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Ornithology from the Tree Tops

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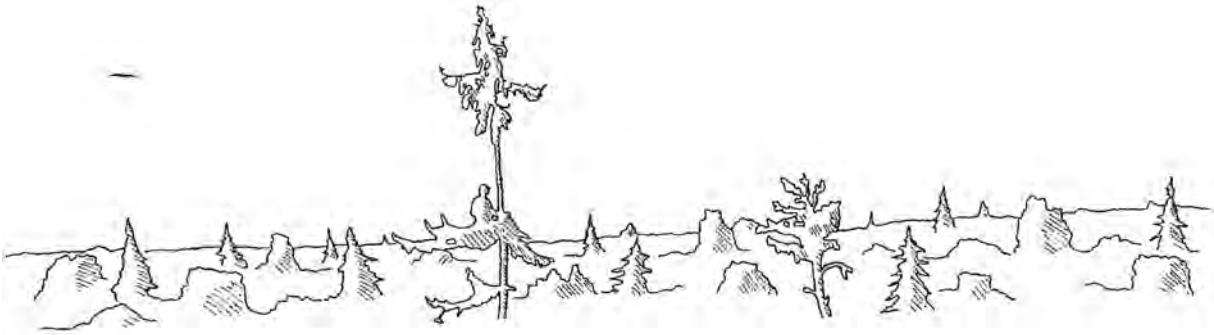
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Ornithology from the tree tops

The strange and not so strange love for re-wilding

Imagine a piece of land the size of 300 by 150 km, half of which is below sea level and therefore partly existing by the grace of dikes. This anthill is populated with 105 million chickens, 12 million pigs and 4 million cows. And not without importance, 17 million people, or 517 inhabitants per square kilometre, with 2.2 million dogs and 2.6 million cats as pets, the latter freely wreaking subsidized havoc among birds, small mammals and what not. The two-legged creatures prefer to move around on a set of wheels, slightly more than 8 million, annually burning rubber for some 194 billion kilometres within the confines of above-mentioned strip of land.

Rather than total chaos – how can all this biomass coexist, one wonders – a well-organized society has emerged where each and every one can live in peace though not necessarily in happiness. One of the advantages of an affluent, densely populated society is the attention to detail. It is an ecosystem of great complexity, but strictly managed. In terms of people and nature, for example, every bird is identified and counted, so to say, not once but repeatedly over the years. Specialized governmental agencies know precisely which birds live where in what numbers. This knowledge has been used to formulate agreements and regulations to such an extent that it is impossible for birds (and some other popular species groups) to decline to dangerously low population levels without an alarm bell ringing. Or conversely, for a bird to colonize the land, or to increase hugely in numbers, without being judged and treated as a welcome guest or a pest. Life is regulated, with little room for spontaneous development.

Intimate knowledge of distribution and numbers of the feathered tribe, in combination with a seemingly bottomless pool of money, a proliferation of wildlife managers and ecological advisers and a government committed to national and international agreements concerning nature protection, inevitably leads to a flurry of conservation actions. A quick-scan of online documents relating to Nature 2000, for example, suffices to see that the conservation business is taken seriously, at least on paper. It must be the bureaucrat's version of paradise. And not just bureaucrats. The money flow is sure to attract hundreds of self-proclaimed ecologists who – with unadulterated enthusiasm – are more than willing to save the world from impoverishment. Re-wilding is – although not a novel principle – the latest bud sprouting from the tangled tree of conservation, a huge success in terms of money turnover and media attention. Instead of doom and gloom, the re-wilder speaks of hope and glory. Especially hope.

Introductions and reintroductions have been *en vogue* for a long time. Günther Niethammer collated all known introductions of mammals and birds in Europe, in 1962 already an impressive list of species, efforts, failures and unforeseen outcomes. Motives for introduction were much like today's, in particular increasing biodiversity and boosting game numbers (often in combination). One of the first, at least with a paper trail, was the case of the war mongering Duke Albrecht von Wallenstein who took the time during the Danish War to introduce – among other birds – Black Grouse *Lyrurus tetrix* in Mecklenburg in 1628–1630, a part of Germany he recently had seized from the Protestants. To no avail, the Black Grouse – and later he himself – came to a sticky end, and this proved to be the common denominator for grouse introductions in the centuries to come. A less messy, but equally futile translocation is currently underway in Salland, the last pinprick to hold Black Grouse in The Netherlands. Local Grouse have disappeared (in fact, the species is extinct), to be

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replaced with birds translocated from Sweden. This project is rather typical of many other introductions: poor science (if any at all), biased or no public information, predator control, safeguarding the inflow of money, hopeful talk against better judgment, and all this going on for decades on end.

