Understanding Nature
Landscapes and Lives

BBC

The Open University

Introduction

Millions of years of climatic and geological change have created a dramatic variety of landscape features across the British Isles from glacial valleys, mountains and hills to coastlines and elaborate cave systems. In turn these landforms have provided a rich variety of habitats for animals, plants and other forms of life, but there is more to this story of habitat creation. Humans have also instigated processes which have created, changed and influenced habitats, and continue to do so. The development of our towns and cities are perhaps the most obvious examples, but farming practices, mining, land drainage and transport infrastructures provide just a few examples of other influences which have affected or created habitats. The story of the diverse habitats found within the British Isles is therefore one of a range of interconnecting influences at work. Yet we often think about these processes in more discrete terms, as being either 'natural' or 'human'. Even apparently timeless and natural processes can be difficult to disconnect from human activity, as has been highlighted by reports of the links between coastal erosion and climate change or the controversy surrounding hydraulic fracturing (fracking) and its potential effects on water supplies.

In instances such as these, it might be helpful for us to question the traditionally sharp distinction between 'the natural' and 'the human' and think instead of what might be described as a more 'entangled' relationship between the two, where our lives and landscapes are forged more through the ways they connect and influence each other. For example, conservation work has traditionally been built on principles of human management, control, restoration

Shapwick Heath, the Avalon Marshes, Somerset Levels

and preservation, but our non-human cohabitants, from beavers to bacteria, continually shape and affect our lives and habitats too. There is increasing debate about the value of 'rewilding' and the reintroduction to Britain of species such as the wild boar, beaver, lynx and even the wolf, species which have long been absent from the British Isles. This could present some particularly radical opportunities for animals to reshape our environment, but there are already many ways in which we can trace fascinating stories of the interconnections between the human and non-human cohabitants living together on these islands. In this booklet we'll explore a range of habitats where such stories can be traced, through Coast, Woodland, Lowland Marsh and Town and City.

"The British Isles are home to a wonderful diversity of wild habitats, supporting an array of rich and complex eco-systems – of which we ourselves are part. Learning about this environment is crucial if we are to conserve it in the face of ever-increasing threats. But it's also a life-enhancing experience. As new technologies allow more and more of us to observe the wildlife around us, we have a fantastic opportunity to gain a richer understanding of the world we live in."

Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall

This booklet has been produced to accompany the BBC Two series Hugh's Wild West. The programmes were made in partnership with The Open University.

To find out more go to

www.open.edu/openlearn/hughswildwest

Living with whales

Along the coasts of the British Isles, marine mammals live and travel within close proximity of many of our coastal settlements. In recent years it has become evident that seals, dolphins, porpoises and whales are coming under increasing assault from humans, not through hunting, as may have been the case in the past, but from the noise we are making. The growth of busy shipping lanes is creating underwater disturbance, which hinders their ability to communicate and echolocate, and there is even evidence to suggest increasing instances of deafness within seal populations. Whether through the disorientation caused by this disturbance, the effects of pollution, entanglement in fishing nets or by other means, of the dozens of whales that become stranded on British shores each year, many do so as a result of links to human activities. It is through these unfortunate events that whales suddenly enter our world in a more meaningful way, attracting national television and newspaper coverage and rousing the support of local rescue agencies, volunteers and spectators.

Beached sperm whales near Skegness, Lincolnshire 2016

Perhaps in part because of these tragedies, humans journeying to meet whales in their usual habitat has become an increasingly popular ambition for many, the northwest coast of Scotland and Hebridean islands being regarded as one of the best destinations. Whale watching has become a major tourist industry and the whales, along with other 'star species', make a significant contribution to the economic activity of the area.

People and fossils

Another growing 'nature industry', which has a presence all around the coast of the British Isles, is that of fossil hunting. Perhaps the most notable locations are the area around Robin Hood's Bay on the North Yorkshire coast and on Dorset's 'Jurassic Coast' where towns such as Lyme Regis have forged a local identity through the practices of fossil hunting, buying and collecting. Further along the Dorset coast in the town of Kimmeridge, plumber and long term fossil collector, Steve Etches, has developed his hobby into a £5 million museum to display his collection and promote the UNESCO world heritage site. Part animal, part rock, part commodity, fossils occupy an intriguing place in our cultural heritage.

