After Wilding:

A speculative documentary

about rewilding and the

future of British nature

Written by

Joe Revans

Based on

the envisioned futures

of the Maple Farm

rewilding community

2022

1. The Researcher's Field Notes: Return to Maple Farm

The Researcher:

Welcome to Maple Farm, a 30-acre rewilding project in southeast England.

In 2022 I visited this place as part of my master's studies to research the rewilding activities that were happening here. And now, twenty years later, I have returned to reconnect with three community members and to hear how rewilding has changed them and this place.

2. Interview with The Wilder: Repairing a Wetland

The Researcher:

Maple Farm, Surrey. 14th June 2042. Interview with The Wilder.

Can you please introduce yourself?

The Wilder:

Yes, absolutely. Hi, I'm The Wilder. I'm a founding member of a collective that works with community-centred rewilding projects in the UK. We have been overseeing the rewilding activities here at Maple Farm since 2021. In fact, it was our second ever project. But we are less hands-on here now, which is a good thing because, when an ecosystem and the community that cares for it become self-sustaining, it's a sign of a job well done.

The Researcher:

What was this place like when you started working here?

The Wilder:

Back then, Maple Farm had the “classic look” of the English countryside. The classic look of the southeast, that is. It was mostly open, grazing grasslands, with a few patches of woodland and scrub. It was split into lots of large fields with fences and hedgerows. And, because it was an animal sanctuary, there were horses and sheep here too, which used to eat or trample any trees that would naturally seed in the fields.

But we were quite fortunate in that there were already some, I guess you could call them either biodiversity assets or nature corridors, running through the site: we had some established lines of oak trees, we bordered an ancient woodland and the River Lox runs through the site too.

So, it wasn’t in a natural state, although it’s hard to say what “natural” means, but it was a recovering place. It was a pretty amazing starting point, to be honest. And we were also

lucky from a legal perspective. Back then, in England, land tended to be divided into “designated sites” or “sites of specific scientific interest”, which come with specific rules, but Maple Farm didn’t have a designation, so we were able to be a little bit more experimental with our approach.

The Researcher:

So, the area we are in now has changed a lot since I was last here in 2022. Can you tell me how this wetland came to be?

The Wilder:

So, we call this type of ecosystem an ‘ephemeral wetland’. They used to be way more common before World War 2 when we drained a lot of the land during the ‘Dig For Britain’ movement. They are areas of land that temporarily fill up with water when the river floods, usually in the early spring, and they retain that water until the start of the summer. It’s June now, so they are starting to dry up a bit. Maybe if we came back in a month they would be fully gone.

But let me tell you, these muddy scrapes are heaven for all sorts of wildlife. The first thing you'll notice is the sound– you can simply hear how high the density of invertebrates is here. This place is literally buzzing with life! Loads of insects live in and around the water here and we get wading birds like lapwings and redshanks, raising their chicks around the edges of the pools. Populations of wetland birds like these have been suffering for a really long time now, so we are super happy to see breeding pairs thriving here.

The Researcher:

So, was there a design process for making the ephemeral wetland?

The Wilder:

In a way, yes there was– although we tend to avoid the word design.

Maybe it’s better to think about it as a process of repair, but with the added complexity that we don’t have a full picture of how the ecosystem looked before it was disrupted.

To make the wetland, we did have to take quite an interventionist approach – we had to recontour the land by digging a series of scrapes into the earth that could hold water. However, we wanted to do this in a way that limited the influence of our human biases about what a wetland *“should”* look like. To do this, we used historical maps of the area to understand where the landscape held water before it was drained and then we randomised the placements of the scrapes within those areas. We then organised a volunteer day to help dig the scrapes.

To be clear, it wasn’t our aim to strictly recreate the past. Instead, we wanted to use historical evidence to understand what ecological processes were disrupted to make the fields in the first place. And, of course, that was just a starting point. The layout of the wetland has changed over the years as the ecosystem found its own way.

The Researcher:

You've talked a bit about intervening in the landscape and trying to reduce the influence of human biases. Could you talk about how you balanced the agency of humans and the agency of the ecosystem over the years?

The Wilder:

That's a big question. Where do humans fit into rewilded spaces? *(pause)*

Our goal with rewilding was to help repair ecosystems so they can operate on their own accord. So, we had to think really carefully about each and every intervention we made in the landscape. But it was also important to remember that humans are part of the ecosystems they live in. In densely populated areas, such as southeast England, rewilding cannot mean depeople-ing. It's just not realistic.

