout (*Salmo trutta*) is technically on the UK list of priority species, which states that it is *clearly threatened in some areas of the UK, particularly NW Scotland. Ancestral trout populations are under threat from habitat deterioration and stocking.*²

The author
takes cover



A spotted wild trout

“The sheep – far and few they may have been – had left nothing for bird nor fish; no habitat, no shrub, no cover – a landscape of short grass and parched rock.”

If you haven’t spotted it by now, the key word here is habitat.

There is a middle way between the extremes of letting nature take over and the overly neat management (neatification) of land. We get fixated by the perceived ‘quick fix’ of predator control – from buzzards preying on high density pheasant pens to cormorants feasting on over-stocked stew ponds, goosanders on salmon parr in washed-out streams³ and foxes nabbing lapwings in featureless fields.

I’ve not even delved into the pressures of modern agriculture on wildlife – from

loss of winter stubbles to soil runoff into watercourses – and there are, of course, huge discussions around these issues that involve tradeoffs and synergies. The hardest, and perhaps least interesting long-term work, is creating habitat that enables resilience within those wild species that we wish to hunt and conserve.

This is further complicated by the release of effectively ‘farmed’ sporting species to take the pressure off wild stocks, as well as ensuring that the rural sector is financially viable. But we must strike that balance between commercially positive and environmentally negative. The release of high densities of pheasants⁴ and trout⁵ can have an adverse impact on habitat and other wildlife, which must be moderated rather than just relying on reducing predators drawn to the feast.

On top of this, an increasingly urban-based, disengaged population relies on information from sensation-driven media which will increasingly pick up on poor practices, which in turn will force the issue of regulation on how some rural enterprises and fieldsports are undertaken. Yes, even fishing – if it’s perceived to impact on wider biodiversity and habitat.

Both wild grey partridges and brown trout need us to focus even more closely on providing habitat to enable these wild species to breed, sustain their young and survive the winter.⁶

There really is no choice in the matter if

we are to continue enjoying their presence in the countryside and to occasionally pursue them in the wild. 🐟

Rob Yorke is a chartered surveyor and rural commentator (and life member of the WTT). Discuss or debate with him at: [@blackgullry](https://twitter.com/blackgullry) or [robbyorke.plus.com](https://www.robbyorke.plus.com)

REFERENCES

- 1) www.yellowstonepark.com/2011/06/yellowstone-national-park-wolf-reintroduction-is-changing-the-face-of-the-greater-yellowstone-ecosystem
- 2) UK Biodiversity Action Plan Priority Species – *Salmo trutta* <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/speciespages/2580.pdf>
- 3) Feltham, M. J. (1995), Consumption of Atlantic salmon smolts and parr by goosanders: estimates from doubly-labelled water measurements of captive birds released on two Scottish rivers. *Journal of Fish Biology*, 46: 273–281.
- 4) Bicknell, J., Smart, J., Hoccom, D., Amar, A., Evans, A., Walton, P. Knott, J. 2010. Impacts of non-native gamebird release in the UK: a review. RSPB Research Report Number 40.
- 5) Cambray, J.A. (2003) The global impact of alien trout species—a review; with reference to their impact in South Africa. *African Journal of Aquatic Science*, Vol. 28 (1), 2003
- 6) Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust www.gwct.org.uk/research/species/fish/trout