Fossil streetlamps in Lyme Regis, Dorset

The village bunting

Further south and west along the coast, Labrador Bay in Devon is the site for conservation work to help almost the entire national population of a small bird, which clings to this coastal habitat. The cirl bunting was once so embedded in everyday rural life that a little over a century ago it was commonly known as the 'village

Steve Etches at his fossil museum, Kimmeridge, Dorset

bunting'. In the meantime, however, it has fallen victim to the intensification of agriculture and the associated loss of habitat and insect life. The work being carried out at Labrador Bay is not the recreation of a 'natural' haven, but of a very human landscape. Farmland here is managed through the use of revived pre-war farming practices to replicate the habitat within which the cirl bunting previously thrived. But the cirl bunting has not only influenced the practices of farmers and conservationists; local council plans and school curriculums are also being shaped by this small bird, as it forges an increasing attachment to the people in the area.

Cirl bunting

Literary fossils

The fossil hunting industry found itself the subject of popular literature when, in 2009, author Tracy Chevalier published 'Remarkable Creatures', a fictional account based on the non-fictional figure of Mary Anning (1799-1847), widely regarded as one of the first fossil hunters. The book was greeted with widespread critical acclaim and served not only to affirm the passion many have for hunting and collecting fossils but the possibility of using this as a highly successful literary device. Here the unlikely combination of prehistoric animals, the story of a 19th century woman, the formation of sedimentary rock and the human predilection for identifying and collecting converge.

Fossil hunter, Mary Anning

Wild boar in the Forest of Dean

Return of the boar

On the border of England and Wales, the Forest of Dean has become a stronghold for a mysteriously re-established population of wild boar, an animal not seen free-roaming in Britain since the 17th century. Being well suited to our climate and popular both for hunting and as a source of meat, wild boar thrived in the British Isles for many centuries before being hunted to extinction. With the market for their meat now rather limited, compared to the time of their earlier inhabitation, and amidst a significantly larger human population, the wild boar in the Forest of Dean and elsewhere are now entering into more imposing and challenging relationships with their human neighbours. Their habit of probing the earth with their snouts in search of food has seen them excavate roadside verges, private gardens and even cemeteries. There have also been increasing instances of vehicles involved in collisions with wild boar, and with adult boar reaching weights in excess of 100kg there have been some predictably damaging results.

Euro-tunnel dormice

Another woodland mammal, but one dwindling in number and far more secretive in its habits, is the common dormouse. For a population of this diminutive nocturnal mammal, it was a story of humans imposing on them when the huge engineering project to build the channel tunnel drove through an area of woodland near Ashford in Kent. However, a suitable woodland site, rich in young hazel trees, was located in North Buckinghamshire and the dormice were taken on a 115 mile journey by volunteers to their new home. Since this momentous coming together of humans and dormice they have continued to thrive in their secretive, nocturnal world, only occasionally coming into contact with the caring individuals who continue to monitor their population.

Common dormouse

Capercaillie tourism

A much more public display of affection is encountered amongst the ancient Scots pines of the Abernethy Forest, where the RSPB reserve at Loch Garten offers regular guided walks for those that come to glimpse the iconic capercaillie. Early, on spring mornings, during the annual courtship display, or 'lekking' season, queues form in anticipation of a chance to see imposing cock birds aggressively staking their claim to a territory. Up to a metre in length, their name, meaning 'wood-horse' in Scottish Gaelic, is derived from the distinctive mating call of the male bird, reminiscent of the sound of galloping horse hooves. They have come to forge a close association with Scottishness, featuring widely in the imagery used to promote Scotland's tourism industry across the world.

Capercaillie in Glenfeshie Forest

Abernethy Forest RSPB station, Cairngorms National Park

Wild boar on the menu

The re-emergence of wild boar in woodland has prompted attempts to reintroduce them onto the British menu. With a long history as part of the British diet, and an increased demand for 'exotic' meats in recent years, this would seem an ideal opportunity. Indeed, it has been suggested that an increasing market for wild boar in the UK may have led to their somewhat mysterious reappearance in the wild. However, for many of those people living in areas affected by the boar's re-establishment, this is seen as unwanted encouragement of the boar's presence in their midst, and it is certainly true to say that they are living amongst residents in these areas. In one town, within the Forest of Dean, they have even been spotted walking down the high street past the butcher's shop!

