

Time for naturalists to step up on the biggest issue of all!

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01. Dead Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* on parched ground, Haines Meadows wetlands, Worcestershire 2018. Gary Farmer.

With last winter's ferocious storms and this (2022) summer's record-breaking heat, drought and wildfires fresh in our minds, few doubt that we are already experiencing the climate breakdown predicted by scientists since the 1980s. Despite their grand promises at COP26 and its predecessors, governments around the world have failed to keep us safe through effective policies and actions to avoid the harmful effects of global heating. Currently on a global atmospheric average of 1.2°C above pre-industrial temperatures, we are on course for much more catastrophic impacts because patterns of fossil fuel use will – very likely in my lifetime - drive us beyond the IPCC's so-called safe 'guard-rail' limit of 1.5°C. It is very urgent that we take action now! The solutions have been clear and obvious for decades. So, on behalf of my grandchildren and the natural world that I love, I boil with indignation that our government – all governments – are knowingly choosing not to take the steps that they know they could and should.

However, it's not just about the climate is it? We naturalists know better than most that the climate is just one side of the ghastly coin now spinning wildly in our faces; it is about our disappearing wildlife too. For we are engulfed in a double whammy of **climate breakdown** caused by fossil fuel-induced global heating and **biodiversity loss** caused by our patterns of consumption and waste disposal and how these shape our use and abuse of land and water (01). Together they represent an existential threat to the future of humanity and the natural world that we depend upon. Our one and only life support system is unravelling before our eyes; and the United Nations acknowledges that we have a small and shrinking window of opportunity in which we must act urgently and decisively to avoid catastrophe.

Those scary climate and biodiversity twins – labelled the Climate and Ecological Emergency (CEE) - are inextricably linked by their common origin: the political and economic systems under which we live are incapable of placing a true value upon the natural world, so harm to climate, habitats and wildlife are not properly accounted for in decision-making and our wildlife and climate inevitably suffer - especially where governments pursue the fantasy of perpetual economic growth on a finite planet. Under our system profit always trumps environment. It follows that no matter how good we are at

nature conservation – and we are jolly good at it in the UK – our contribution has been simply to hold some important patches of ground and to slow the loss of wildlife just a little. We can't achieve more than this within a toxic system that forces us to fight our battles for nature with one or both hands tied behind our back. That will always be the case until the system changes.

I am ashamed of how long it took for this crucial penny to drop in my mind towards the end of my long career in wildlife conservation. I suspect the reason lies partly in how and where we conservationists focus. We tend to concentrate on issues that are local rather than systemic or global and we defend the sites and species that we know and love. These are the close battlegrounds that demand our attention and dominate our efforts to protect nature, so we don't easily see the Big Picture and the true drivers of harm. Now it's time to remove our blinkers!

We probably each have our personal stories about how Worcestershire's wildlife is being harmed by the CEE. One of mine is the near-complete loss of Swifts (02) and House Martins from my home town of Malvern, due mainly to the staggering decline in aerial insect biomass attributed to our chemically clean agricultural landscapes. Yes, there are still a few of the delightful birds left, but they were so much more abundant when I moved here nearly 40 years ago. In terms of climate impacts upon Worcestershire's ecosystems, some of these are more subtle and under-studied, but doubtless no less profound. I remember my friend Andrzej telling me, when I visited him in eastern Poland twenty years ago, how even then botanist colleagues at the Polish Academy of Sciences were detecting changes caused by global heating in the plant species composition of Białowieża Forest. So it is inconceivable that Worcestershire's plant communities – and the fauna that depend upon them - are not similarly affected. Other impacts must arise from the ways we manage land and water to cope with a hotter, more stormy county and how we mitigate for severe and increasingly unpredictable climatic events. Our farmers face huge challenges in this respect and our foresters – with their long-term view and recognising the heating trajectory we are on – are now looking to southern Europe for new timber species to plant in the hope that they will thrive in our climate.



02. Swifts *Apus apus* have all but gone from Malvern town and many other areas of Worcestershire due mainly to the “staggering decline in aerial insect biomass”. Gary Farmer

Most of us have tried the conventional ways of pressing our elected representatives to do better, by lobbying our MPs and councillors, and by supporting campaigns led by our fine environmental groups. But we have to admit that these have all failed to turn the tide. This realisation that – due to systemic barriers - all our polite lobbying and campaigning was bound to fail to protect wildlife led me to join Extinction Rebellion (XR), an organisation that is bravely trying different, non-violent ways to press governments to make the changes we so desperately need. Not being a natural rebel, it took courage for me to step up into activism and I have frequently been well outside my comfort zone. Nevertheless, I have felt more empowered and hopeful through joining thousands of brave, kind, caring people in well-organised acts of civil disobedience on the streets of London. But where were the other naturalists from our huge community whom I know care as much as I do? I am shocked by how few have taken the same steps as me, so I resolved to wake the sleeping giant! Thankfully I am not alone in this task.

