

## **LIVING LANDSCAPES**

Over the last several decades there has been a rapid decline in the wildlife of this country across all habitats. Just to give a few examples: compared to 1930 there are only 70% of marsh tits remaining and since 1960 only 9% of wildflower meadows. In nearly all parts of the country, coastal marshes and heath lands are in decline as are iconic animals such as turtle doves and red squirrels. Now that we know that there is a problem, we must attempt to do something about it. But what and who will do it?

The Essex Wildlife Trust has taken up the challenge and is working to transform the environment in which we live by restoring, recreating and joining up wildlife-rich spaces in both rural and urban areas. They are not attempting to achieve this on their own but in partnership with local communities, landowners, schools and businesses. These projects are called Living Landscape schemes and around the country there are currently over a hundred. The goal is for wildlife to thrive and re-colonise our landscape, outside of protected nature reserves, so that we and future generations can enjoy our natural heritage.

Farmland covers around 75% of the UK so that working with farmers is essential if the natural environment is to recover and allow wildlife to return and disperse through our landscapes once more. An agricultural environment that produces food, and also supports abundant wildlife, underpins sustainable farming and is essential in creating a truly living landscape.

Likewise, wetlands are a core part of a Living Landscape – the lives of countless animals, plants and people depend on their existence and quality. Wetlands provide us with food, water, transport, help reduce the impacts of extreme weather, and many are places of outstanding beauty

Grasslands are vital natural resources for bees and other pollinators, and for animals that depends on wild grasses and flowers, from butterflies to barn owls. They maintain healthy soils that store more carbon than our forests, and absorb water to reduce flooding. Livestock that graze grasslands or feed on the forage from hay meadows in the winter provide us with our beef and lamb. But our wildlife-rich grasslands are vanishing and the wildlife that depends on them is under threat.

So what must be done to get the message across so that Living Landscapes can be achieved? The answer lies in inspiring people, especially youngsters, to value nature and to devote time to its appreciation and continuation. We can all play our part whether we volunteer to help manage woodlands, take part in animal and plant surveys or create ponds and plant wildflowers in our gardens. These garden habitats act as stepping stones to permit the movement of frogs, butterflies and bees across our landscape.

**Keith Snow**