A similar case, but with a different ending, pertained another threatened species, i.e. the Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*. It unfolded in the central Netherlands in the early and mid-1960s. Goshawks were declining rapidly (in retrospect it is clear that the size of the Dutch population had been seriously underestimated, although declines were undeniable), reason for the then World Wildlife Fund to start Operation Goshawk. Birds from (mostly) northern Germany were translocated to the central Netherlands, where many subsequently died from secondary poisoning or illegal shooting and trapping. Of 40 pairs tracked in 1964–1965 only 20 were successful, raising a total of 50 young (Bijleveld 1966). Details from later years are lacking, but an independent survey in 1965–1970 showed that breeding numbers remained low and breeding success poor until the use of organochlorines was outlawed in the early 1970s (van Lent 2004). Operation Goshawk was a typical example of well-intentioned but pointless intervention because the causes of decline were not yet remedied, i.e. widespread use of persistent pesticides in agriculture and large-scale illegal persecution. As soon as these two problems had been tackled, the Goshawk population soon soared to unprecedented heights, just by itself.

Two more bird reintroductions have been attempted in The Netherlands, of Ravens *Corvus corax* and White Storks *Ciconia ciconia*. After respectively extermination and near-disappearance, both species now breed in The Netherlands in numbers not seen since more than a century. These might be construed as successful reintroductions, if not for the fact that they would have returned anyway, following recovery and colonization elsewhere in Europe and, for White Stork, improved rainfall in the Sahel after the devastating droughts in the 1970s and especially the mid-1980s. For the latter species, improved adult survival and changes in wintering sites (increasingly Southern Europe, rather than West Africa) also played a substantial role in the changing fortunes and steep increase. Conservationists are often unable to look at larger scales or beyond the restricted timespan of their own life. When this impatience is combined with a lack of scientific background, as used to be the case for many reintroductions in the past, this prepares the ground for decisions which seem opportune at the time but are in fact singularly pointless. Reintroductions are human decisions made for other animals (or plants), preventing or compromising decisions and adaptations of the species themselves.

It was therefore with a sense of relief that the intended reintroduction of White-tailed Eagles *Haliaeetus albicilla*, by WWF Netherlands in the 1990s, failed to materialize. The Eagles came anyway, spreading across the country at their own tempo, immigrants from nearby Germany and local recruits. A decade later, a similar colonization is happening in Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*, by birds originating from Germany and England. It is so much more interesting to see birds make their own choices, instead of being tinkered with by well-meaning re-wilders. In the words of Dave Goulson (2017: 200): “Never had I come across the idea that one could just let go, stop trying to be in charge. It was really wonderful”.

Goulson’s sentiment is not likely to take root. Au contraire, the natural world is increasingly managed in terms of a dichotomy: good or bad. The latter implies ruthless removal of the unwanted, be it pests, exotic species or anything causing damage to people’s interests. The Good Nature,– or as Dutch re-wilders were proud to announce without any irony intended (Zekhuis *et al.* 2021): the Wanted Animals –, is to be introduced, reintroduced, translocated and pampered. Hence the endless list of “obscure species with Action Plans” (Peter Marren 2020: 262) in a thoroughly polluted and disturbed environment. The far bigger problems of environmental degradation are not remedied with the release of Wanted Animals, despite the utopian visions of re-wilders. Fortunately, Dutch attempts at re-wilding are endearing at best, a parochial road to create jobs and media attention in a climate where embracing ‘hope’ is increasingly considered as one of the last resorts in nature conservation. Elsewhere, grander visions have been promoted, even of re-wilding western North America with a ‘Pleistocene megafauna’ consisting of lions, cheetahs, elephants and camels from Asia and Africa, to recreate what was lost 13,000 years ago (Rubenstein *et al.* 2006). American bravado, or a sense of humour among the re-wilders? Let’s hope for the latter, although the seriousness with which such proposals are discussed in the scientific literature makes you wonder… It’s getting "curiouser and curiouser" in the realms of nature conservation.

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