Wild boar meat pies at Borough Market, London

Lowland Marsh

Starlings murmuration near the Solway Firth and Gretna

Life amongst the reeds

Lowland marsh is a habitat created where land and water meet. Found across many parts of Britain it supports a variety of species adapted to these distinctive surroundings. Birds, mammals, fish and amphibians in particular thrive here, but there is also a human story woven through this landscape. In Norfolk, the roof thatching industry maintained thousands of acres of reed beds until the middle of the 20th century when the practice of roof thatching reached an all-time low. The disappearance of this human managed 'crop' plant also removed habitat for animals which had thrived there. Populations of reed bed specialist birds, such as the bittern and the bearded tit, crashed simultaneously. But successful conservation work in recent decades has significantly increased Bittern numbers, as well as the fish and amphibians on which they feed.

Bittern on frozen lake, Yorkshire

A managed landscape

On the other side of England, in the reed beds of the Somerset Levels, the number of breeding bitterns is now comparable to the entire national population just 20 years earlier. One amphibian, no doubt on the menu of these birds, is the Iberian water frog. It is not known how these creatures made their way from Spain to Somerset, but human intervention seems likely. Humans have certainly played their part in the habitat that exists here today, not only through conservation

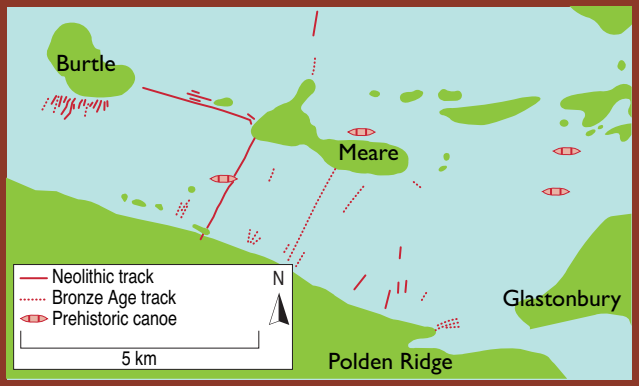
Iberian water frog

Gathering peat in Westhay, Somerset, 1905

work but through a peat extraction industry that shaped the recent past of this landscape; the industry's decline allowing the reed beds to encroach once more. Going further back and prior to the land first being drained around a thousand years ago, there was almost no land here and a few thousand years earlier still our Neolithic ancestors built bridging tracks to connect what was a series of islands.

The spectacle of winter starlings

As the winter months set in, the reed beds play host to a more familiar bird species, many of which have travelled from the near continent to benefit from the relatively milder British winter – starlings, in their hundreds of thousands, and even millions! As they come to roost on winter evenings these birds form spectacular displays (known as murmurations) before descending en masse into the shelter of the reed beds for the night. These murmurations have become an increasingly popular event for people in recent years and can draw crowds of up to a thousand spectators, many of whom don't consider themselves regular 'birdwatchers' but who are drawn to this dramatic spectacle nonetheless. As the sun sets over the Avalon Marshes, on the Somerset Levels, and temperatures begin to plummet, the assembled spectators share flasks of tea and exclamations of delight at the performance unfolding before them. But this is a very different story from the murmurations that used to occur in the heart of central London several decades ago, when the sentiments of frequently spattered cinema goers and business owners in Leicester Square were somewhat different. Since the early 1980s the starling murmuration has largely disappeared from London and many other urban locations. The starlings used to follow us for the sanctuary and welcome urban heat that we offered them, now we follow them for the life affirming spectacle they offer to us in the peaceful expanse of the winter marshland.



Ancient tracks of the Avalon Marshes

Within the reed beds of the Somerset Levels lie the ancient remains of the Neolithic pathways, created to traverse the marshland up to 6000 years ago before the area was drained to build human dwellings around the time of the Norman Conquest in 1066. These tracks map out a different landscape to the one we see today, a connection of islands dotted across the water. Since the Normans, successive waves of drainage over the last millennium have led to a productive peat industry shaping the landscape further. Now conservation and nature reserves are the main industry here, but the landscape they conserve is one born out of the entangled histories of a place made by humans, plants and animals.