That's why small-scale rewilding projects, like Maple Farm, appeal to us. They can happen much closer to population centres and they're more intelligible because you can walk around the site in a day. So, yes, we were keen for people to

interact with it: we wanted people to see what a successful rewilding project could look like, we wanted to create a community that cares for the ecosystem, and we wanted this place to become a flagship for the local community.

Of course, there was a balance of play between access and ensuring the site didn't get too trampled but, in the end, we didn't have to worry about that too much. I'm happy to say that there are so many rewilded places in the UK now that, in general, people don't have to worry about overusing them.

3. Interview with The Volunteer: The Hedgerow We Planted

The Researcher:

Maple Farm, Surrey. 14th June 2042. Interview with The Volunteer.

Can you please introduce yourself?

The Volunteer:

Hi, I'm The Volunteer. I've been involved in the rewilding activities here at Maple Farm since 2022 planting hedges and trees, digging scrapes, removing fences, and stuff like that. Just every so often, like, when I have a free Saturday.

The Researcher:

So, back then, how did you get involved in the rewilding activities here?

The Volunteer:

Oh, it was a long time ago. *(slight pause)* I've always been into spending time in nature – especially foraging. And then I went to a university talk by The Wilder about rewilding and the project here at Maple Farm, so I signed up to help out. Back then, I was a student in London, so I jumped at the opportunity to get my hands dirty!

My first ever involvement in rewilding was the volunteering day when we planted the hedges here.

You were there too, interviewing people, if I remember right?

The Researcher:

Yes, that's right! It was my first time volunteering too. Compared to twenty years ago, it looks quite different here now. How would you say this place has changed?

The Volunteer:

So, we planted a huge mix of different species that would have been in a more, I guess, traditional UK hedgerow– and some oak

trees too. Over the years, the ‘whips’ that we planted grew up and knitted together to form the nice, thick hedges that you see today.

As the hedges grew, they grew space for other things. Lots of birds, small rodents, rabbits and insects use it for shelter. And specific mushrooms, too, because their mycelium networks like to grow in the shade that the hedges provide. On a wider scale, the hedges have helped to link up the site. They’ve brought together the woodlands from one end of the site to the other. And they’ve connected those woodlands to the river and wetlands too.

As you can see, the area around the hedge has also changed. Before, this space was a large, quite nondescript field. But now, it’s a big patchwork of brambles, scrub, grass, meadow flowers and trees. It’s an abundance of different plants at different heights. But, unlike the hedges, these aren’t things we planted directly. These plants have seeded themselves.

Oh! And each year, the team brings pigs onto the site to disturb the landscape. The pigs rootle through the soil and break up the denser areas of the thicket and, in doing so,

they open up space for new plants to grow. I've heard that foraging can have a similar effect too, when it's done sustainably. It can apparently help spread the mycelium network, which is interesting.

The Researcher:

Over the years, how has your involvement in rewilding changed your relationship with the environment?

The Volunteer:

Before I got involved in rewilding, I had never really thought about the ways that humans should share the land with other animals. And I hadn't thought about the ways we could change the land to make it more biodiverse. Instead, I would walk around the countryside thinking "Oh, this is so wonderful. It's nature. It's wild".

But it wasn't really. So much of the UK's wild land had been destroyed for livestock grazing, agriculture, etc. It's

difficult because, for me, these agricultural landscapes are quite beautiful. But now I see more potential.

With that, I would say that my understanding of what a beautiful landscape looks like has changed. Wild spaces aren't what we think of as classically beautiful. I think that we inherited our idea of a beautiful garden from the Victorians, but that's not what rewilding is. It's much more ugly plants. It's thorny scrub and stuff that isn't appealing but that has a lot of benefits. To me, this place here is a good illustration of this new, more difficult beauty. It's diverse and messy and textured and colourful and noisy. And, despite the hedges more-or-less following the same line as the old fences, where the fences made the landscape feel split up and divided, the hedges make the landscape feel more coherent and connected as a whole. Now, the features of the landscape flow into one another. *(slight pause)* There's a rhythm in the noise.

