

MY WAY OF THINKING

MARK CARWARDINE

The broadcaster and campaigner airs his views on our perception of the state of wildlife and wild places, and invites your thoughts on the subject.

One of the greatest challenges in conservation is tackling something called the Shifting Baseline Syndrome. In essence, it means that each generation has a lower expectation of wildlife and wild places than the previous generation. What my generation sees as abundant or pristine is seen by our parents as rare or degraded; and what we consider to be rare or degraded is seen as abundant or pristine by our children. We each assume that the current situation – the one we know from first-hand experience – is the norm. And so, over time, the ‘baseline’ shifts.

It’s a frightening concept: as a society we accept environmental degradation, simply because we can’t imagine how the natural world used to be. What seems OK to us today would have been considered pitiful a generation ago. Consequently, most people don’t have a clue about how much wildlife we have lost.

Even over my 59-year lifetime I can see the Shifting Baseline Syndrome in action. When I was a young boy, growing up in suburban Hampshire, our garden was a veritable wildlife paradise. Cuckoos were the perpetual soundtrack to summer, the flowerbeds were alive with umpteen species of butterflies, and four or five hedgehogs would come to be fed on our patio every night. I took it all for granted, because that was the ‘norm’.

Not any more. I can’t remember the last time I heard a cuckoo, I actually register every time I see a butterfly, and I could count on the fingers of one hand the number of (unsquashed)

hedgehogs I’ve seen all summer. And, in case you’re wondering, I’m not viewing my childhood through rose-tinted spectacles: the facts speak for themselves.

Over my lifetime, in the UK we have lost three-quarters of our cuckoo population, three-quarters of our butterflies have declined (some by as much as 96 per cent), and we have lost nearly 97 per cent of all our hedgehogs (there were 30 million when I was growing up – now there are one million). It’s a wonder there is anything left at all.

But perhaps the best example of the Shifting Baseline Syndrome is the so-called ‘windscreen test’. I remember how, when I was a boy, long summer car journeys would leave my father’s windscreen comprehensively splattered with squashed moths, mosquitoes, flies and other insects. Nowadays,

“Thanks to a generational blindness, we aren’t grasping the severity of the situation.”

there may be one or two. Or none. I also remember blizzard-like clouds of moths in the car headlights. But now the air seems to be devoid of all life.

Yet my norm is completely different from my parents’ norm. I can’t begin to imagine how much wildlife was around in their day. There are still pockets of relative abundance (your chances of hearing a cuckoo are better in the Scottish Highlands, for example) but, overall, the shocking, rapid and calamitous decline in our wildlife is there for all to see.

At least, it should be. Thanks to this generational blindness to environmental destruction, we are simply not grasping the severity of the situation. And that is the problem. The concept of a shifting baseline has been around since 1995 – when it was first proposed by marine biologist Daniel Pauly – but we are only just waking up to what it really means.

The solution is continuously to measure and record as much as we possibly can – the UK’s State of Nature report is a perfect example – to provide a more accurate and tangible baseline. And then we have to shout about it from the rooftops.

If we don’t, we will always be satisfied with much too little, and we will always aim far too low. Surely, the severely depleted wildlife we are becoming accustomed to in the UK should not be anyone’s norm? 🐦

MARK CARWARDINE is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? If you want to support Mark in his views or shoot him down in flames, email wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk



Lost soundtrack to summer: we have lost 75 per cent of our cuckoo population in the UK.