Peregrine falcon near St. Paul's, London

The urban falcon

In 1967, writer J.A. Baker published what would become one of the most celebrated books in natural history writing, 'The Peregrine'. Baker's intense, poetic descriptions of the peregrine falcons near his rural Essex home are seen by many as an imagining of Baker himself becoming a peregrine. The birds he described were part of a plummeting population, seen only on secluded marshland in deep winter. In recent years, however, the peregrine has become a familiar resident of large towns and cities across the British Isles. Its habit of nesting on lofty cliff top perches, from where it can dive on to its unsuspecting prey, is replicated with skyscrapers and cathedrals, and, in London, Tate Modern has become a regular location for nesting, as well as for crowds of human observers. In many of these locations the peregrines are 'doing their bit' to enlist support for the RSPB, as the organisation sets up pop-up viewing areas where people can come and use the spotting scopes and binoculars provided, whilst making donations and signing up to become members.

Pop-up viewing spot on Millennium Bridge, London

Beavers in town

If the peregrine is something of a wildlife celebrity already, then another possible star of the future might be found in the recently reintroduced European beaver. After a trial reintroduction in Western Scotland's Knapdale Forest, by 2009 the beavers had re-established themselves in Scotland and elsewhere. Bolstered by further unlicensed releases, some are now establishing themselves in close proximity to human habitation. The village of Otterton, in Devon, is one such location and the

Otterton village sign, Devon


European beaver

local wildlife trust has even established a 'Beaver Trail' for visitors hopeful of a glimpse of this newly re-introduced British species. Like the wild boar, this is an animal with a long history in Britain, until it was hunted to extinction around 300 years ago. But our renewed relationship with the beaver is raising concerns with some landowners, who argue that the beavers' practice of river damming will flood their land. However, others point to the benefits of beavers for broader flood management within a river system, allowing floodplains to be fully utilised in slowing and spreading flood water and reducing the risks to homes and other properties further downstream. Beavers could also have a valuable role to play in 'rewilding' landscapes and allowing other plants and animals to re-establish.

Collaborating with bees

Humans and animals alike continue to create, manipulate and alter the environment around them, affecting each other's worlds and influencing each other's practices, and often it is not the large and spectacular creatures in our midst that are involved. In the last decade, or so, the honey bee population has been in sharp decline, in part because of the significant loss of wild meadows. This has led to awareness campaigns, which have served to highlight the huge significance of the bee to us as a pollinator of many of our food crops. In response, gardens in towns and cities across the country are seeing new planting regimes with 'bee friendly' garden plants such as echinacea, lavender and verbena. In this simple, everyday way people are manipulating their immediate environment to better support bees so that they, in turn, can continue to manipulate it for our benefit.


Honey bee on lavender

Celebrity bee-keeping

The plight of the honey bee is one which has not only attracted the attention of gardeners throughout British towns and cities. Those who keep bees for their honey also have a vested interest in raising awareness of the honey bee's plight and BBC journalist and presenter, Martha Kearney, is just one of a list of celebrities who have been actively involved in gaining media attention for honey bees. Suggs, lead singer of the band Madness, is an active supporter of promoting bee population growth in London and there is even a party political bee campaigning presence in the form of Vince Cable MP.


Vince Cable MP, Chelsea Flower Show

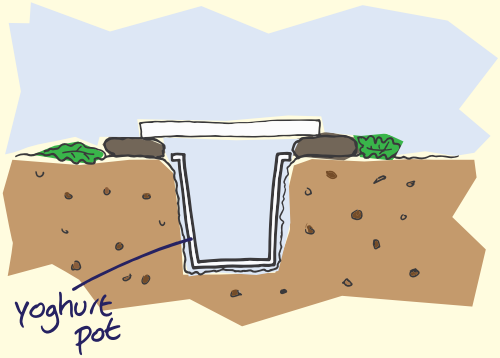
Things you can do...