Back in early August 2022, in a powerful speech as part of a ‘National Emergency’ Zoom call organised by *Just Stop Oil* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JUTiAfrNn7o&t=2056s>), Chris Packham acknowledged that UK naturalists have been the best in the world at plotting the declines in our wildlife driven by the CEE, but this must surely not be the limit of our ambition. He appealed to all members of environmental NGOs to stop “tinkering around the edges” and to “make a last stand for the natural world”. He called for a change of tack towards significant action to “force governments to make the seismic changes that we need”. He argued for “entry-level activism”, meaning that we must make it easier for concerned people (such as us naturalists) to feel involved and productive in putting effective pressure on those who can and must make a difference. Through commonality, tolerance and kindness our movement must grow into an irresistible force, Packham asserted. Since then (in early October), Chris has appealed to a host of environmental organisations – including the Wildlife Trusts and XR - to join him in another ‘Peoples Walk for Wildlife’.

There is more happening to suggest a growing willingness to rise up. In early October 2022 the UK government launched a desperate and highly controversial plan to boost economic growth, supported by a bill to revoke 570 UK environmental protection regulations inherited from the EU - infuriatingly dismissed as a ‘red tape burden on business’ by some media commentators – by the end of 2023. The RSPB immediately responded with a Twitterstorm (how appropriate!) of unprecedented fury at our government’s “attack on nature”, and talked of mass mobilisation of its members. Then, a day or two later, DEFRA announced its intention to review the post-EU Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) funding support for farming, comprising payment schemes for sustainable farming, nature recovery and landscape recovery. This prompted a swift and unusually outspoken response from the director-general of the National Trust, Hilary McGrady: “Rather than ramp up action to

support our environment, this government appears however to be heading in the opposite direction,” she said. Since then, a poll of 8,000 adults for the National Trust, RSPB and WWF revealed that 81% believed nature was under threat and that urgent action was required to protect and restore it: 48% said they were willing to take action themselves. Finally, the CEOs of RSPB, NT and the Wildlife Trusts have met to discuss tactics and reportedly didn’t rule out their members taking direct action. [While preparing this article for publication in the second half of October 2022 there has been yet another change at the top of the UK’s government bringing more uncertainty – eds.].

However, nothing much will change if our government does not very soon feel the burning heat of our anger, fear and frustration in new ways beyond the traditional press release and letters to MPs. By sitting on our hands and mostly keeping quiet, we naturalists – with our collective knowledge, wisdom and authority on the natural world - have made it so much easier for government to ignore the environmental crisis that is upon us or, at best, to ‘kick the can down the road’ by asking us to accept that 2030 is soon enough to start a programme of nature recovery, and that 2050 is a safe target date for achieving net zero carbon emissions. We should be furious about this shameful greenwash, but how can we channel that fury effectively to promote change?

There are many reasons why concerned people haven’t made the decision to step up into activism. I fear some are taken in by government greenwash and believe they have it sorted. Some are too stressed by other worries, such as making ends meet and putting food on the table. Some may feel that the problem isn’t bad enough to warrant such action while some just find the idea of activism too scary – “it’s just not me”. Some believe it is OK to let others represent them, which doesn’t help us achieve the persuasive numbers that we need. I have tried to convince you that now is a better time than ever to reconsider your position on how best to stand up for nature and climate.

In case these inspire you to make that first brave step, may I suggest:

- If you read one book about climate breakdown, make it *HOTHOUSE EARTH – An Inhabitant’s Guide* (Icon Books) by Bill McGuire, Professor of Geophysical and Climate Hazards (this is the book that our government really doesn’t want you to read because it explains, with vast scientific integrity, just how serious things are already and what more is coming if we don’t act fast)
- If you read one short text that explains the motivation behind our government’s ‘Attack on Nature’, then make it George Monbiot’s piece in *The Guardian* on 30th September 2022: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/sep/30/environmental-destruction-is-part-of-liz-truss-plan?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other
- If you feel moved to explore the world of peaceful activism, make contact with your local group of Extinction Rebellion – there are groups in Wyre Forest, Bromsgrove, Worcester and Malvern – where you will find a warm welcome from surprisingly normal people and no obligation to do anything remotely scary. <https://xrworcs.org.uk>.
- And finally, if you feel moved to step up for nature and climate, look out for news of huge protest gatherings planned for early 2023 in London and join me and thousands of others in helping our government to understand how urgently it must act. Do please email me if you want to know more (or offer constructive comments on this article).

Thank you for reading this and please forgive me for ending by saying ‘*bad things happen when good people do nothing*’. The time to act is now!