

Species loss

Over the summer I was in Norfolk, visiting a stately home, and by chance saw a hare dashing across its grounds. It was a wonderful sight that has stayed with me.

We no longer have hares in Richmond Park – the last one was seen in 1972. They live entirely above ground and were driven away by increasing dog numbers. We have also lost hedgehogs and water shrews.

According to the Park's Bird Recording Group, whose records go back to 1921, in the last 50 years we have lost breeding pairs of Pheasant, Grey Partridge, Woodlark, Tree Pipit, Redstart, House and Tree Sparrow, Linnet, Bullfinch and Yellowhammer.

These lost species of mammals and birds are the obvious ones. Many others that we do not see or where our records are not so good – beetles, butterflies, insects, wildflowers – have undoubtedly also been lost.

We have also gained species. But the new bird species are mostly "urban" birds – the Mandarin Duck, Red-crested Pochard, Egyptian Goose, Collared Dove, Ring-necked Parakeet – that you can find in any local park.

So it is troubling to read of the recent decline in Skylark numbers (see the report on page 9). One of the main reasons seems to be people with dogs ignoring the signs (*photo on the right by Jan Wilczur*). The disappearance or decline of species can be caused by a range of factors, from climate change to farming

practices to human (and dog) disturbance. But we humans are ultimately responsible for the vast majority of it.

Does this matter? Yes it does. The world we know is shaped and sustained by a vast range of species that interact with each other and the earth, in ways that we often don't understand.

How will the world adjust to the large and rapid loss of species now occurring? We just don't know, but we should care deeply. Biodiversity is essential for our future. The loss of a species diminishes us. It reveals our arrogance as the dominant species. We lose the unique contribution of that species to the world and our lives. In the case of the Skylark we will lose its wonderful song high above the Park's grasslands – Vaughan Williams' "Lark Ascending" and Shelley's "blithe spirit". I don't want in future to have to go to Norfolk to hear it.

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