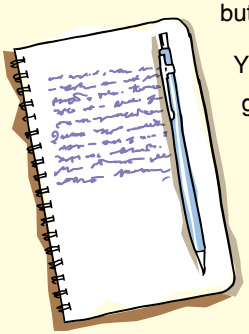
If you'd like to get more involved in observing and understanding the wildlife around you there are things you can do with a small patch of garden, a balcony or just a few pots for planting bee friendly flowers. Here are a few suggestions for things you could try and if you'd like to take things a step further, and you are in a position to do so, you could invest in some of the new technologies which are now widely available to help you discover more.

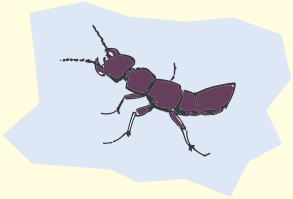
For further ideas and information you can also visit **www.open.edu/openlearn/hughswildwest**

Yoghurt pot bug trap

With a small investment of time, a tiny patch of ground and a yoghurt pot, it is possible to reveal some of the largely unseen insects and 'mini beasts' living alongside us. Start by digging a hole about the same shape and depth as your yoghurt pot, place the pot into the hole and fill any gaps between the pot and the hole so it is flush with the soil around it. Then, add a roof about 1cm above the pot (an old tile or large flat stone supported by smaller stones is ideal) and make perforations in the bottom to avoid the pot filling with water. The trap can be left over night, but should be checked as soon as possible in the morning. With luck your pot could provide a morning encounter with nocturnal species such as the devil's coach-horse beetle (**left**) or violet ground beetle. Be sure to let your prize go as soon as possible, so it can get back to helping you keep the slugs at bay!

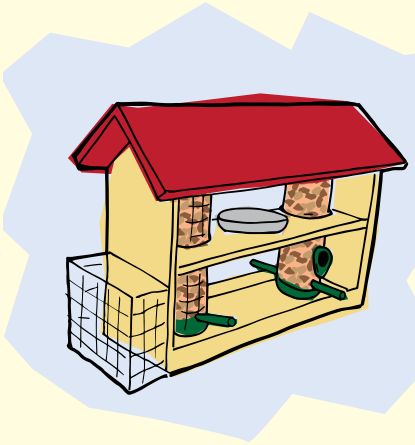






Create a garden habitat and monitor what you attract

A visit to a local garden centre will offer a range of bird feeders, some of which can be bought and filled for a few pounds. You can also find butterfly-friendly seed mixes, which are cheap and easy to sow. If you have a bit of space for a more substantial plant, buddleia (often referred to as the 'butterfly bush') is a great choice. This common plant can often be seen self-seeded on 'brownfield' sites, railway sidings or even growing out of the brickwork of derelict buildings, where it is usually covered in bees and butterflies on warm sunny days.



You can also treat your garden as a site for gathering data – keep a record of the species you see in your garden and track trends from year to year. This may even help in indicating wider population changes, as well as changes in migration and hibernation times.

Washing up bowl pond

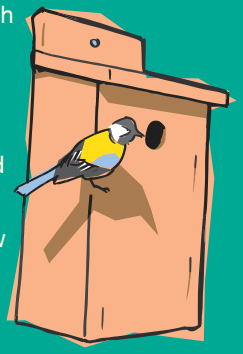
A pond liner or preformed shell can be expensive and labour intensive to install, but a pond can be made from something as simple as an old washing up bowl, buried to ground level or surrounded by a wall of stones or bricks so that creatures can get in and out. Positioned so that it receives a mixture of sun and shade during the course of a day, it should soon start to attract occupants from a variety of invertebrates, insects and, if you're lucky, frogs and newts that come to feed on them. It will also provide a location for birds and maybe small mammals to drink and bathe. It is best to fill your pond from a water butt, or just allow it to fill with rainwater, as tap water contains chlorine, which is harmful to wildlife. However, if left to stand for 24 hours, or so, the chlorine in tap water will dissipate and can then be used safely.

Bringing technology into your garden...

If you want to take things further, and are in a position to spend a bit more money monitoring the wildlife in your garden or local area, there are now a whole range of technologies that are readily available to help you.

