



Grazing animals are key drivers of habitat generation and biodiversity

WAIT AND SEE

and see life returning

Isabella Tree reports on a pioneering project in rewilding

In just a few weeks' time – around the end of April – we should be hearing our first nightingales, followed by cuckoos and turtle doves. The return of these lovely African migrants is one of the most keenly awaited moments of the year at Knepp Castle, West Sussex. To those of us who heard them regularly as children, their song is suffused with an almost melancholy nostalgia. It's the sound of summer. They're the stuff of Keats and Shakespeare, as British as strawberries and cream.

Yet younger generations may never have heard them. All three birds are now critically scarce in the British Isles and classified as *Red Data Book* species. Their populations have declined 95% since the 1970s, with turtle doves the most likely bird species to become extinct in the British Isles in the next few years.

But suddenly Knepp is bucking the trend. And what's happening here has shed new light on the birds' decline and shown real possibilities of reversing it, as well as offering exciting new insights into other species and their habitats.

We embarked on our rewilding project nearly 14 years ago. The land on our 3,500-acre estate is notoriously heavy

clay with traditionally small fields marked out by hedges and ditches. It has never been ideal for intensive farming. In the 1940s, though, as Britain began to 'Dig for Victory', every inch of our land – including ancient water meadows – was ploughed up for arable crops, right up to the front door. The Green Revolution of the 1970s heralded pesticides, fertilisers, new crop varieties, bigger machinery – and yet still, more often than not, we failed to make profits. We began to look for an alternative way to manage the land, starting with the restoration of Repton Park around the house and gradually, over the course of six years, taking out all the remaining land from agriculture.

Fourteen years on, the wildest and woolliest part of the estate – known as the Southern Block – has taken on a look of Africa, with wild scrub criss-crossed by meandering animal trails. Among numerous other species returns it has become a breeding hotspot for some of our rarest migrant birds. A survey carried out by Imperial College two years ago estimated that Knepp now has 2% of the UK's total breeding population of nightingales. We heard our first turtle dove here seven years ago and last summer reckon we had at least