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Badgers and balance

WE have got in a terrible muddle about badgers. Everyone wants to see a reasonable number of them in the countryside—they're engaging creatures—but numbers have exploded since the 1970s and the West Country, in particular, is overrun.

Dairy farmers have borne the brunt of this, as they're convinced that badgers spread bovine TB, a case supported by the results of the cull in disease hotspots where rates of infection have reduced. To phase out the cull, as the Government proposes, when there is no proven alternative, would be a cruelty to farmers whose livelihoods depend on the health of their herds.

But badger numbers are a national issue. They don't only eat earthworms and beetles, they take the eggs and chicks of ground-nesting birds. Their leathery tongues can cope with bees' nests and their strong claws can prise open a curled hedgehog, the squeals of which, as it's eaten alive, are horrific—hedgehogs are now as rare as badgers are prolific.

Maintaining the balance of Nature requires humans to step in, for the badger has no natural predator. As rural policy is rewritten post-Brexit, it's important to remember that only through management will the countryside become rich in the species that everyone wants, an ambition that can only be achieved by providing habitat and controlling predators, among them the badger.

‘Only through management will the countryside become rich in the species we want’

That's what management means, but it's contrary to the doctrine of the age: rewilding (*Farming life*, page 46). Don't be fooled, however, when landscapes are left to run wild, scrub takes over and biodiversity dwindles. Many wildflowers depend on the sward

being cropped, usually by sheep; light must reach the forest floor to enable growth.

At that fascinating rewilding experiment at Knepp Castle, West Sussex, clearings are made by longhorn cattle, Tamworth pigs and Exmoor ponies, domestic animals that turn the soil. As a result, birds and butterflies flourish and it's good use of poor farmland; income is derived from visitors and organic meat sales.

In Nature, old and sick animals starve to death during winter, but nothing on the estate happens without the owners' approval. If the artificially introduced animals were removed, the landscape would return to the forest it once was and, dare one say, might be quite boring.

Elmley National Nature Reserve on the Kent marshes (*page 54*) appears natural, but everything about it is managed by humans for the benefit of wildlife, including fencing out badgers (and foxes). The result is that the ground teems with rare species: more flocks of lapwings, redshanks and avocets than anywhere else in lowland UK. It's the perfect argument to temper the rewilding rhetoric.

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