

# Give back eco-Cinderella's flowers...

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Now you see it, now you don't.... #MowerArmageddon

*Better thinking on parks and grass verges could help restore us to an ecological happy ever after, one that Britain desperately needs...*

Once upon a fairy tale, in a Cinderella grass land not far away, some ecological 'magic' began to happen. It felt like some good fairies had waved wands. The dark fairy was to arrive later. The story I am going to tell does not yet have a final chapter. It may one day have a happy ever after, but in recent times it has been going very wrong. And it matters more than ever.

This is a story of heartbreak and hope that reminds me of one of those Choose Your Own Adventure books where we make our choices and decide what happens to the story, except here there are interlopers who make us lose the page. It is a people and budgets versus nature tale, being retold in similar

ways up and down the UK, around parks, on grass verges and other green spaces.

Back in 2015, I put out a call for help, expecting maybe one or two replies. But hundreds of brilliant Bristolians of all ages, from about three to 83, came together and we created something beautiful.

By planning, digging, sowing, growing, planting, coppicing, fund raising, donating and negotiating, we began seeing the transformation of our local park, from largely a sea of three-inch turf with Victorian horticultural beds, into swathes of tall mixed grassland, uncut all summer, butterfly beds and mini meadows re-sown with native wild flower mixes, carefully selected to support pollinators.



Several hundred children from two primary schools helped, along with volunteers and resources from Victoria Park Action Group, Avon Wildlife Trust, Butterfly Conservation, Get Bristol Buzzing, Heritage Lottery, Good Gym, Woodcraft Folk, cubs, residents, a mental health charity, council staff and local politicians of various flavours.

Everyone began learning about wild flowers, their names and ecology, how and where they grew, why and how much these stunning species have declined over recent decades, by devastating amounts.

They learned how these plants have very special ecological associations, often uniquely with particular groups of invertebrates, including many of the pollinator species that

have also declined. They found out how much these vital insect food plants and their habitats have disappeared and how modern farming has taken its toll on our natural environment in recent decades, and the much greater range of wildlife that it once supported.



We felt good and empowered as our new pollinator areas began to grow and bloom and we all looked forward to watching the wild animal visitors arrive and thrive.

It was something positive in our community, that all could share and enjoy. Primary school children spoke with pride of the pollinator areas being 'their' wild flower meadows and when I challenged them they could even remember the names of some of the British wild flowers that they'd learned. What a rich educational resource.





Sadly, three years in a row now, we have been heartbroken to see the mowers make short work of destroying some of our 30-metre-long mini meadows and verges - each time apparently by accident. I've been told that the same has happened at two other local parks. I have heard similar stories of grass verges and park wildlife areas around the country suffering the same fate.



The loss of such beautiful areas does not only destroy habitat and affect wildlife, it also undermines good will, and at a time when our under-funded parks need support more than ever.

But I don't believe the cause is recklessness or forgetfulness. It is failure by design. It happens because councils no longer have adequate budgets to think about better options. In some

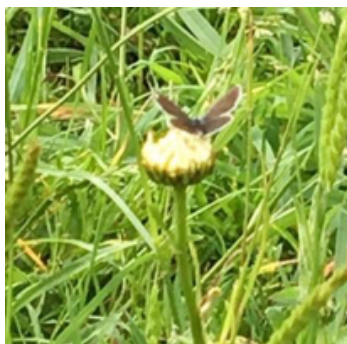
respects at least, wildlife opportunities are out of sight, out of mind or out of reach. Our councils can no longer even afford to write park management plans (ours expired in 2013), let alone have enough staff to stick to them after redundancies.

The parks budget here in Bristol was slashed this year from £4.5m to £2.6m because of austerity cuts that were imposed on city council budgets by central government. This is not just one city's problem. At least 92% of park managers in Britain's approximately 27,000 parks have suffered budget cuts in the last 4 years. Clearly there will be consequences, with wildlife being low down the priorities: <https://bit.ly/2lldGij>

#### WHY DOES IT MATTER?

We had funded and sown around 50 wild flower species, which together were enough to potentially sustain hundreds of different animal species - a local ecosystem of invertebrates along with the birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians that visit them, many of which are also in decline.

Last year, I saw the first record of a small blue butterfly in the park, on one of our wild flower areas that has since been mown off. This was one of very few recent Bristol sightings according to the local biological records centre.



We've regularly heard and seen tawny owls, which feed on the small mammals now dwelling in the long grass that was once too short to hide even a snail. There have been regular sightings of hedgehogs waddling about too, rummaging for food in the new wild larder.

