OF PREDATION AND LIFE

Predators have been regarded as vermin for a long, long time. In fact, any creature looking in the direction of man's crops, livestock or game was considered vermin that had to be removed from the face of the earth. (The war against weeds and insects, just as relentless, continues till this day.) The extent of this extermination is difficult to comprehend but it suffices to read hunter’s manuals published in that bleak era: man's inventiveness in how to eradicate the unwanted is unsurpassed. Many reviews have sketched the massacre of birds and mammals in the 19th century and before, a depressing literature that shows from how far we have come (Bijleveld 1974, Lovegrove 2007, de Rijk 2015). Systematic persecution depleted predator populations. In the course of the 20th century this was aggravated by profound changes in the management of – particularly – farmland, which led to serious declines in flora and fauna. For many of us, this was the starting point of our field work (1970s and 1980s): a sterile landscape with few predators. In fact so few, that even the deeply ingrained dislike of farmers and hunters for predators somewhat abated. And so it came about that, triggered by increased prosperity, improved ecological knowledge and depleted prey and predator populations, the present state of affairs is completely different: wildlife protection has become embedded in laws and minds. Or has it?

In the past few decades a change in the perception of predation as part of life seems to have taken place, at least in a Dutch setting (but the literature indicates that similar attitudes prevail elsewhere, for example in the UK where Natural England is issuing licenses to kill legally protected Common Buzzards Buteo buteo near Pheasant Phasianus colchicus rearing pens). Predators are again increasingly depicted as a problem, by many even as a pest, that needs immediate intervention. Farmers, hunters, wildlife managers and biologists, each with something else at stake, consider themselves sublimely knowledgeable about predators and are more than willing to correct this unwanted flaw – i.e. predators making a living – in the state of affairs. There are several reasons for this shift in attitude.

First of all, since the 1980s generalist predators, such as Common Buzzards Buteo buteo, martens Martes martes and M. foina and Red Foxes Vulpes vulpes, have increased in number and distribution. This was partly a recovery from losses incurred in the preceding decades (pesticides, persecution), partly also a successful adaptation to changes in the landscape and a behavioural change by predators (higher tolerance to man's activities). Some predators are therefore not just more common than ever before, they are also more visible. On each and everyone’s doorstep, a predator can be seen. (Mind you: other predator species have declined, such as Eurasian Kestrel Falco tinnunculus and mustelids.) In combination with the benchmark of depleted predator populations some 40–50 years ago, this recovery and increase has led to an overall idea that predators have reached pest status. It only shows that historical perspective is rare among the public.

Secondly, many prey populations are in serious trouble. There is no better landscape in which to become aware of a silent summer than farmland (Maclean 2010). The demise of 'meadow birds' in The Netherlands has received an inordinate amount of attention, and is being lamented till this day. But far more profound changes have taken place. The diversity and abundance of soil organisms, from nematodes to earthworms and leatherjackets, are in decline. Gone are weeds and insects. Eurasian Skylarks are now so rare that the chances of a 21st century John Clare poetically exulting in the lark's song are non-existent.

Thirdly, conservation has become a fragmented science: not habitats but species are the focus of attention (even when – pro forma – studies say otherwise). In combination with the exploded number of biologists, wildlife managers, governmental agencies and specialized journals and organizations, this has resulted in a