My involvement has also made me realise how complicated rewilding in the UK is in terms of politics. Sometimes I feel a bit sad that, despite rewilding projects becoming more and

more common over the years, most of the progress in rewilding has been volunteer and charity-led. The government has avoided investing in ecosystem restoration by relying on the charity sector, just like they have in many other important areas. And in addition to this, because so much of the land in the UK is privately owned, it's landowners who have ended up having the ultimate power to decide whether the country restores its ecosystems, or not. Which can be positive and negative depending on their interest.

4. Interview with *The Landowner:* My Bench in the Forest

The Researcher:

Maple Farm, Surrey. 14th June 2042. Interview with The Landowner.

Can you please introduce yourself?

The Landowner:

Hello, I'm The Landowner of Maple Farm. I'm the founder of a charity that has several projects that are either animal welfare-based or environmental-based. And the rewilding project here is one of them.

The Researcher:

So, what was it that twenty years ago that inspired you to rewild your land?

The Landowner:

Maple Farm is my home and, before we began to rewild it, I was running it as an animal sanctuary – another one of my charity's projects. Around twenty years ago, I started to ask myself "What could I do with this land?" That's when somebody introduced me to the book *Wilding* by Isabella Tree and it blew my mind!

And I thought "Well, why can't we do something like that? It would be amazing!" So, I got in touch with The Wilder to guide the process and that's how it all began.

The first thing we did was change our own habits and mindsets. This was before any of the interventions like planting hedgerows or digging scrapes for wetlands happened. So, that year, we stopped ourselves from cutting the grass to make hay, and from trimming the hedges to neaten them up. We stopped ourselves from chopping up fallen trees for firewood. And we stopped replacing fences when they fell down.

The changes were simple, but the impact they had was huge. After just one year, Maple Farm had already started to change. I noticed more how the tiniest change in weather and season

affected the landscape and what animals I saw. I noticed more birds and, in the summer, more insects. The insects were just everywhere. It was crazy!

The Researcher:

Did you face any challenges along the way?

The Landowner:

For me, the biggest challenge we faced was the idea that we were wasting the land. In southeast England, there is so much competition for space. Farmers wanted the land so they could use it for grazing sheep, or whatever, and property developers wanted me to sell the land so they could build houses. But I always told them *(with gusto)* “No. Over my dead body!”

I just wanted to create a place for wildlife to have peace amongst all of the crazy building work, pollution and everything else out there *(sigh)*. So, here at Maple Farm, although there is a footpath that comes through the site, there’s also plenty of space away from the path. I wanted to

see that area being left for nature, so the wildlife could flourish. That's it really.

The Researcher:

We are currently in a forested area of the site. However, if I remember well, back in 2022 this used to be a field for grazing. Could you tell me a little bit about how this space has changed?

The Landowner:

Yes, that's right. This section of the site is quite special because it borders an ancient forest on two sides. We wanted to see more trees on the site, but we didn't want to intervene too much by manually planting them. Instead, we decided to encourage the spread of the ancient forest and it's been quite successful. You can see how the forest has reclaimed the field that used to be here.

However, it was quite difficult in the beginning because I had previously rescued a small flock of sheep which lived in this

field and the next one over. The sheep have all moved on now, but back then, they would eat up any young trees that started to sprout, preventing the forest from spreading. So, we had to find a way to reduce the grazing pressure on the forest without displacing the sheep that I had committed to caring for. So, we decided to create a sacrificial field and fence the sheep into it.

In a way, it felt wrong, as we were so keen to remove fences elsewhere on the site, but it was a decision we made for the greater good. And, on reflection, I think it was a good choice because of the speed at which the forest reclaimed this space, despite the occasional prison break from the sheep setting us back now and then.

Recently, we have been able to remove the fence around the sacrificial field and we are starting to see progress there too. Hopefully, if you come back in another twenty years, these two spaces will be one continuous forest. That’s the goal.

The Researcher:

So, maybe on a more personal level, how did it feel to witness the rewilding of your land over the years?

The Landowner:

The process has made me realise that this land doesn't really belong to me. Well, it does, but you know what I mean. In a way, I belong to the land and I'm just looking after it for the moment.

So, I spend a lot of my time sitting on this bench. I put it here, many years ago, before the start of the rewilding project, and from it, I have watched the forest grow. You don't always notice the changes when you're walking, but if you sit, even if it's just 20 minutes, it's a grounding experience. I think we, as people, are so busy doing tasks and thinking about what's next. Rewilded places, like Maple Farm, are different. Rather than places of 'doing', they are just places of 'being'. They're places for enjoying the moment. They're just awesome.