We've recorded at least 8 species of bat using the park and feasting on the flying insects in our wild areas - serotine, noctule, leisler's, lesser horseshoe, brown long-eared, common and soprano pipistrelle and a myotis.

By day, our mini meadows briefly brought joy, with a gorgeous carnival of colourful annuals and perennials among shades of green grasses of many varieties.



Where not mown, they were ablaze with vibrant golds: corn marigold, bird's-foot-trefoil, hawkbit, hawk's-beard, lady's bedstraw and the welcome arrival of gate-crashing ragwort and sow thistle, a stage show of hoverflies and a scrum of other insects.



The bright red delight of poppies, aswarm with bees and later festooning the field with rattles, the wonderful feathery fuzz of wild carrot and the giant landing pads of ox-eye daisy, all a festival of bugs and beetles.

We enjoyed the pleasing pink blush of mallows, ragged robin and campions, and the rescued corncockle, which in recent

years was almost sent extinct in Britain by modern farming and luckily discovered and recovered from one of its final fields where it was still clinging on.



We had the crimson glow of black and greater knapweeds, the electrifying blue of cornflower, the calming mauves of field scabious and a flurry of burnet moths on wild marjoram.

By improving habitat quality in this way, such green spaces can collectively offer an opportunity to address a severe deficit in wild flower and nectar resources. There is now a greater amount of park land, recreational green space and grass verge coverage in Britain than there is good quality meadow land.

But one moment on a mower will destroy a whole season's food supply for very many invertebrates that are depending on it. When a population of caterpillars or flightless invertebrates loses a specialist food plant, it can decimate that season's micro-population in that location, unless the same plant species exists plentifully within crawling distance.

Such losses also reduce nectar resources for adult butterflies and moths, bees, bugs, flies and beetles that underpin local food webs.

Recent media reports have warned of an #InsectArmageddon - we are losing drastic numbers of insects. Pollinators give us about one third of our food and ensure about 90 per cent of our planet's flowering plants can reproduce. By destroying 97 per cent of Britain's meadows since 1940, we've wiped out a lot of their food and habitat.

We could increase the coverage instead of continuing with piecemeal and avoidable habitat destruction. Another load of butterflies and moths and their caterpillars are knocked out every time we mow a verge or green space at the wrong time of year, multiplied across Britain. This is why the charity Plant Life has launched a grass verges campaign:

<http://plantlife.love-wildflowers.org.uk/roadvergecampaign>

We are officially one of the most nature-depleted nations according to the 2016 State of Nature report. We need proper investment in good land management - including replenishing the funding from central government.

All the charity and volunteer good will in the world would achieve greater things if there were better support for what we are doing instead of efforts being undermined. And in my view we need to get away from this culture of relying so heavily on unpaid goodwill in lieu of proper public funding for conservation and smarter policies.

## CINDERELLA HABITATS

Our parks and verges could help recover the wildlife losses of Britain and become tomorrow's Cinderella habitats. Victoria Park's character reminds me of Cinderella. Our park could still get a fairy tale, nature-rich future. She began life covered in soot, when around 1890, amid south Bristol's coal mining era of choking smog and heavy factory pollution, the council bought the land from the estate of Sir Greville Smyth. He was a famous world-travelling naturalist and wealthy land owner. The park became a green lung for workers in a poor pocket of Bristol, full of slums, poverty and disease.



The hill was transformed into a fashionable Victoria vista. Despite it being the golden age of the roving naturalist, they favoured manicured short grass, promenades of trendy trophy trees - mostly ornamentals, hybrid poplars and hybrid limes.

Eventually, it became a sea of ecological blandness as any historic grassland species were outcompeted by a monoculture of perennial rye grass, the darling of amenity parkland planners who loved its ability to grow vigorously, crowd out what they regarded as 'weeds' and tolerate trampling. This formula was repeated across Britain's parks. What a sad waste of a lot of green potential habitat!

Our 20-hectare park may not win any contests for botanical rarities or outstanding beauty, sitting in the middle of Bristol city centre and surrounded by urban sprawl, but it is the closest green lung, access to nature and free wildlife education resource for thousands of residents. It is now home to hundreds of species and a vital stepping-stone on a green corridor through an urban jungle.

The good news is that we have this year got busy with support from the council and Buglife (more here: <https://bit.ly/2Kpl2bg> and <https://bit.ly/2NekgMb>) to create five more new pollinators areas elsewhere in our park.

We are determined. We hope our misfortune is a closed chapter, not the whole wildlife story.

We want - and need - an ecological fairy tale with no ending.

*Alex Morss*

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- This piece is not intended to criticise the hard working grounds staff, but to illustrate the consequences of an under-funded system.