

Summary from the PACE Supporters Meeting, 4 March 2025 at Mistley Village Hall.

An Essex Rewilding Project – Harold’s Park Wildland – by Tom Moat.



40 people were present for this introduction to rewilding and nature recovery. Tom Moat, who lives in Mistley and is a Trustee of PACE Manningtree, has recently moved from his role with Essex County Council, where he was responsible for the Trees and Woodland Initiatives, to work for Nattergal as Manager of Harold’s Park Wildland – a new rewilding project on 206 hectares (509 acres) of degraded farmland near Nazeing in west Essex.

Tom explained that rewilding is about restoring natural processes allowing the ecology and habitats to develop over time, and often involving large herbivores which influence these processes. We hear a lot about rewilding involving large carnivores like wolves and lynx - these could not really be reintroduced in a county like Essex even if it might just be possible in a large area in Scotland. However, more important for most rewilding projects are the key herbivores like iron-age pigs, Exmoor ponies or Tarpan horses, old breeds of hardy cattle and deer and in wetland habitats key species like beavers. Traditional nature conservation is about creating habitats to support particular target species: rewilding is about allowing the habitats to gradually progress using the large herbivores and accepting that other interesting species will come along with that.

Tom also explained how Nattergal (Dutch for Nightingale) was established to become a world-leading nature restoration company which is pioneering the commercialisation of nature restoration to help deliver biodiversity on a landscape scale. Charlie Burrell who has pioneered rewilding at the Knepp Estate in Sussex along with Isabella Tree, has set up Nattergal as a company which mobilises private finance and investment and also utilises the funds from such initiatives as Biodiversity Net Gain. Key principles are that “Nature comes first”, that you can “Restore degraded land” and that “Nature can be a good investment”. With over 50% of our species in decline in the UK, nature recovery is high priority and a lot of the funding can come from the public and from philanthropic sources. Nattergal currently has three sites in the UK: Boothby Wildland in Lincolnshire (617ha purchased in 2021), High Fen Wildland in Norfolk (291 ha purchased in 2022) and Harold’s Park Wildland in Essex (206ha purchased in 2024).

Harold’s Park Wildland was formerly deer park, farmland and equestrian centre about 30 miles from central London. Most of the land has been degraded but there are a few nice woodlands and tremendous potential to restore biodiverse grasslands, interconnecting hedgerows, scrub and some water features. It is in a prime location for Biodiversity Net Gain which many developers will require to offset their housing and infrastructure projects. Iron-age pigs, Longhorn Cattle and Exmoor Ponies are planned as the main herbivores with the possibility of Bison in the future.

Here are a few examples of the Questions from the audience which Tom answered well.

Q. What do you do about public footpaths which come through your land?

A. Harold’s Park that does have existing public rights of way so we will use signage and public engagement to inform users of the presence of large herbivores and how to behave around them (especially with dogs). We will plan to enable locals and tourists to visit Harold’s Park Wildland.

Q. Where does the funding come from to buy and run the Wildlands?

A. Nattergal has a lot of interest from private investors because they can see the return from such initiatives as Biodiversity Net Gain which results in a 30-year commitment and 30years worth of payment.

Q. How will you fence the land at Harold's Park?

A. At present we are concentrating on the perimeter fence so that the large herbivores will be contained on site. We may need some internal fences, but we will want to keep these to a minimum.

Q. How many Iron-age Pigs do you think you will need for Harold's Park?

A. Only 2 or 3. These pigs will do a lot of rooting, so we don't want too many. Even at Knepp which is over 3,000 acres there are only about half a dozen pigs.

Q. What date or era are you aiming to rewild back to?

A. Some people think we are aiming to rewild back to just after the ice age (8,000 years ago) when there would be a great deal of natural habitat, tree cover and gaps between trees created by large herbivores. But the priority is to allow the natural processes and the herbivores to create what habitats they create – yes, much of it will be open woodland and grasslands, but we are not rewilding to a particular vision – we are 'wilding' rather than 'rewilding'.

Q. Some farmers seem to be very sceptical of rewilding particularly in Scotland – is that correct?

A. Yes there is some opposition from traditional farming interests. Such traditional farming has been focussed on intensive food production: and that has resulted in the loss of much biodiversity. Rewilding will bring back a lot of biodiversity and will produce some sustainable food produce but at much reduced levels.

Q. How do you get into this type of work?

A. Degree, perhaps in an environmental subject; then practical experience in land management or conservation management.

Q. How is Biodiversity Net Gain measured?

A. There is a metric which is based on an ecologist assessing the type of habitat and the condition of that habitat. For example, an ecologist will assess the metric for a developer who wants to build on land which will remove that amount of biodiversity, and the developer would then either have to provide replacement habitat on the same site or could pay for this biodiversity to be offset on our Nattergal site.

Q. Can we come and visit your site at Harold's Park?

A. Yes you will be welcome – perhaps PACE can bring a coach-load, and I will be pleased to show you round.

Caroline Hall thanked everyone for coming and particularly thanked Tom Moat for his talk and for answering so many questions.

John Hall gave a summary of progress on several of the PACE Projects.

Next PACE Supporters meeting will be "Is Going Local the key to food system resilience?" on Tuesday 1 April at 7.30pm. Venue TBC