

WILDLIFE IN THE VALE OF LORTON: LOOKING AHEAD

Written by Alan Gane

The natural world is, and always has been, in state of flux. Things change, often very, very slowly, but sometimes, especially when effected by Man, change may be rapid. Geological time is so vast that, for most of us, it is difficult to envisage. We have problems in comprehending the third Ice Age, when a wall of ice a mile or two thick crept southwards at a rate of a few hundred yards a year! Or the fact that even now India is pushing against Asia so hard that the Himalayas are being forced upwards by about 1cm a year! Locally, we have only to climb Black Crag and look down on Highnook Tarn to see signs of the gradual shrinkage of the tarn over the centuries.



On the other hand, there are changes which take place in less than a lifetime.

Global warming, for example, has resulted in many plants, such as primroses and snowdrops, flowering much earlier than in the past. Unfortunately, not everything reacts to temperature change in the same way, which can adversely affect vital synchronicity. For example, some birds have been accustomed to hatching their young just as there is an abundance of caterpillars on which to feed them. Global warming can affect birds and caterpillars to different degrees, with the result that the two might no longer coincide, thus robbing the young birds of their prime food supply.



As we all know, there has been a marked decline in a number of species of birds in recent years, but, in addition to this particular phenomenon, we are likely to see species in future which hitherto we would have expected to see only further south. The egret, the crane and even the parakeet are already established in southern England. Warming is also likely to affect our sub-alpines, such as starry saxifrage, mountain yellow saxifrage, alpine lady's mantle and others, which are already largely confined to the high fell.

Another change we have witnessed has been the great decline in the otter population, followed by its triumphant return from the brink, a near calamity caused, not by warming, but by pollution and the loss of habitat. A singularly beautiful and largely nocturnal wild animal which is seldom seen, except by those enthusiastic enough to watch and wait at appropriate spots at dusk or dawn.



Then we have Man's influence on our iconic red squirrel, by the singularly unfortunate importation of the grey, followed recently by a very determined, if rather late, attempt to control the situation in favour of the red. In addition, further south, we now have an established population of black squirrels, Genetically these are simply 'grey' squirrels with black coats, so do not offer an additional threat. Shall we be seeing them up here too? More than likely. We also have the fascinating red kite, to the north east and south of our immediate area and surely, in time, we shall see them here too.



If so, do not forget to "Beware of small linen", as Shakespeare put it, because kites are quite capable of stealing the odd handkerchief or other small item from the clothes line, with which to line the nest! A large rufus, highly agile bird, one of our finest 'swoopers', the red kite is certainly exciting to watch and is only a scavenger, so poses no threat to other wildlife.



Many changes are subtle and are noticed only when there is constant observation. There is, and always has been, strong competition for food, light, space; some are weaker than others and decline or even become extinct, while others advance.

Hopefully we have learnt some of the lessons of the past - we do not want another DDT or dieldrin. Hopefully we will (a) be very careful about what we introduce, both in the way of alien species (such as Indian balsam, Japanese knotweed, the grey squirrel, the mink) and in the way of chemicals (tested for efficacy but not for harmful side effects), (b) monitor the situation carefully so that (c) we can take strong and decisive action just as soon as a problem is arising. Overall, 'the Valley' may seem to be a snug and somewhat isolated oasis, but it is, of course, subject to all the outside influences, just like every where else. We must be alert to changes and, where possible minimise unfortunate effects and adapt to new conditions. Valley wildlife is a very special part of a very special place. Let's guard it well.

We are in fact very fortunate in having a number of highly active and proficient bodies each of which play a part to this end. [The Friends of the Lake District](#), the [Wildlife Trust](#), the [RSPB](#), the [National Park Authority](#), the [National Trust](#)...and others...each in their own way are guardians of our valley, and each warrants the support of all who are privileged to live or holiday here.

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