

## Yellow Wagtail Project, turning back time

2020 was supposed to be the year for nature, the year where we turned it all around and 10 months in, we have seen more devastation than progress. We discovered that in 2019, English water companies released raw sewage into our rivers on more than [200,000 occasions](#); the construction of [HS2](#) is destroying precious conservation areas; [supertrawlers](#) have been devastating our marine protected areas. And to top it off, the EU's latest [State of Nature](#) report indicated that the UK's habitats were the most depleted in the whole of Europe, with 70% of habitats having a bad conservation status.

The UK is full of amazing habitats, woodland, heathlands and moorlands, wetlands, wildflower meadows, chalk streams, cold water reefs, sea grass; the list goes on. They clean the air we breathe, purify our water, create spaces where we can forget our problems. They can mitigate flooding, support diverse arrays of fauna and flora and are key players in the fight against climate change. It is vital that we work to not just to protect these areas but enhance them to what they once were, and reconnect fragmented landscapes.

One positive thing to come out of the year is the [Prime Minister's pledge](#) to protect 30% of UK land by 2030, with over 4,000km<sup>2</sup> of new land to be designated and protected. Such a promise has the potential to see a rapid draw-down of carbon from the atmosphere; reverse biodiversity loss; reconnect fragmented habitats; support nature-based businesses as well as many other ecosystem services.

[Oxfordshire's Nature Recovery Network](#) which is proudly led by [Wild Oxfordshire](#) will be crucial for this movement within Oxfordshire, and the [Yellow Wagtail Project](#) is excited to play a part.



The Yellow Wagtail Project seeks to restore 4 miles of wetland meadow back to its former glory. In April and May the meadows turn a bright yellow as the buttercups and kingcups start to flower, throughout the spring, the strong scent of meadowsweet fills the air. Flowers from ragged robin, plantain, forget-me-not, angelica, and meadow vetchling appear. The species composition varies within and across the meadows telling a story of the history of the River Thames and showing the soil types and depths that replaced the river's previous entity. Crickets, grasshoppers and other insects dance about in the long vegetation trying to avoid the hungry mouths of the ground nesting birds.

The Domesday Book says that wetland meadows were ten times more valuable than arable land and have provided important pasture and hay for livestock for over one thousand years. Today they are also valued for their natural flood management qualities as well as their ecological importance and potential to act as a wildlife corridor.

However, over the last half century, wetland meadows have decline by 97%, largely due to agricultural intensification, and they are now listed as a priority habitat under the Biodiversity Action Plan.

The Yellow Wagtail Project plans to use traditional management approaches such as low intensity grazing, and the sewing of additional plant species to encourage the herb-rich meadows to be re-established in the degraded areas.



Historically, low intensity grazing has been an important management method for these meadows and we are proud to be working with local grazier, [Emma](#). The cattle are natural lawn mowers, grazing on the vegetation all day. They help to disperse seeds. As the cattle rip the vegetation from its roots, seeds are thrown to the surrounding area, those eaten are excreted in cow pats and some seeds use the cattle as their personal taxi, by clinging onto their fur. The cattle are frequented by birds, including the yellow wagtail, who use them as bait to catch flies. Sustainably managed cattle like Emma's, actually draw atmospheric carbon deep into the soils with the help of dung beetles, worms and other beasties. And best of all, these 100% grass fed cattle, produce tasty and healthy meat that is good for the environment.

If the project is successful, we hope to inspire other landowners to restore their wetland meadows and bring them and the wildlife that they support back on the road to recovery.

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