Bat detectors work by picking up bat echolocation signals and registering them as frequencies on a scale more audible to humans. As different species of bat call at different frequencies a bat detector can provide a means of identifying different species in flight, something which would otherwise be extremely hard to do.

Nest box cameras are readily available through mail order websites and are relatively easy to mount and hook up to a monitor, so that you can view inside your garden nest box. Not only will you be able to see which species come and investigate their prospective new home, but, if you get any takers, you should be able to follow egg-laying and the development of chicks, see what they are being fed on and track the use of your nest box over a number of years.



Trailcams are another device you can use to track visitors to your garden. These cameras can be bought in a number of different formats to capture still or moving images, some with 'night vision'. They are triggered by movements picked up by a sensor, and whilst this may often be the work of the neighbourhood cat, you might be surprised at what else is paying you a visit whilst you are sound asleep.

For even more ideas on how to make your garden wildlife friendly, visit

www.open.edu/openlearn/hughswildwest

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Dr Andy Morris, Senior Lecturer in Geography, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at The Open University

Andy's background is in social and cultural geography. His main area of interest is in how the relationships between humans and non-humans (from beavers to bacteria) can inform understandings of nature and society. His work on Open University modules has included writing on subjects such as landscape, national parks, environmental rights and wildlife data collection. Andy's recent work has included researching starling murmurations and writing for the new OU Level 2 module Environment and society, which presents in October 2018.

Find out more about Andy's expertise and academic profile:
http://fass.open.ac.uk/people/acm47

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For more ideas on how to observe and understand the wildlife around you, visit

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Town & City

Understanding Nature: What you can do…

There are a wide range of **bee species** in the British Isles, all of which benefit from our help in providing them with suitable garden plants from which to feed. All bees are active in the warmer months (honey bees overwinter but feed off their honey store during the colder months). Locate a spot which gets plenty of sun throughout the day and experiment with different bee friendly plants, such as lavender, echinacea and verbena to see what you can attract. You can identify the different bee species you see with the help of an I.D. guide which you can find in shops and online.

The Open University

Lowland Marsh

Understanding Nature: What you can do…

The lowland marsh habitat has become a stronghold for **roosting starlings** and there are a number of marshland nature reserves across the British Isles where you can see a spectacular murmuration from late autumn through to early spring. Anytime from October is a good time to head out in search of one, but flocks often increase in size during the course of a winter, meaning that March or even April can be the best time. Some of the most renowned viewing spots include the Avalon Marshes on the Somerset levels, Leighton Moss in Lancashire and Newport Wetlands in South Wales.

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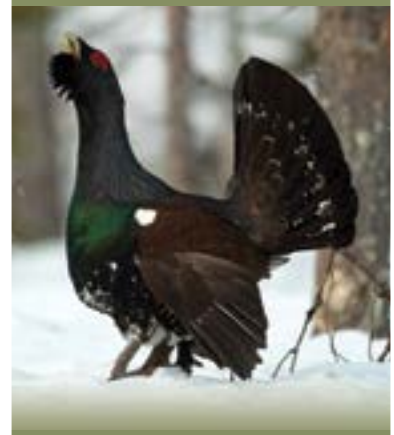
Woodland



Understanding Nature: What you can do…

If you want to see a **capercaillie** in the British Isles then a trip to the central and eastern highlands of Scotland is in order. The capercaillie is active all year round but this iconic bird has become increasingly rare. However, it can still be regularly encountered on organised capercaillie walks. These walks are usually run in April and May during the spring courtship or 'lekking' season when the male birds become particularly active. They can be aggressive towards humans at this time, so an expert guide is recommended, and stick to paths during early summer to avoid disturbing this ground nesting bird.

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Coast

Understanding Nature: What you can do…

There are a wide range of books and websites offering advice on **fossil hunting** at locations around the British Isles. Many of these sources will grade locations in terms of their ease of access, as well as how likely you are to find something. In many cases it can pay to visit beaches at low tide and walk along the tideline to check for recently beached ammonites and other common fossils. Fossil hunting after a big storm or a particularly high tide is always a good idea as weathering and erosion may have exposed fresh fossils. If you want to extract fossils from rock you'll need a hammer and chisel as well as some eye protection.

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