

**Be more beaver**  
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**Published in the Norfolk Magazine**

On the windowsill in front of me, above my desk, are two small shards of willow wood. Grey willow, to be exact. I keep them there, directly in my line of sight, to give me hope. For, finely scarred with gnaw-prints, these were hewn by beavers. Captive beavers, yes, but living along a wooded river, and foraging naturally, they are among the first in Norfolk for many centuries.

Why are these ragged scraps of wood significant? As Norfolk naturalist and writer Simon Barnes explains in *On The Marsh*, in the Anthropocene loving nature equates to grief:

'If you learn how to look at a landscape correctly, you can see at a glance how much is no longer there. Almost, it's as if by loving wildlife you are wilfully bringing sadness into your life. My mother used to say that acquiring a pet was an investment in sadness. That didn't stop her acquiring dogs and loving them. And besides, what she said about pets is true on a much wider field: if you love anything that lives, you will have sadness in your life. That's the deal. Most of us accept it. We love, knowing that love will bring sadness. That's because we also know that living without loving is not life.'

Everywhere a nature-lover looks today, species and habitats are missing. Gone centuries ago are lynx, aurochs, wolf and bear. More recently great bustard, wryneck, burbot and red-backed shrike all joined them: extinct in the UK. Turtle dove, curlew, willow tit, nightingale and lesser spotted woodpecker are plunging to the same oblivion. Corn bunting, spotted flycatcher, wood warbler and many more are in decline.

To love nature, as Simon rightly says, is to welcome sadness to your life. The more you know, the more you know has gone; the more the land is peopled by ghosts of animals and plants which should be here. Which would be here but for our wantonness.

These shredded strips of willow wood are my reminders that — with vision and resolve — another story is possible. Though recent research suggests they lingered rather longer, my childhood *Readers Digest Field Guide to Animals of Britain* tells me there has been no evidence of UK beavers since the twelfth century. Here though, on the windowsill in front of me, these rodent-chiselled flakes of wood say otherwise. Beavers are back in Norfolk, hundreds of years since they were lost. If this is possible, so too are countless other victories for landscape, wildlife and our environment.

One salient message — though was there ever any doubt? — from COP26 in Glasgow was that we cannot count on politicians to deliver victories for wildlife and the environment on our behalf. Their task, the single most important in human history — affecting every person, plant and animal alive today and in the future — was to limit global heating to 1.5 degrees by keeping fossil fuels locked in the ground and slashing our emissions. In this they failed.

For a day or two, following COP, I grieved, frightened for our wildlife, for my nieces and my nephews, and for generations still unborn. Then, sitting at my desk a few days later, my eyes fell on the shredded willow on my windowsill. I remembered there were beavers back in Norfolk.

Visiting the enclosure where these beavers live, last autumn, shortly after they arrived, was far more powerful an experience than I'd imagined. From when I first set eyes on their nibbled willows, I was rapt. As for their dams — their engineering — I was amazed. In no time these returning beavers had begun to shape the landscape, restoring important habitats we lost hundreds of years ago.

I've since watched many clips of Norfolk's beavers hard at work, usually long after midnight. For hours each night they harvest branches and mound up mud, creating the conditions they need to thrive. Who would have thought these corpulent, orange-enamelled mammals could be wiser in this respect than all the politicians in the world? Creating what they need to thrive, but taking nothing more.

We too can thrive. We too can shape a landscape and environment in which our kind can flourish; and other species with us. Indeed we must. But it will take conviction, creativity and humility. We need to learn what really matters to us, hold it tight, demand of politicians that it be respected. What is more important: fresh air, clean water, birdsong and productive soil, or bigger cars and longer flights and all the stuff we tell ourselves will make us happy?

I'm with the beavers: wanting healthy habitat — water, and food and climate — and just enough to feed my mouth and soul. The rest is trivial. Not only trivial: for its production and consumption harm our world.

Now is the time to be more beaver. To toil to keep the planet habitable. In his closing remarks at COP26, UN Secretary-General António Guterres said, 'Much more is needed to reach carbon neutrality by 2050 and keep temperature rise to 1.5 degrees by the end of the century. We need more concrete plans, more ambition from more countries and more businesses. We need all financial institutions, public and private, to choose, once and for all, the green economy.'

COP President Alok Sharma added that hope of restricting global heating to 1.5 degrees was just alive, 'But, its pulse is weak. And it will only survive if we keep our promises. If we translate commitments into rapid action.'

At The Wildlife Trusts we are committed to our part. Since Norfolk Wildlife Trust was formed in 1926 we've fought for wildlife in the county, with ambition and with passion. Today we know protecting habitat is not enough. A habitable climate is fundamental habitat — for people and for wildlife — too. And as we fight for it we need support as we never have before. This is the battle of our lives but, with you beside us, we are ready.