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978-1-107-67323-6 - A Less Green and Pleasant Land: Our Threatened Wildlife

Norman Maclean

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A LESS GREEN AND PLEASANT LAND

Our Threatened Wildlife

Disentangling the facts from the hype, this ‘Domesday book’ of the British and Irish countryside offers a definitive and up-to-date survey of the state of our wildlife today. Norman Maclean, editor of the best-selling *Silent Summer*, examines the latest findings of Britain and Ireland’s top wildlife experts and interprets them for a wider audience. Each chapter provides reliable estimates of animal populations, showing which species are thriving and which are in decline. The book also considers the effects of climate change on our wildlife and how human population growth is influencing its development. Beautifully illustrated with colour plates and wood engravings throughout, this accessible and timely study reveals just how rapidly our countryside and its wildlife are changing, why we should be concerned, and what we can do about it.

NORMAN MACLEAN is Emeritus Professor of Biology at the University of Southampton and a lifelong wildlife enthusiast. He has visited and studied wildlife in more than 50 countries around the world and has given numerous radio and TV interviews on the subject. He is the editor of *Silent Summer* (Cambridge, 2010).

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*To Richard and Cherry Kearton,
whose book With Nature and a Camera, published in 1898,
helped inspire my early enthusiasm for wildlife.*

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FOREWORD

In Britain and Ireland we live in an overcrowded and intensively managed landscape, in which not a single square metre has not been, or is not, influenced by the ‘hand of man’. We have cut it down, ploughed it, drained it, afforested it or concreted it over – in short, we have totally ruined much of it. And yet . . . like you, I still love it with all my heart. I can still find scraps of paradise, things of extraordinary beauty, and things both big and small which make me smile, sing, set my alarm clock to get up, go out and rejoice in. And that is why, like you, I care so much when it comes to conserving it.

But let me ask you a question. If conservation in these islands were a single-company business, all the effort, endeavour, all the strategies, money and employees were under one roof, and that company had shares to purchase on the stock exchange, would you invest in them? Based on results? I wouldn’t. Not because I think that the company isn’t sincere or isn’t trying hard enough, simply because its results are not only poor – they are disastrous.

Okay, there is a palette of notable successes on many levels. A guild of individual species have been managed and have prospered, certain habitats are now sufficiently understood to be better protected or even re-created, some species have recovered due to changes in legislation or have increased due to opportunities through others’ losses. It’s not all totally bad news, but perhaps the occasional ‘good’ is exaggerated to cover the majority of bad. Perhaps happy tales of more stone curlews, dormice or ciril buntings are used to mask the misery which is so easily revealed when you delve into the data:

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that empirically the vast majority of our habitats are in serious decline, as are most of our notified sites of nature conservation, and indeed many of our nature reserves. And when it comes to biodiversity per se . . . let's be frank, in all of our major animal and plant groups the declines are catastrophic. Even some of our most cherished species, the cuckoo, the nightingale, most butterflies and moths, the salmon, our orchids and sadly so many more are cascading to extinction. In our business, in most departments, targets are not being met, and in many we're going bust.

That's why this book is important, because it is both essential and critical that we summon the courage to stop sheltering in the deceit of our successes and face our very serious failings head-on. Only then do we stand any chance of making a difference. A difference which I sincerely believe we can make. Because, whilst all these declines and damages have been unfurling we have simultaneously been developing an impressive arsenal of techniques and technologies which could make those differences. We have learned how to captive-breed and release, we can transform wrecked agricultural wastelands into rich, varied and wonderful environments, but we also need to be far more energetic when it comes to influencing and enforcing change on altogether broader fronts. We have to value our strengths as a movement and exercise them with both honesty and vigour. Ultimately, we must not shy from the bigger issues which are crushing and killing our green and pleasant land.

Like the author, I don't feel like a traitor, I don't feel the need to conceal my criticisms – because they are motivated benevolently and voiced to prompt thought, debate and creative change. And across the pages of this book you will sense, indeed feel, sympathetic parallels and echoes of this manifesto. Throughout its pages there are thinly disguised pleas for real and prompt progress – and they have been penned because we care. I hope that you will read, consider, mull over and mould all its ideas in your minds and then feel empowered and motivated to help move wildlife conservation in Britain and Ireland into a new era – before it is too late.

Chris Packham
New Forest

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I should emphasise that despite all of this help, some mistakes will undoubtedly persist, and for these I must take responsibility. Let's hope they are few.