

Loss of Wildlife Habitats

I read with great interest an article from the RHS garden magazine of January 2012 regarding areas of grassland in London's Royal Parks that are to be left uncut under a new management regime. It is to be part of an experiment to convert mown grassland back into meadow land. Being a country born and bred man who takes great interest in nature, I found the article very pleasing, and here is the reason why.

In the early years of my working life as a ladder maker and undertaker's assistant starting in 1954, I spent many hours in churchyards and cemeteries digging out graves. During this period all such places were left completely wild and natural, the exception being the paths to where recent burials had taken place, or where the next of kin still kept their loved ones' graves tidy, and this I have no qualms about.

Being brought up within a farming community, I was taught to use a scythe to cut long grass for hay-making, hence I was asked, not only to dig out the graves, but twice yearly to mow the areas of the churchyards and cemeteries by scythe. I found doing such work very pleasant and rewarding in more ways than one. Not only because of the wonderful aroma from the freshly cut grasses, but from seeing the growth of the many natural varieties of plants in the grass. There were too many to mention here, but amongst them were some species of orchids which are now very rare. Another reason was to see the great variety of insects including flies, butterflies and moths of every type. Certain areas were full of wild strawberries that attracted different types of butterflies. These in turn attracted a variety of mammals and birdlife both during daylight hours and at night time. Some tombstones were covered or overgrown with ivy and this also attracted birds and insects through the year.

Then, keeping everywhere tidy became the way. Instead of cutting the grass twice a year, I was requested to cut it on a more regular basis, at least once a month and sometimes twice. Instead of using a scythe, I was asked to use a motor driven rotary mower, making the churchyards and cemeteries more like lawns, and so the variety of plant, insect, and birdlife was lost.

At one time I started up in business cutting grass full time as it was so lucrative. I did whatever was requested to keep such areas tidy, even using tractors with flails after removing and making paths from the gravestones, and using a vibrating roller to level out all the humps and hollows in the churchyards. There was a row of Scots pines along one of the paths in Bugbrooke churchyard where red squirrels could be seen scurrying about the trunks and between their drays in the boughs. When the Scots pines went, so did the red squirrels, never to return. The workload escalated and I was asked to mow roadside verges, but the damage to nature was devastating and it left the verges and churchyards as dead of nature as those under the soil. Some people started to set daffodils in the roadside grass verges to bring them back to life instead of allowing things to go back to nature with its diversity of flora and fauna. You can't try to replace nature with such madcap goings-on. It beggars belief.

Since my early teens, to my seventy odd years of life, I have witnessed miles of hedgerows being ripped out in the name of progress, dozens of field ponds filled in or drained. What

hedges that are left are being cut with flail mowers instead of laying them, thus robbing the wild life of a bountiful supply of winter food.

There is no point complaining that the cuckoo is rarely heard when there is a scarcity of the caterpillars that it normally feeds on because there is nowhere for them to live. Farm barns are being converted into dwellings too, so there is no room for swallows, swifts, house martins, sparrows, barn owls, and bats....the list goes on. Indirectly it can affect our food supply from the land, gardens and allotments too. So, the sooner everyone starts helping nature, the better for all of us.

Stanley Joseph Clark.