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Wildlife watching: 'The best form of meditation I can imagine'

Tired of city life, Patrick Barkham returned to his adolescent hobby of butterfly spotting and found the tranquility of woods at dusk brought him both peace and happiness

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Patrick Barkham

theguardian.com, Monday 16 June 2014 14.39 BST



A fox cub playing in evening light. Photograph: Calum Dickson/Alamy

I spent most of my 20s working in cities, with little time for wildlife. I'd hate to think of embracing nature as equivalent to tuning into BBC Radio 2 but when I was in my 30s I felt increasingly alienated from nature, and anxious to return to it. So I decided to

resurrect my childhood passion: butterfly spotting.

Most of us have to discard a bit of emotional baggage when we go wildlife watching. For me, the problem was that badge of geekery, binoculars. Putting on binoculars but shrugging off that teenage self-consciousness about what they symbolised was the first step to enjoying time out in nature.

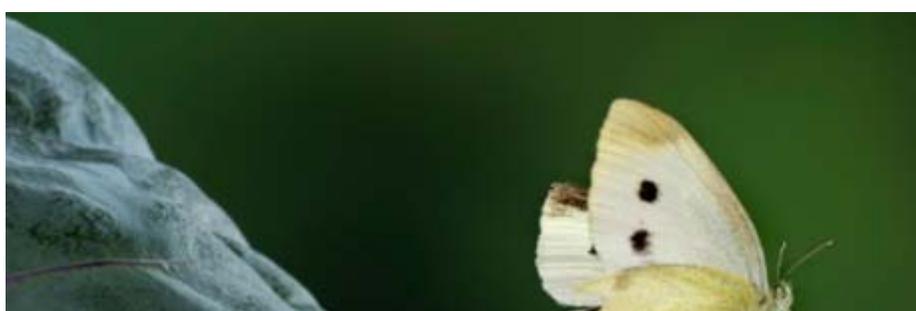
I set myself a goal (I'm not obsessed with ticking things off but it helped at first to have a focus for spending time in nature, something that got me out of the door – listening to nightingales, following a barn owl, watching badgers, or recording bumblebees. Deeper pleasures then took over) to find all 59 species of British butterfly, and this hunt defined where and when I went. It forced me to seek out areas I knew nothing about, and in this way I encountered my first revelation.



Bavaria, Germany: a dragonfly covered in morning dew. Photograph: Frank Kraemer/zefa/Corbis

Focusing on one small area of nature helps us make connections and interpret interesting behaviour because we soon acquire a bit of expertise. Some people just love birds of prey, others obsess over orchids or a limited group of insects. Butterflies are ideal for any beginner because there are only 59 species in Britain; others swear by dragonflies (57) or bumblebees (24).

At first, my identification skills were rusty (I mistook moths for butterflies and spent ages trying to identify a common "cabbage" white) and my mission was a bit embarrassing. Soon, however, the pleasures of lingering in sunny meadows in scrappy corners of London and more conventionally beautiful nature reserves surpassed any lingering discomfort about explaining to passersby what I was doing.





The Large or Cabbage White Butterfly in flight. Photograph: Alamy

I met some lovely fellow obsessives but most of my joy was a more solitary communion with the countryside. By the end of the summer, I tracked down all 59, which was very satisfying but it wasn't really the point: my knowledge and feeling for Britain's wild places was drastically enlarged – butterflies had open all kinds of symbolic and literal doors into nature.

After my sunny butterfly mission I set myself a contrasting task: to explore the countryside at night and watch badgers properly for the first time. During one of my early fruitless badger hunts, I realised that my struggle with the gloom was awakening long-dormant senses. I suddenly had an odd premonition I was being watched, turned around, and saw a tawny owl, gazing at me like one of those stone ornaments in the little-visited corners of a garden centre. My awareness felt like an echo of an era when an awareness of predators and prey was not merely a recreation.



A badger out foraging for dinner. Photograph: Alamy

There is no harder-to-get-to-know common mammal than the badger and yet watching one sett regularly over one summer soon gives you intimate knowledge of the habits of one clan of badgers; watchers who invest a lot of time in a sett are often “accepted” by this notoriously shy species, and the badgers will even scent-mark the boots of someone they come to recognise, if not as a friend then at least as part of the furniture of their evenings.

Our lack of knowledge about nature sometimes means that wild places are intimidating. Like taking up running, or swimming, however, it's surprising how quickly we improve with relatively little effort. Even without tuition (although I recommend some trips into nature with local conservation groups or experts first as the quickest introduction;

self-taught knowledge is always harder won), we can piece together fragments of lost memories or instinctive understanding of nature, and begin to find meaning in what is unfolding before us.



A close up of a Ruby Tiger moth. Photograph: Sue Bowden/Alamy

There are so many joys to be gathered watching wildlife and one of the greatest is when we feel we have blended into the landscape and become part of the day, night, or ecosystem. Our pursuit of the little details of nature – a species of moth or a type of birdsong – are intrinsically pleasurable but they are also sense sharpeners, that bring us alive to the possibilities in a landscape: the muntjac standing quietly behind us, the crackle of autumn leaves, the pong of the honey fungus.

They give us an excuse to loiter in a landscape, to stand still and simply be. They are a pathway to a much broader experience. On my nights out, I realised I was not really badger watching at all, I was dusk watching, listening to the creatures of the day as they were superseded by the creatures of the night, with their rustles and screams and unfathomable signals which I did not comprehend but could still savour.



A man walks along a tree lined path on the South Downs near Chichester in West Sussex in southern England. Photograph: Alamy

Perhaps it's not for everyone, but the sense of rest in the countryside between sunset and darkness is the best form of meditation I can imagine. It is a kind of peaceful exhilaration. Maybe people raised solely in the city would be immune to such pleasures. But I don't believe they would remain so for long. We only have to make time for nature, give it a chance to unfold, semi-naturally, before our eyes, ears and nostrils and it repays us, many times over, for our modest investment.

We need to feel we belong to human society, and sometimes nature watching can make us feel we are eccentrics on the margins of conventional life. But we also at some fundamental level need to feel we belong to the natural world. Being in nature, allowing the near or distant wild to seep into us, is wonderfully liberating. We see ourselves as we truly are, a small living thing, part of much grander and older forces all around us. It's an appreciation for something that in other eras people might have called God. I don't call it that (although I've no grudge against people who do) but I worship this greater society of living things of which we are but one small part. It makes me feel much better about myself and much fonder of the world around me.

Tomorrow: Psychologist Oliver James on ecotherapy and wilderness programmes.

Patrick Barkham is a natural history writer for the Guardian and the author of [The Butterfly Isles - A Summer in Search of Our Emperors and Admirals](#) and [Badgerlands](#), published by Granta on 3 October 2013. Follow him on Twitter @patrick_barkham.

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