Changes in Wyre: a personal perspective

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I first visited the Wyre Forest in the mid- 1970s when a friend's father took us on a crayfish hunt in the Dowles Brook at Cooper's Mill. We caught (and released) plenty of White-clawed Crayfish and that afternoon turning stones in the dappled shallows, kindled a love affair with the forest which has persisted for over 50 years. Wyre soon became a regular haunt of mine and, inspired by Norman Hickin's books *The Natural History of an English Forest* and *Forest Refreshed*, summer days searching for Adders or High Brown Fritillaries sped by. Back then I didn't know that the snake would almost disappear and the butterfly become extinct, just as the Wood Warblers and Spotted Flycatchers that I took for granted would also decline sharply, along with Woodcock, Turtle Doves and Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers. What I could not have envisaged was the arrival of overflying Red Kites, the breeding of Goshawk, Mandarin and Firecrest, the domination of escaped Signal Crayfish and most recently, the advent of the Purple Emperor butterfly.

It's not only Wyre's wildlife that has changed dramatically since my first visit. Nowadays I can see where I'm going. During the "Dark Ages" of the 1970s when Forestry Commission conifers were maturing and rides closing in, a walk in many parts of Wyre could be a claustrophobic and disorientating experience, with few viewpoints and sunshine severely rationed by the canopy of overhead needles. This conifer-planting crusade lessened in the late 20th century, following a national recognition of the worth of ancient broad-leaved woodland in more than just monetary terms: it was also deemed important for its landscape, recreation and conservation value. Landscape and some wildlife has benefitted from this sea change. In 1997, in his book *England's National Nature Reserves*, Peter Marren described the Wyre Forest as a "text book example of woodland management for nature conservation" citing an "ambitious programme" to reinstate coppice...from thinning, ride and glade management, removal of conifers and Rhododendron, grazing and hay-cutting...research and education." To some extent these policies have been achieved, though naturalists would always like to see more. Species such as Wood Ants *Formica rufa* and the nationally scarce *Formica sanguinea* increased along the forest edges and Common Lizards found more basking spots. Plants such as Betony and Violets increased and targeted conservation was now possible to revive



Pearl-bordered Fritillary in a widened ride, Withybed Wood — Brett Westwood

the fortunes of butterflies such as the Pearl-bordered Fritillary. One long-running success story which underlines the dramatic change in Forestry Commission (now Forestry England, FE) policy is the focus on species such as the Dormouse. The monitoring of the colony in Ribbesford Woods during the process of removing conifers to restore ancient broad-leaved woodland (PAWS) is a shining example of dedication to long-term conservation.

But not all wildlife gained in this lighter, more open treescape. Tree Pipits and Adders (among others) continued to decline, the reasons for their demise more complex. Now in the 21st century, new shadows darken the landscape: finance and public pressure.

Back in 1945, the influential botanist Arthur Tansley remarked that the dominance of the market for planted softwoods meant that "there is no prospect that the economic motive alone can justify the maintenance of British oakwoods". The monetarisation of our most important and valuable broad-leaved woodlands has always been contentious, to the extent that in 2010 the government proposed selling off many of our public forests, eventually withdrawing in the face of huge opposition. But the problems of funding a National Nature Reserve like the Wyre Forest from the public purse remain and so in recent years it has been marketed, less as a wildlife-rich area than as a recreational resource, a perception that translates in the minds of most of its visitors as a place to go biking, jogging or walking the dog. For many public woods, especially forestry plantations, this is not a problem, but in Wyre's ancient

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Mountain bike erosion in a stream valley near Cooper's Mill Brett Westwood

woodscape with its unique assemblage of species, this designation sits uneasily.

The current populist view of nature as a public health support system, boosted considerably by the Covid restrictions, has created a political climate in which the need to protect wildlife, even in the most important places, has become subservient to human well-being. We are urged to jog, cycle, forest-bathe or whatever in our woods, thus saving the NHS money while boosting the coffers of FE with takings from the car-parks. What this means in practice is that any naturalist in the public areas of Wyre will meet increasing numbers of bikers, dog-walkers, fun-runners or whoever and is less likely to experience the tranquillity that the forest and its wildlife has always offered. Hundreds of dogs are exercised in Wyre each day, many off-lead. Mountain bikes are a modern scourge which have turned narrow paths along the Dowles Brook into rutted, muddy motorways: unauthorised bike tracks thread through most areas of woodland, scar the sides of sunny banks and deface the stream valleys of the Dowles catchment. There are welcome attempts by FE and NE to limit them, but fresh routes soon appear since the Forest has become a playground for Midlands' bikers by day and night. There is a presumption among bikers, which the forest managers have done very little to rebut, that in one of England's finest National Nature Reserves where there is a statutory duty to put nature conservation first, anything goes. It's a woeful dereliction of duty and it's happening not just in Wyre, but across the whole of the UK. The combined disturbance must be catastrophic for a wide range of species but with the exception of a few cases, its effects are poorly-studied. But, if you're a ground-nesting Wood Warbler for whom the Wyre represents the last West Midlands stronghold, this increasing and indiscriminate pressure is a final blow to a bird whose survival has recently been shown to depend on lack of disturbance in its summer home. Under current conditions, the bird's future here, along with those of breeding Woodcock, Tree Pipits and Adders, looks bleak.

That said, there are still some excellent conservation projects in place in Wyre and credit must be given to the nature conservation officers from FE and NE who are making these happen. Wyre has always been a working forest and I would not want to give the impression that naturalists are ungrateful and want it all to themselves. That is not true; we need more public support for gems like the Wyre Forest if we are to protect it. But future public usage must be appropriate: dogs on leads; bikers restricted to recognised routes; restricted access areas and sanctions for misbehaviour. Our forest wildlife has enough uncertainties to contend with- climate change, tree disease, agricultural run-off and alien introductions to name but a few- without adding mismanagement and ignorance from policy-makers to the mix.



The essence of Wyre: Spring flowers in a meadow bordering Dowles Brook. Brett Westwood