

Letter from Scotland



Duddingston Loch

One of the pleasures of living in Scotland is that there is plenty of countryside, even in the cities. On average, each of us shares a square kilometre with just 65 other people. That compares with 269 in the UK as a whole and makes us one of the least densely populated countries in Europe.

According to the latest satellite images, Edinburgh has the most “green space” of Britain’s 10 biggest cities (49 per cent). Glasgow comes next with 32 per cent of the city classified as green space. That compares with just 23 per cent in London.

Let me take you to a green space I know well in Edinburgh. Duddingston Loch lies to the south of Arthur’s Seat. Here you can almost forget you are in a large city. The gorse-covered hill rises to 250m. Woodland, reedbeds and rough pasture surround the loch. The rural 17th century Duddingston Kirk can just be seen peeping between the trees.

Much of the area is a nature reserve, run by the Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT), and I happen to know it is the home of 69 species of birds (including 40 herons and 200 jackdaws) 4 species of bats, 44 species of trees and shrubs, 42 types of grass, 58 mosses, 16 lichens, several species of dragonflies and butterflies and in the freshwater loch itself, roach, perch, eels and the occasional otter. Roe deer leap through the trees, cattle graze in the meadow.

I know this because I am one of the SWT’s thousand volunteers who tend to its 120 reserves across Scotland, many of them purposely close to towns and cities where most people live.

Our little team of six or seven work one day a week in the Duddingston and Bawsinch reserve, planting trees, thinning trees, rooting out invasive plants, cutting back bramble, maintaining paths etc. It's gardening on a grand scale.

But the SWT has realised that protecting nature in its 120 reserves is not enough. They have to be linked together into what it's calling "a living landscape." So it's chosen three pilot areas of Scotland to develop the project, Coigach-Assynt in the West Highlands, the new town of Cumbernauld in central Scotland and old Edinburgh.

Here the idea is to encourage individuals to cultivate their gardens for wildlife, to tend window boxes, plant grass roofs on their garages, leave hedges in place etc. Businesses and other organisations are being asked to play their part. The city council is being encouraged to develop its parks and roadsides with wildlife in mind and, in its planning decisions, to consider "wildlife corridors" linking the parks and green spaces together to give birds and beasts the run of the city.

It's one way of trying to halt the drastic decline in Britain's wildlife. The latest "State of Nature Report" warns that half of the 4,000 species studied are in decline and 15 per cent face extinction if nothing is done. Along with efforts in the cities, modern agriculture will have to change and we will all have to reduce our carbon footprint if our wildlife is to be saved. But at least in Duddingston a start has been made on the great work.

And our lives should be the better for it.